All rise to the university branding challenge

Category: Branding
written by Steve Harvey | 19 October 2015

How does a university that's just one of the UK's almost 200 institutes of higher education stand out from the crowd enough to attract students, academics and investors? The answer, of course, is university branding, a phrase that's almost as common in higher education as 'league tables'.

The days when higher education was a sellers' market are long gone. Today's buyers (that is, prospective students) are very firmly in the driving seat. They're investing heavily in their own education and they want bang for their buck: qualifications with real currency on the job market, excellent teaching, great facilities, nightlife, community, pastoral care – the list is long. And they're hard to impress. This generation has grown up immersed in brands and advertising. They're looking for 'a fit' – that intangible something that makes one university chime with them more than the others. Enter university branding. For many marketers and communication specialists, branding a university has never been more challenging, or more appealing.

Appealing to such demanding buyers takes a lot more than a university branding campaign in isolation can achieve. You do to have a really great university brand identity. A brand identity that makes you stand out from the crowd. A brand identity that works consistently across everything you do. And a brand identity that instantly says who you are and what you stand for. And it all need to be aligned to an informed university brand strategy.

It's a great ambition, but often easier said than done. Universities tend to be genuinely diverse institutions, so it

can be a real challenge to pin down just one or two things that make them different. Internal acceptance can also be a problem and is made more difficult by complex staff relationships and hierarchies that can hinder brand creation and make managing the brand in an institution a minefield. Branding a university requires strong leadership, and the ability to manage expectations on many levels.

But don't let fear stand in the way of progress. The good news is that you don't have to go it alone. A good university branding agency, with experience of the education sector, can guide you through overcoming these barriers and work with you to create a strong, distinctive and workable brand and visual identity. At some stage you will also need to appoint a brand guardian(s), to ensure your hard work isn't undone through a poorly defined and managed implementation stage. Applying a university brand identity across multiple channels and platforms, both online and offline, requires detailed planning. University brand guidelines are a step in the right direction, but they're hopeless if they're not adhered to. Implementation of a university's brand identity needs to be consistent to get maximum value out of the investment. This is not an automated process, but one that needs to be managed by real people. Many university branding campaigns fail to achieve the standards they set. Not because they're set too high, but because of a lack of joined-up thinking from within.

Branding a university requires the entire project team to dig deep, but there are common pointers to keep the process on-track, and everyone pointing in the same direction…

A brand is not just a logo

You need to look at the concept of a brand as a promise with four essential elements: making a promise that students and investors value; communicating the promise; living the promise; and strengthening the promise. This should be

fleshed-out during the early phases of the re-branding programme, and will feed directly into your university branding strategy.

Build your brand from the bottom up

Don’t try and bolt on to what you have. Look at your mission (what’s important to you) and your vision (what you aspire to be) and make sure they spark an interest in students. Spend time talking to students, staff and investors and research the market to see what everyone else is doing. Examining the characteristics of other eduction institutes will enable you to find ‘space’ in the sector, and provide an opportunity for you to occupy that space. Again, this will form part of the initial strategy phase, and will be particularly beneficial when it comes to creating your university branding campaigns.

It’s not about competition

It’s about differentiation. You’re not trying to be the best university, but you are striving to be the one that does a particular thing best or offers something that no-one else does. An accurate positioning is key to reaching the right audience through highly targeted messaging. Any university branding agency worth its salt will understand the importance of this passage of the re-brand programme.

Have focus

Don’t claim to be great at everything as you will dilute your messages. Just pick one or two things and then deliver them. The more scattergun the approach, the less accurate your university branding campaigns will be. No institute can be good at absolutely everything, and prospective students are unlikely to be seeking a generalist provider. More likely, they’ll be researching your institute for a specialism, then

your location, and the facilities and lifestyle opportunities you provide.

Is your university's brand sustainable?

University branding is all about making a promise and delivering it, and you can't keep a promise if it's not real. Start by being honest with yourself, and make sure this is installed through your university brand guidelines. This way, you can keep coming back to your 'promise', making it your mantra. From here, you can filter it down to even the smallest piece of communication in the marketing mix.

Take a 360 degree approach

Make sure your university brand is working consistently and effectively on all platforms. Look at the success of corporate brands like Virgin or Nike who squeeze maximum value out of a powerful brand image with branded products and services, environments, advertising, literature and events to create a total brand experience.

Build in flexibility

The most successful university brands work on an institutional level, but allow enough freedom for departments and disciplines to market themselves within the master brand. This can be considered early in process, and guidelines can be contained within your university branding guidelines document. Consider how you're going to distribute this, and which sections are relevant for each department. Traditional printed guidelines and pdfs are being superseded by dedicated online brand guidelines centres, which might suit your need better. Making the process of distribution easier.

Use technology to your advantage

Your website is often the first point of contact that prospective students have with your brand, so it’s important to make the most of this opportunity. Think about how students will be accessing your university website, and how well your university’s brand identity translates online. According to the Office for National Statistics, 70% of 16- to 24-year-olds in the UK mostly use their mobile phones to go online. E-marketing campaigns could also be an effective way of reaching your audiences.

Segment your audience

Think about the differing concerns of your stakeholder groups: academics, undergraduates, post-graduates, staff, institutions, regional media, stakeholders and other investors. Make sure your university’s brand identity is used in a way that reaches out to each group.

The acid test

Ask yourself what pops into a student’s head when the name of your university is mentioned. If it’s ‘business school’ or ‘great research’ or ‘great reputation for agriculture’, you’re on the right track. If it’s ‘good university’, it suggests they don’t really know anything specific about it and you have some work to do…

With the right information, the right strategy and the right re-branding process, it’s possible to get it right and create a compelling and distinctive university brand. It may not come as far up the list as a must-have lifestyle brand, but then when did an iPhone ever promise a future?

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