Higher Education Institutional Brand Value in Transition: Measurement and Management Issues

In today’s higher education landscape, college and university leaders may well consider principles of brand management to assure their positions vis-à-vis their competitors. Although considerable differences between higher education and product brands exist, there are sufficient similarities to warrant a foray into issues of brand management. Higher education leaders may derive guidance to manage effectively what may be the most important intangible asset a college or university owns—its long-term image and bundle of core meaning. Paul Herr, associate professor of marketing at the University of Colorado, discusses issues related to brand management and presents strategies for developing and extending brands in higher education.
Branding Principles

Simple principles of cognitive psychology provide the theoretical base for brand management strategy. Cognitive psychology addresses the areas of human memory, and the processes by which information is internalized and used by individuals to make sense of their surroundings. Individuals store information in their memories in a form that can be retrieved, manipulated, and otherwise used, and that is organized in meaningful patterns. Pieces of information are connected to other pieces by links that vary in their associative strengths, ranging from very weak to very strong links that will always be activated by certain triggers—for example, when one thinks of a mini-van, one might also always think of families and children.

Prior to the purchase of a product, links are generally based on secondary sources, such as advertisements, word-of-mouth, and consumer information. On the other hand, post-purchase links are largely experience-based. Over time, strong summary links are often formed, reflecting the attitude one has about the product in question. Summary links are extremely accessible; their singular importance lies in the fact that they often persist long after the specific links on which they are based have weakened or dissipated. Once an attitude is formed, it often prevents new information from being accepted at face value. Accessible, summary attitudes, therefore, are quite predictive of subsequent behavior concerning a particular product. When an effortless flow from attitude to behavior exists, changing a person’s attitude or judgment is extremely difficult, if not impossible, even though the object may change considerably.

The specific attributes linked to a brand and the strength of the respective links represent the overall positioning of the brand relative to its competitors. Likewise, a cognitive representation of colleges can reveal their overall competitive positioning. An important distinction arises, however, between brands and higher education at this point. With respect to brands, the question of whose cognitive map should be identified is fairly easily answered. Colleges and universities, though, have multiple constituencies that may have conflicting cognitive representations and values. Attempting to position a college optimally with respect to all these constituencies is a daunting task; adding or deleting specific links may please one group while alienating another. One of the larger problems facing higher education in the face of rapid change is optimally balancing positioning among various constituents. The real value of measuring cognitive representations lies in the ability to chart the progress of this effort.

Measuring Cognitive Representations

Measuring an individual’s cognitive structure is easily done. A “top-of-the-mind” awareness task is often used, in which subjects are given a category or attribute label and instructed to list all the thoughts that come to mind upon considering the label. Generally speaking, the order of output indicates the relative strength of association each listed item has to the label in question. For example, if we
were concerned with the question of who owned “prestige,” we would present individuals with the word prestige and instruct them to list the colleges and universities that came to mind. An institution would have to be on the list to be considered for prestige ownership. In a second task, the length of time it takes to recognize that a member of the list is associated with prestige indicates the level of ownership of the attribute. The college or university that individuals most quickly recognize as possessing prestige is said to own the attribute relative to other competitors. Even if a brand does not own an attribute, its relative standing may be discovered by using this technique.

**Strategies for Developing and Extending Brands**

Two commonly used branding strategies are **category extensions** and **brand leveraging**. Category extensions entail entering a product or service category where the brand had not heretofore competed. Extensions can be used to reposition a brand’s meaning, but this is often a slow and costly process, and may backfire if an inconsistent extension is selected. For example, Budweiser might successfully extend into pretzels and other snacks, but probably not into orange juice. Further, some brands are so dominant that it is difficult for consumers to learn new associations. These are known as **master brands**. Being a master brand is both a blessing and a curse—while master brands enjoy substantial market share, it is difficult for them to be truly revolutionary. These are the brands that suffer most during times of rapid consumer preference shifts.

Master brands can be extended directly by strengthening the brand’s core competencies. Fortifying higher education brands through direct extensions simply entails expanding curricula and programs under the umbrella of the institution’s brand, on site. Another direct method of extension is expanding the customer group. In higher education, this approach is evident in the increased focus on nontraditional students, graduate and professional programs delivered through Web-based technologies, and off-site executive education programs.

The **Brand Leveraging Compass** shown in Figure 1 identifies four principle strategies for leveraging the value of a brand. Strategies on the north-south axis represent vertical branding tactics, whereby new elements are added to an existing brand. Strategies on the east-west axis represent horizontal tactics, whereby elements from different brands are combined.

**Sub-branding strategies.** Sub-branding represents an effort to add an element below the level of the master brand. A sub-brand combines with a master brand to create a “dual mark,” both of which are owned by the same firm. This is often done with fairly old, established brands. In higher education, the technique is fairly straightforward, and can be seen in university sponsored institutes, departments, and the like.

**Super-branding strategies.** Super-branding represents an attempt to add elements to an existing brand hierarchy above the level of the master brand. Typically, this is done to reflect an improvement in the master brand, for example, Holiday Inn’s Crown Plaza Hotels. This strategy generally works best when a substantially new and improved product is being introduced, and when the
master brand is shielded—at least at first—to facilitate learning the new association.

**Brand-bundling strategies.** Brand-bundling represents an attempt to overcome the limitations of the master brand’s strengths via-a-vis the competition by pairing someone else’s established brand with your product. This “cross branding” is fairly common in higher education, with cross registration agreements and consortia, as well as joint faculty arrangements. Brand-bundling may play an even greater role in the future as 1) established institutions become targets for newer institutions to elevate their credibility or 2) established institutions pair with each other to more effectively compete with the newer institutions.

**Brand-bridging strategies.** When a firm wishes to move toward a more distant product or service category, the master brand might sponsor a newly created brand until that brand has sufficient strength to stand on its own. Unlike super-branding, the master brand is not initially hidden. This leapfrogging allows the master brand to stretch farther than it could have without the intervening new brand. This strategy may be especially important as a possible means for individual institutions to reposition in a fairly short time.

**Conclusion**

The strategies presented here may help institutions better position themselves in the minds of their targets, first by measuring their current positions, and second by presenting possible approaches to changing their positions. The institutions’ goal, however, is not merely to attract the best students to attend the first day of classes, but rather to retain those students through graduation and beyond as loyal alumni. Just as most consumer goods businesses attempt to build life-long relationships with their target customers, so too might higher education benefit from focusing on establishing life-long ties with their graduates. By focusing on individuals and strategically establishing their brand accordingly, universities may be better positioned to maintain relevance and prosper well into the future.

Paul Herr is associate professor of marketing at the University of Colorado. He is the author or co-author of numerous articles and book chapters, including “The Impact of Dominance and Relatedness on Brand Extensions” (1996), “Using Dominance Measures to Evaluate Brand Extensions” (1994), and “Strategies for Leveraging Master Brands” (1992).