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HARNESSING THE POWER OF THE UNIVERSITY BRAND: FIVE STEPS TO AN EFFECTIVE BRANDED FACILITY

INTRODUCTION
Ever increasing competition for student enrollment has created a strong need for Higher Education institutions to differentiate themselves. Today, effective strategic planning and brand management require more than traditional advertising, marketing or identity development. Institutions that craft, present and manage a unified brand message, experience and environment achieve a competitive advantage in recruiting, retaining and building loyalty amongst their students, parents, staff, faculty, alumnae and donors!

No longer limited to a strictly commercial connotation, the concepts of branding are becoming increasingly important in the world of Higher Education. The interpretation and integration of an institution’s brand into a unique, engaging and memorable experience is crucial as Higher Education positions itself in the 21st century.

Many factors contribute to shaping an institution’s brand, including its academic reputation, athletics, location and distinguished alumnae. For years Higher Education institutions have unconsciously and consciously capitalized on their brand identity, especially as related to intercollegiate athletics. Tapping the power of the institution’s brand, and infusing it into all aspects of collegiate life will create a unique and identifiable experience.

A distinct Brand Experience is at the forefront of creating recognizable Higher Education facilities that support student life, while also acting as marketing and recruiting vehicles. Student unions, housing, e-cafes and recreation centers present unique opportunities to establish and strengthen a university’s brand identity. How these facilities are planned and designed play a key role in shaping the student life experience, encouraging alumnae engagement and in successfully marketing the forward-thinking Higher Education institution.

A new and innovative strategic approach to building a powerful and visible presence within the Higher Education market is through creation of a unique, “own-able” Branded Environment. Development of a Branded Environment is a means to creating consistency and cohesion among an institution’s contact points including the physical environment, marketing communications materials, internet presence, signage, displays & exhibits.

BRAND AND BRANDED ENVIRONMENTS
A brand represents a unique, identifiable symbol by which ownership or origin may be ascertained. In its most literal form, it can be manifested by a permanent mark, such as the “branding” of livestock in the “Old West” of the United States. This can still be observed today in the modernized version of this practice that affixes a permanent metal tag to the ear of each cow or steer. Not only does this device establish ownership, but it may include individualized data about the animal through the use of bar codes or even interactive GPS transponders.

Literal branding is not limited to agrarian economic models. Some of today’s best known commercial brands have their genesis in their historic manufacturing marks. One of the most literal examples of this is Pillsbury. Their logo was first used as a stamping on the circular top of their wooden shipping barrels, which helped to identify their product and manufacturing origin.
Over time the Pillsbury mark came to be known for more than mere identification of maker and product. The stamping became recognized by consumers as symbolic “shorthand”, implying positive attributes such as “quality”. Once the stamping was vested with added meaning, the Pillsbury mark had evolved from a logo to the beginnings of a brand. Although the days of wooden shipping barrels are long gone, Pillsbury continues to use a stylized version of that original marking because it has become the symbol of their brand, has established an innate relationship with their customers and therefore adds value to their business.

Today, a brand may be defined as a name, symbol or experience identified with a person (Martha Stewart = lifestyle), product (Band-Aid = adhesive medical strips), service (FedEx = overnight delivery) or organization (3M = innovation). It is a symbolic tool for conveying a set of beliefs that are commonly understood by the audience. To be truly successful, it must be specifically “own-able” by the entity that it represents. A brand embodies an organization’s unique, unmistakable essence, much like a strand of DNA can only be derived from a specific individual.

A variety of tools are utilized to effectively establish and communicate a brand to its target audience. These typically include the name, logo and tag line, as well as often utilizing color, shape, texture and pattern. More advanced brand tools include marketing communications, brand “personality” and image characteristics, or attributes linked to a particular lifestyle or audience aspiration.

These tools can be used singly, but are typically most effective when used in combination. Consistency of message, look and feel across all brand vehicles is absolutely critical to maximizing brand recognition and impact. Look no further than Nike to see an example of integrated brand tools. Anyone who has set foot in Chicago’s Niketown begins to recognize the power of a well developed Branded Environment.

Branded Environments play a growing role in establishing, enhancing and maintaining a brand. They utilize an integrated, research-based approach to define an entity’s essence (it’s “DNA”) to communicate a brand’s identity, attributes, benefits and features. They are three-dimensional representations of the brand, impacting multiple senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and occasionally taste) while enhancing the visitors’ Brand Experience across all contact points.

Contact points are the vehicles by which a brand interacts with its audience. There is a wide array of means by which the Branded Experience is created. These include three-dimensional (Branded Environments, point-of-purchase displays, special events), two-dimensional (brochures, catalogs, direct mail) and virtual (web site, email “blogs”, broadcast media). Don’t forget the importance of the “original” contact point, face-to-face interaction. Even the strongest brand cannot easily overcome the damage that a negative face-to-face encounter can inflict.

It is also important to note that brands are not static entities. They grow and change over time, much like living organisms. Planning and managing this evolution across each contact point is critical to maintaining the brand. One great example of a Branded Environment that integrates AND manages its contact points well is Starbucks. Unlike the static “cookie cutter” approach of a fast food chain such as Wendy’s (where every location is exactly the same day in and day out), Starbucks creates individual “places”.

Each Starbucks location is unique, while also regularly changing and updating elements of the environment, graphics, communications and product offering. The key is that Starbucks continues to skillfully create a consistent brand experience with the audience, while employing all of the individual variations. Although a customer may never set foot in other locations, they have an expectation in their mind of the brand experience, which Starbucks delivers upon.
CAMPUS BRANDING TRENDS

Higher Education institutions face a number of current trends that affect their need for branding. From Domino’s in the food court, to the Reebok display in the bookstore window, as well as the Gap, et al in the student union, brands have already slowly taken root on most campuses. Much like the tenacity of weeds in your flower garden, these commercial brands have the capacity to choke off an institution’s brand before it can take root. Even if a university or college has no organized brand unto itself, it must have a plan for how to organize, present and regulate other “foreign” brands, lest the campus soon look like “McDonald’s U”. The implication of this trend is that establishing specific brand standards and co-branding strategies will continue to be an important part of an institution’s overarching brand plan (if not an act of brand self-preservation).

Today, students are much more sophisticated in their life styles, working at a more intense pace and often combining study with employment. They are more introspective, seeking greater balance and meaning in the choices that they make, including a desire for more flexible means to participate in educational programs. Never before have institutions experienced students with such high levels of technological knowledge, communications savvy and brand sophistication. The implication of this trend is that the student body is experienced with, and has an expectation of a well developed Higher Education brand. Institutions need not fear that branding will trod upon unsophisticated student sensibilities. Rudimentary branding efforts will no longer be enough within the competitive landscape for the student’s attention.

Competition for qualified, full time students and the search for additional sources of revenue through alternative populations (such as commuter, part-time, graduate & continuing education students) will continue to drive a need to provide programs, benefits and facilities that will interest and engage the student body. Providing a quality education is no longer enough, but rather the “entry cost” for Higher Education. Students, families, alumnae and even faculty are seeking a “sense of place” and a “memorable experience” when deciding where to go to school or where to work. Here, the opportunity to utilize a Branded Environment is clear. The intent is not to create a fake “Disney-ized” campus, but rather a true environment that builds upon the values and essence of the institution to amplify its unique qualities, features and benefits.

For institutions of Higher Education, “brand” constitutes a unique promise to the students and their families, the faculty and the surrounding community. It is not a mission statement, particular curriculum, slogan or athletic program (although they do create a brand impression). It is the sum of its attributes including the institution’s name, history, reputation and environment, as it exists in each of the audience’s minds (real and imagined). It goes beyond the literal and includes the intangible. Brand may be managed by the institution, but cannot ultimately be controlled. It lives through how an institution plans, creates and delivers on the target audiences’ expectations, impressions and experiences.

Higher Education institutions have a wide and diverse set of target audiences. Each of these groups often has different levels of brand commitment, knowledge, experience and motivators. Some are obvious, such as existing and potential students, their families (often decision-makers or influencers in school choice) and alumnae. In today’s competitive market, an institution must also have strategies to recruit, engage and retain faculty and donors. Outside of the traditional boundaries of campus lie other important audiences, such as funding decision-makers in government, corporate business partners and sponsors, as well as the local community that the institution exists within. Finally, don’t forget the potential impact that the various local and national media have in communicating and validating the Higher Education institution’s brand.

Brand and Branded Environments have an important impact on Higher Education marketing. To be effective, an institution’s brand must utilize a few basic principals to reach, educate and motivate its target audiences. It must have an understanding of the institution’s essence (the “DNA”), its competitive arena, its desired positioning and a strategic brand plan by which to work from. The institution must be able to believably embody the desired position and communicate it in an understandable manner. The position also must differentiate itself from its peers and competitors, and must be strong enough to act as a “call to action” to its audience. Paraphrasing Daryl Travis of Brandtrust, “A great brand lives in the hearts & minds of its audience”.
FIVE STEPS TO AN EFFECTIVE BRANDED FACILITY

Five steps are recommended to develop an effective Higher Education facility through a Branded Environments approach:

**Step 1: Know your Target Audience**

Know your existing and potential target audiences. Understand the demographics, but push beyond to identify what motivates their decision-making process. Reach out to touch their minds and their hearts.

**Step 2: Identify your Unique Essence**

Identify your institutions’ “DNA” and understand its make up. What defines the spirit and the experience of the campus? How can you differentiate from peers and competitors?

**Step 3: Challenge your Pre-Conceived Notions**

Don’t take existing perceptions at face value. Understand their genesis, as well as the conditions of the day. However, look beyond and work to an established “vision of the future”. As long as that vision is based upon principals and goals that are true to the institution’s essence, the vision can be planned for and achieved.

**Step 4: Build from Existing Foundation**

Understand the brand strategies and tools that may already be in place. Leverage that foundation to allow the institution to take “the next step”. Inform and include the key decision-makers to gain consensus. Don’t think that you need to “start from the ground up”. Incorporate new strategies, tools and plans into the institution’s budget and timeline process.

**Step 5: Plan for Measurable Results**

Plan to measure the results of these efforts. Whether it’s increased student enrollment, longer dwell time in facilities, higher sales and donor revenue or increased public awareness, quantifiable results help demonstrate the value of the brand program, as well as help garner continuing support.

CONCLUSION

Our experience shows that the use of an integrated in-house and consultant team (brand, marketing, facilities, master planning, architecture, interiors and graphic communications) will successfully result in identifying and integrating a Higher Education institution’s unique “DNA” into tangible Branded Experiences and Environments.