

Mission impossible...?

Don't leave home without it, but what is the point of the mission statement?

When "mission statement" appears on the committee agenda, it is probably time to reach for the hard hats and declare that a status of "mission critical" has been reached.

Few things appear to inspire such frustration, ire or plain boredom and yet this much maligned element of corporate communication is being increasingly cleverly used (or radically adapted) by those institutions determined to present themselves in new ways to key stakeholders.

SELF KNOWLEDGE

The realistic value of the mission or positioning statement is centred on the ability of organisations to fully understand and communicate two key issues: their core strategy and business purpose. For many organisations (and especially those outside the HE sector), mission is inextricably linked to "self-knowledge" and grounded business acumen: a test of the "health" of the organisation and a reflection of its empathy or otherwise with the real market issues it faces. This encompasses the need to be acutely aware of the organisation's role within a defined set of markets, plus the successful communication to stakeholders or consumers of the ethical and moral values that inform the institution's guiding principles. In this way, successful mission and positioning can be symptomatic of the "conscious" or business-aware organisation: the organisation that possesses and is informed by a practical understanding of the interplay between its business objectives and the driving forces of its markets.

Stamp Consulting manages the development of mission statements and positioning strategies for institutions within the higher education and public sectors. To assist its work with higher education clients, the company conducted a generic sector research exercise during 2001-02 to consider how HEIs in the UK and elsewhere used mission statements. The study was informed by benchmarking organisational mission in sectors outside education, including key business and service sector players. The exercise highlighted starkly the health of the mission statement in UK higher education: although not completely exclusive, three clear sub-groups emerged.

HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER...

From the research process, a clear base of "traditional" institutions (not necessarily pre-1992s) clung to mission statements that were almost interchangeable, "off the peg" or "ready-mix". In some acute cases, phrases from different organisational statements registered as identical matches. In the research benchmarking process (outside higher education) incidences of identical phrasings, for example, were negligible even among comparator organisations within different sectors.

In some HE cases occurrences of interchangeable phraseology also existed, despite the fact that the organisations in question displayed significant differences in their strategic vision and approaches to core business issues, or even though institutional remit or brief had often changed markedly since the statements were scripted. The common denominator was an emphasis on self-preoccupation and internal focus: statements were much less concerned with effective communications with stakeholders or the potential to demonstrate organisational "style or approach", illustrating instead a re-iteration of ways in which the organisations would strive "to be the best, biggest, first".

TO BOLDLY GO...

Institutions that appeared to be more adept at the "science" of the mission statement were those that could be deemed to be forward looking. The group was made up of those institutions that had at some point within the last five years questioned or adjusted their vision and future direction or corporate targets in a significant way. This had occurred as the organisations endeavoured to respond to, for example, specific aspects of governmental policy, to adjust to market shifts and new (often business related or "global") opportunities or demographic trends.

The group demonstrated statements that much more closely fulfilled the "text book" concept of what a mission should really include: i.e. a bold focus on "less about me, the organisation, and more about what I pledge to do for you, the potential beneficiary of our services". Elements included, for example, an expression of the organisation's objectives and strategy, an understanding of the service users or target markets and an emphasis on proving to stakeholders how organisational guiding principles might make a tangible difference to stakeholder experience at every, or any, level. The group included a mix of pre- and post- 1992 organisations.

The pre-1992s included institutions that had assessed realistically the sustainability of their current favourable status or market position and decided to plan pragmatically to secure an equally auspicious future. The post-1992s within the group included institutions that had fought successfully to develop some level of differentiation within the generic higher education market place or that demonstrated tangible confidence in their brand strength within key target markets.

IS THE FUTURE BRIGHT?

A small but very exclusive group of UK institutions had set themselves apart by moving beyond the concept of the mission statement in favour of the positioning statement or strategy. This trend to move on from the mission statement approach was first flagged within business and commercial sectors and is, realistically, only for the few institutions that deem themselves to be brave enough for the challenge.

The positioning statements assessed were inevitably longer treatises. In all cases the focus was on being transparently honest about organisational goals, relating these directly and very "hand on heart" to an aspirational and inspirational vision of the organisation as the opportunity to be a catalyst for the future of its stakeholders. The check-lists of "best, biggest, first" were resigned to the facts and figures pages of the web site. These institutions had determined to make bold statements about the ways in which they believed they could make a difference, sometimes for individuals, sometimes for the broader stage, by assisting "a generation" to fulfil its potential.

US models for such statements are more readily apparent, with the big players such as Princeton and Harvard demonstrating overt pride in the belief that their real achievements are in the opportunities they make possible for people and in the alumni they produce. Such organisations are happy to state that they have produced alumni that are trail blazers in "every field of human endeavour", or that they consider themselves to be "in the nation's service and the service of all nations", for example.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

So, what is the point of the mission or positioning statement? It's simple: it is as valuable as the institution makes it.

If the organisation simply has a statement, because it feels it has to, the statement can only be of limited benefit: it will be useful or applicable to a very limited audience. If it's identical to others, out of date or of little relevance to stakeholders, it will not serve the organisation as a differentiator from other market players and may well be subject to unfavourable comparative scrutiny (a situation which has been registered within perceptions analysis research).

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE...

If the organisation uses the statement to communicate the specific characteristics of its approach to its audiences, to articulate its aspirational beliefs or to inspire those with whom it wishes to engage, it could well become a powerful element within the organisational marketing mix.

A few institutions have now begun to recognise what other sectors have long known, that the mission or positioning statement, if developed appropriately, can be a dynamic "prelude" that sets the stage for an organisation in a way that few textual elements can. Several Ivy League US institutions know this and use it well and so, now, do a select group of UK institutions. The point remains, as with many aspects of the marketing and communications process that the choice can be made:

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| ■ Not to use it. | ■ To use it badly. |
| ■ To use it ineffectively. | ■ To use it well. |

The worst case scenario is to use it, but to use it badly. In all cases, the results are publicly available for all to see. They provide yet another option of choice, comparison and measure of difference for stakeholders. If one organisation stands out for the effective use of its statements, the opportunities increase for the stakeholder to ask of other institutions, "what have you got to say about yourself and what might you do for me?" It's your challenge, should you choose to accept it.

How did your organisation fare in the research exercise? To find out more about the mission and positioning development process, to arrange an on-site seminar or a mission briefing, contact Rosemary Stamp.

Rosemary Stamp is Director of Stamp Consulting, providing strategic advice and consultancy support to education and public sector organisations across the UK and Europe.

rosemary.stamp@stampconsulting.co.uk

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