

## Profile and reputation?

### Get back to basics...

Organisations are increasingly concerned about their reputation and profile, and it isn't surprising with so many ways of "measuring" institutions and their performance so readily available.

Increased regulation, public accountability, a raging "whistle-blower" culture coupled with heightened stakeholder expectations are all driving increased scrutiny of organisations and their ability to deliver (or not) on the promises they make. A wealth of information makes it increasingly easy for audiences to make comparisons about one organisation and another, no matter how accurate or reliable the source information. It is hard for institutions to focus on being creative in reputation management when so much energy and resource is demanded simply to cope with the day to day management of effective stakeholder communications and the resultant audience perceptions.

#### BASICS, FIRST...

Many organisations are concerned about their profile and reputation, but before embarking on major reviews or re-branding processes, it's important to sense-check the basics...

Experience of a wide range of corporate branding assignments within and beyond higher education suggests that it is some of the simpler and more obvious things in life that can make a real difference to organisational (and sector) reputation, so it's worth considering specifics:

#### KNOW THE "DRAG" FACTORS...

It may not be only the "usual suspects" that are dragging an institution's relative profile and positioning down; for example location issues, uncompetitive results or negative PR "baggage".

Rather, it could be a lack of organisational cohesion about how reputation is formed and the demands that its management may place on the institution. A classic illustration of this is the exponentially negative effect that a lack of cross-institutional consistency can have on league table reporting protocols and subsequent results, for example. Also, achieving senior management team buy-in for marketing and reputation issues means more than getting approval for actions, it demands that key staff must be prepared to act as visible brand champions and play an active role in communicating the proposition, through the good and bad times.

#### DO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU DO?

Unless institutions communicate their "total" proposition as part of marketing and brand equity we should not be surprised if their stakeholders make incorrect assumptions about what they do. When so much beyond T and L, KT and research is integral to the "business" of higher education, it is important to communicate not just what the organisation does, but how, where and to whom it makes a difference.

#### BE PROUD OF SUCCESS

One of the major hindrances to effective positioning can be an institution's self-effacing approach to the communication of its products, service offer and successes. This works internally, too: it can be the case that staff within an institution are not always fully aware of the scale of its achievements and so their ability to act as effective advocates is limited.

## TANGIBLE RESULTS

Institutions benefit when they link the advantages generated by their activities to their audiences' concerns and agendas (and in terms of profile, this is pertinent to stakeholders from students through to government ministers). It helps to demonstrate tangible differences, i.e. outputs that have been achieved to the contribution that an institution makes. For some organisations, a key positive of their regional presence may be linked to their role as a major employer and yet this factor may be overlooked in positioning an organisation within its community and in the development of a competitive employer brand.

## KEEP IT SIMPLE

It is always critical to deliver on brand promise, but doing **"what it says on the tin"** demands a simplicity of communication that can be incredibly hard to achieve for complex organisations with many channels of communications to a widely diverse array of audiences.

## KEEP GOOD COMPANY...

Effective strategic alliances are fundamental to successful competitive positioning and a major catalyst (and, in some instances, insurance) for an enviable reputation. While every organisation will have business and other partners, strategic alliances are critically different, providing long-term mutual benefit to organisations and delivering added-value at many levels. Many of the best strategic alliances will not involve any kind of financial exchange and may be formed between organisations or individuals, and yet formal **"alliance strategies"** are not yet a default within strategic corporate planning.

## THIRD PARTY ENDORSEMENT...

Know when others will say it better than you can. Make the most of effective and credible third party endorsement.

## EVALUATE AND IMPLEMENT...

Of course it is critical to understand stakeholders' motivations and to market to them accordingly, but make sure that audiences know that their input is a driver of the portfolio and services.

## FORGET AT YOUR PERIL...

While we think we may be able to manage reputation, it is always driven by our stakeholders, their experiences of the institution and the subsequent development of their perceptions. The future challenge may be accelerated by the way in which new media communications, such as social networking and open access content sites, can place unrestricted power to influence audience perceptions within stakeholders' hands. The reach, potential speed of change and acute vulnerability of word-of-mouth communications will be supercharged in the future online environment.

**We need to be ready...**

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