

## Brand leadership: Clear messages for difficult times

When so much within the sector is in flux and institutional priorities are adjusting to accommodate policy change and funding shift, one critical advantage can help inform required institutional responses: a robust institutional brand proposition will support effective communications to stakeholders in uncertain times.

The world, not just the education sector, is watching for institutional responses to recent funding and policy changes. In some cases, these have been fast, furious and very public, drawing (some unfavourable) worldwide attention to the "state of UK higher education".

While the debate is necessary, it affects not only stakeholders' understanding of institutions but also their relative confidence in institutional futures. There may be trouble ahead, but institutions have no choice but to deal with what's on the horizon and keep stakeholders informed.

An important advantage in managing this difficult process can be found in the strength of a clear and evidence-based institutional brand proposition. This can provide support to an institution's effective communications with its varied audiences, enabling stakeholders to understand the institution's position, keep pace with its developing views about current issues and its plans for the future. Keeping stakeholders engaged with the institution's response strategy will be a critical constituent of future sustainable success.

A review of the sector suggests that this is not an easy task or one that every institution is able to address effectively.

### THE CONTEXT FOR A CLEAR BRAND PROPOSITION

The sector imperative for brand proposition clarity in difficult times is exacerbated by:

- [1.] The ease of comparison between institutions and the education offer (including for example, different pedagogical approaches, for-profit providers etc).
- [2.] The increasingly ubiquitous way in which stakeholders evaluate widely differing experiences.

- [3.] Heightened stakeholder expectations.
- [4.] An increased sense of stakeholder investment (not just monetary, but also their commitment or motivation to study, the opportunity cost of enrolling on an education programme, for example).
- [5.] Increasingly visible corporate accountability.
- [6.] The economic context which stimulates stakeholders to question the viability and sustainability of providers in a fluctuating market sector.

### EMERGING RISKS

Without the advantage of a strong brand proposition in times of difficulty, a number of risks emerge:

- [1.] Inaccurate perceptions of the institution may develop and remain unchallenged.
- [2.] Image and reputation lag may occur.
- [3.] Less able institutions may appear to be more successful or better placed to deal with the current situation.
- [4.] The institution may appear to fail to keep pace with its rapidly changing market context or stakeholder needs, for example.
- [5.] Stakeholders may make choices or decisions about an institution based on anecdotal information, rather than evidence-based and accurate factors of differentiation.
- [6.] The institutional message does not get through.
- [7.] Most critically, others may speak for the institution (by default) due to a gap in visible brand presence or communications.

## WHY BRANDS UNDERPERFORM OR FAIL

From brand consultations during the last two years, five recurring issues have emerged which give some insight into brand failure or weakness in an education sector context. These become critical in tough times and include:

- [1.] Failure to monitor or keep pace with changing stakeholder or market needs.
- [2.] Losing contact with stakeholders.
- [3.] Poor service delivery which undermines consumer confidence in the institution.
- [4.] Failure to recognise the "real" nature of the competition they face.
- [5.] Not articulating or delivering credible "reasons to choose" the institution over others. A wide range of factors are noted, but these include: low levels of visible competitiveness; promoting factors that are not evidence based or substantiated; complacency.

## WHAT BRAND PROPOSITIONS AREN'T

Let's be clear that a robust brand proposition is not:

- Spin or hubris.
- Just visual identity.
- Statements without supporting evidence.
- Pure aspiration.
- "Me too" marketing.
- Overly introspective.
- Just about the tangibles of the institutional offer, rather than the experiential factors, too.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG BRAND PROPOSITIONS

Conversely, strong, clear brand propositions for institutions in an educational context:

- Are evidence-based.
- Enable institutions to manage accurate communications about their activities, style and purpose.
- Drive accurate understanding.

- Inform choice.
- Enable the institution to speak for itself.
- Facilitate accurate stakeholder understanding of the institution, its mission, objectives and operating style.

## BRAND LEADERSHIP MUST-HAVES

It is not enough for institutions to say they have a strong and understandable brand, they must live and breathe it, a challenge that must be led from the very top of the institution. Brand leadership must-haves for the Principal or VC include:

- [1.] An understanding that brand and marketing are integral to institutional business strategy.
- [2.] The willingness to be an active brand champion for the institution, demonstrating visible endorsement of the institutional brand and advocating on its behalf.
- [3.] A desire to encourage mutual engagement with and responsibility for the institution (and what it stands for) across all internal stakeholders.

## PROACTIVE STRATEGIC FIT

To continue to be relevant, institutional brands need to adjust to (and pre-empt) shifting markets. In their development, they need to incorporate and be responsive to:

- The need for agility and speed of change.
- Shifting planning horizons.
- Constant and robust market intelligence.

## FUTURE BRAND CHALLENGES

What does the future hold? The challenges are very diverse and will shift constantly, but be prepared to address:

- [1.] The implications of out-sourcing: institutions are no longer in control of some stakeholders experiences delivered in their name.
- [2.] The impact on stakeholder expectations of the services delivered by private providers and for-profit models.
- [3.] Increasing competitiveness in staff recruitment and retention, which will demand a competitive employer brand proposition.
- [4.] The challenge of competitive pricing strategies (in some markets).
- [5.] Problems with the "expectation and delivery" equation: gaps between what the institution promises and what it delivers.
- [6.] Shifts in brand hygiene factors: as previously "new" or market leading attributes become standard practice.
- [7.] Stakeholder and market-led product and service innovation.
- [8.] The relative lack of institutional control over "word of mouth" communications delivered through user-generated web and social media content.
- [9.] The need to reassure stakeholders and foster confidence in the institution in uncertain times.
- [10.] The REF impact imperative and relevance: the need to demonstrate a fit with the broader context of the social, economic and skills agenda.

Whatever challenges face an institution a robust, evidence based brand that is relevant to, and understood by its stakeholders will be integral to the effective communication of its future plans, understanding and engagement.

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