stampreport

ROSEMARY STAMP | DIRECTOR | STAMP CONSULTING

stampconsulting
REALISM | INSIGHT | OBJECTIVITY

The evolving brand
How new policies force brand change

One of the biggest changes affecting education institutions has been taking place by stealth.

As sector policy drives shifts in activities and priorities, a wide range of institutions have found themselves running to keep up with exponentially rising standards and increasing stakeholder expectations.

What, exactly, is going on?

Such changes have side effects: new initiatives drive the modification of the corporate brand.

As stakeholder expectations rise and corporate responsibilities increase, factors that could once be described as part of the "augmented" brand proposition (i.e. additional or added value brand facets that may, in the past, have set the organisation apart from peers or competitors), migrate into the core brand: i.e. rather than being "extras", they become "must-haves" or standard "hygiene factors" that, the sector dictates, any self respecting organisation should demonstrate.

BRAND MODIFICATION DRIVERS

The catalyst for this process has been a blend of policy issues, changing market needs plus rising stakeholder expectations. Whatever the origin, the legacy is the need for educational organisations to complement their accepted/traditional brand proposition with additional, market responsive brand facets. A number of issues appear frequently, for example:

[1.] SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability/carbon footprint issue is now a critical one for all UK education institutions: it is linked to some funding parameters and is the subject of league tables and comparator benchmarks.

This has not always been the case, however.

A decade ago, sustainability was very often limited to a place within the organisation's programme portfolio, but increasingly, the green agenda has become centre stage, an integral part of the institution's corporate strategy and future planning. It has now become a "must-have" for the corporate brand proposition, increasingly playing a role in decisions about the estate, building programmes plus infrastructure and facilities development.

[2.] STUDENT EXPERIENCE

All institutions will feel they have a distinctive student experience to offer, but changes in brand proposition relative to this issue have been powered by increased scrutiny and reportage.

Among other factors, the NSS has, particularly, driven interest in the comparative measurement of the facets that compose "student experience" and relative satisfaction.

Now, organisational brands must articulate, as standard, the specifics of what the student experience means at their institution and the benefits that accrue. Of course, student experience itself is a constantly changing concept. It is, currently, reported in a more "three dimensional" way than it has ever been before: encompassing social experience, diversity of the student body, programme structure and T and L pedagogy, for example.

[3.] INTERNATIONALISATION

As reported[1], internationalisation is set to become a critical differentiator for many organisations, and has already made its way into some institutional propositions.

However, it is tough to embed within the core organisational brand, as it requires input into so many aspects of the institution's culture and operation. Its influence needs to range from partnerships and alliances, student experience and the quality of staff through to the development and management of the portfolio itself.

[1] Internationalisation: the new "must-have" for the strategic plan; Rosemary Stamp: www.stampconsulting.co.uk/reports.php.

[4.] FACILITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Expected standards for the pragmatic basics of educational life (for example, facilities, buildings, accommodation, systems and infrastructure) rise year on year and with dizzying speed.

Perceptions among staff and students of sector minimum standards are fuelled by the ease of comparison and accessibility to peer benchmarking studies, not just within the UK but across global comparators.

Basic accommodation standards demand wi fi/internet access; teaching resources are increasingly measured through the deployment of VLE and innovative learning lab methodologies and, of course, more and more services are required to be 24/7.

[5.] CUSTOMER SERVICE

This will be the agenda to watch for 2008-2009.

Government is becoming increasingly involved in setting the agenda and standards for customer service within other sectors. As a result, educational institutions are beginning to recognise both the real value that effective customer service can bring (as evidenced across a great diversity of organisations), and, consequently, the need for a more formalised approach to an issue which is at the heart of much service-related activity.

The real challenge will be in not simply responding to changing stakeholder needs, but in being proactive in customer service in a way that improves systems and brings efficiencies across the organisation. The difficulty most educational organisations face is the delivery of a joined-up approach with consistency in standards, rather than silo activity and variable KPIs.

IMPLICATIONS…

Of course, such changes to the brand and the institutional proposition cannot occur without implications.

The main repercussions for institutions centre on:

[1.] INCREASED BRAND COMPLEXITY

As hygiene factors increase, the articulation of the brand and organisational messages become more complicated. This has an impact upon marketing, communications and the practicalities of stakeholder engagement. Stakeholders need to know "what you do, what you stand for and how you do it", and institutions must present an easily understandable and coherent proposition for this to be achievable.

[2.] SKILLS

As new brand facets migrate from the augmented brand to the core brand, those responsible for the associated services need to be increasingly adept at delivering on them and explaining them to target stakeholders. This has seen a growth in the need for skills such as service-to service/internal marketing plus negotiation and lobbying skills within areas such as estates and facilities management. For example, if the estates office needs to align the institution's behaviour to the corporate green agenda, it must achieve internal buy-in and stakeholder engagement across the organisation.

[3.] RESOURCES

Inevitably, all these changes require additional resources.

However, this will not be simply in the form of capital resources but also in terms of specialist human resources, professional services and skills, for example.

[4.] BRAND KPIS, EVALUATORS AND BENCHMARKS

Those augmented brand facets that transfer to the core brand need to be apparent and demonstrable to all stakeholders.

The organisation must be able to demonstrate how the brand has changed (i.e. been "improved" or deepened, for example, by the addition of these new facets); stakeholders must be able to recognise the change and understand the difference that this delivers for them in comparison with other brand propositions.

Within this context of development and change, the effectiveness of new brand facets needs to be monitored and evaluated to ensure there is continuous delivery on the evolving "brand promise".

At whatever stage of development the institutional brand and proposition may have reached, one thing is certain: "change is the only constant" and, as new initiatives and polices arrive and planning horizons reduce, brand adaptation will become an increasingly regular necessity.

Rosemary Stamp is Director of Stamp Consulting. She provides specialist management, marketing, skills development and strategic planning support to a wide range of organisations.

Her consulting portfolio includes international marketing strategies; competitive brand development; location brand strategy; nation branding; business, foresight and policy response planning; competitor analysis plus digital and online strategies.

Rosemary has advised a wide range of institutions striving to achieve a successful competitive positioning. During the last three years she has led twelve brand development strategies for organisations in the public and education sectors. Rosemary facilitates decision-making seminars, competitive briefings and strategic planning programmes for senior management teams throughout Europe.

+44 (0)7970 209470
enquiries@stampconsulting.co.uk

www.stampconsulting.co.uk