

Chapter 61

Building a Brand in Virtual Learning Spaces: Why Student Connections Matter

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ABSTRACT

This article employs a case study approach to explore the notion of connectedness between doctoral learners at a Midwestern distance learning university and other learners, faculty, their schools within the university, and the university itself in terms of brand identity and management. Although more than one-third of the learners felt no connection to their university and thus no brand association, this case study suggests that there is room for improvement at all levels of connectedness to the academic environment. This includes developing management practices that reinforce uniqueness and foster consistent images of the institution as credible, reliable, and responsive.

INTRODUCTION

“Maybe I’m a purist... but when I hear football announcers speak of RED filling the stadium [instead of scarlet] I feel the hair rise on the back of my neck.... Could the athletic department post a reminder in the press box of the REAL name of [our] colors?”—Ronald, graduate of a large Midwestern university

“Heck, I didn’t even know we had colors!”—Sharlene, faculty member at a virtual university

For Ronald, the retired alumnus, thinking about his school colors evoked memories of “walking the beautiful campus interacting with students” (R. White, personal communication, November 16, 2010). In contrast, at Sharlene’s virtual university, only one of 28 faculty surveyed identified the correct shade of the school’s red (H. Glazer, personal communication, November 18, 2010).

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Yet another faculty member sensed that colors promote an affective connection to the university and acknowledged that “a little sense of school spirit wouldn’t hurt” (J. Smith, personal communication, November 19, 2010).

School colors are among the symbols that differentiate one institution from another and are one aspect of an institution’s brand. Other elements of a university’s brand include promises about the benefits of attending the university, distinctive features compared to other institutions, and how the university is represented through symbols and communication (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). The perceived value of the degree; resources available to students, faculty, and alumni; and the attractiveness of the campus atmosphere add to strong brand images (Association for the Study of Higher Education, 2005).

Brand relationships can be construed as expressions of consumers’ identities (Swaminathan, Page, & Gürhan-Canli, 2007). Consumers form strong relationships with brands that have values and personality associations with which they can identify (Swaminathan et al.). People want to be associated with strong brands, and brand associations or connections can create positive attitudes and feelings about the organization (ASHE, 2005).

Connectedness to the institution and those within it is a core feature of academic communities (Beattie, 2002; Rovai, 2002). Yet for many, university life is fragmented, disconnected, and isolated (McNay, 2005; Bibeau, 2001), which affects the attractiveness of the university’s brand to prospective students (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009). This chapter employs a case study approach to explore the notion of connectedness between doctoral learners at a Midwestern distance learning university and other learners, faculty, and the university in terms of brand identity and management. We conclude the chapter with suggestions for fostering connectedness and building institutional brands.

BACKGROUND

One of the hallmarks of a graduate education appears to be how connected the individual feels to the academic community, or to elements of the community (Thurston, 2005; Beattie, 2002; Rovai, 2002). This is easy to observe at a landed university where colors are worn and sports are played. However, in the distance learning environment, learners have little tangible connection with the physical university. School spirit, cohesion, and interdependence are aspects of connectedness that must be conveyed through technology (Rovai, 2003).

A university’s visual identity helps convey the brand image, and a strong visual identity can suggest a more favorable reputation (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006). Aspects of visual identity include the university’s name, logo, tagline, color palette, and architecture as well as the university’s public behavior (Alessandri et al.). In an exploration of visual identity and university reputation among students, Alessandri et al. found that the distinctiveness of an institution’s visual identity can prime a positive image in the minds of the public. One faculty member at a virtual university noted that she did not realize that the school colors were on the website as the color template (H. Glazer, personal communication, November 18, 2010). If faculty are not aware of the colors, can we expect that students are?

Paradoxically, while technology can solve the problem of geographic isolation, it can create issues with social isolation (Bibeau, 2001). Creating an academic learning community is considered a fundamental strategy to combat isolation (Bibeau, 2001; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000), help learners develop social presence and online identities (Cousin & Deepwell, 2005; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001), and to support knowledge construction (Moisey, Neu, & Cleveland-Innes, 2008) and meaningful learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Connectedness is one of the

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