

Chapter 1

What is the Secret of Successful University Brands?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines branding and how the concept adds value to organizations beyond the usual focus of consumer product marketing. In particular, the focus of exploring branding conceptualizations associated with successful higher education brands in a UK context makes a contribution to a little researched but increasingly topical area. The UK focus was chosen for this initial stage with a view to later comparison with other markets such as the United States where branding of universities has a longer track record. The literature was examined and the concept of 'successful' brands explored. The research approach involved generating constructs to determine what underpins a successful university brand, and subsequently testing these among a larger sample of UK university 'customers.' Findings explore the variables that underpin successful university brands and significant relationships among these variables. Ultimately, the paper offers initial conclusions on what underpins a successful university brand and proposes variables associated with such brands.

INTRODUCTION

Education has been argued to be a quasi-commercial service industry (Brookes, 2003) and universities are behaving increasingly as corporations in many respects (Veloutsou et al., 2004; Bunzel, 2007).

With increased commercialization comes an associated focus on marketing and branding and the adoption of marketing as an ethos by diverse sectors, including education, is no longer under debate (Shepherd, 2005). The challenge for uni-

versities, however, is that effective application of marketing to specialist areas such as education is arguably not well developed (Hankinson, 2004).

As part of marketization it is argued that branding is a key organisational competence as universities compete for resources (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Veloutsou et al., 2004; Helmsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Branding, as conceptualized in this research, comprises both the *rational* and the *emotional* elements common to many writers (Le Pla & Parker, 2002; Balmer & Greyser, 2003) and the authors

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accept the view that ‘the brand is a synthesis of all the physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements’ (Hart & Murphy, 1998, p. 61).

To explore the essence of branding, however, may require researchers to question why some organizations are more successful than others in brand building (Urde, 2003)?

The contribution of this research is that it investigates the elements of brand *success*.

Whilst there has been a reasonable amount of work on what constitutes a successful brand in commercial organizations, and a growing body investigating components of university brands, the specific context of successful university brands addresses a gap in the literature at a time when this work is highly topical. It is accepted that *success* is a highly subjective term but this is explored through the literature and this paper is offered as a basis for further work to isolate the essence of successful branding in organizations such as universities.

The specific objectives of the paper were:

- To look for commonalities in brand related activity among universities suggested to have *successful* brands.
- To identify the brand components/ variables associated with *successful* UK university brands.
- To further the debate and inform practice on the issues surrounding branding in contexts other than commercial product marketing.

These objectives are linked by the common purpose of investigating the factors underpinning successful brands in universities and draw from existing literature on HE (Higher Education) branding in general and brand success in commercial contexts. The assertion that conventional branding techniques are inadequate in this market (Jevons, 2006) further supports the need for this research.

It is conceded that HE branding in the USA is generally more accepted and therefore advanced than the UK (R. Sevier, personal communication, May 2004) but the UK focus of this paper is considered appropriate as it is a interesting and rapidly changing HE market, and results may be valuable for subsequent comparison not only with the US, but with other countries where branding in HE is becoming commonplace but is at varying stages of implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the concept of successful brands, central to this paper, and then goes on to consider the specific branding context of universities, the application of corporate branding to the sector and finally applies the concept of brand success to the HE sector.

SUCCESSFUL BRANDS

The concept of *success* in any aspect of an organisation is subjective, and this is particularly so when applied to concepts as intangible as brands and brand management.

Some common definition of brands is a necessary initial step; there is agreement among most writers that a brand encompasses both the *rational* and the *emotional* elements (Le Pla & Parker, 2002; Balmer & Greyser, 2003) and conceptualizing a brand as a synthesis of physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements (Hart & Murphy, 1998) was considered inclusive and appropriate.

Defining brand success, however, may prove even more elusive, as whilst marketing success is well defined as a concept, no definitive source seemingly focuses on brand success (De Chernatony, D’all Olmo Riley, & Harris, 1998).

There are attempts at defining successful brands, generally alluding to a name or symbol

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