

What defines 'successful' university brands ?

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Structured Abstract

Purpose. Branding in universities has become an increasingly topical issue among practitioners, with some institutions committing substantial financial resources to branding activities. Although it is receiving increased academic investigation, to date this has been limited. The particular characteristics of the sector present challenges for those seeking to build brands and it therefore seems timely and appropriate to investigate the common properties of those universities perceived as having successful brands.

Design. The study employs qualitative research techniques in an exploratory study, examining the institutions perceived to be ‘successful’ in terms of brand management, and seeking to explore any commonalities of approach or circumstance.

Findings. The findings and conclusions identify issues surrounding university branding activity. It was found that even among those brands considered ‘successful’, challenges such as lack of internal brand engagement and limited international resonance may be apparent. Certain common positive success factors are also suggested, however.

Research limitations/ implications. Exploration of the literature does point to a gap that makes this work challenging– a seeming lack of knowledge underpinning the precise objectives of university branding programmes – in other words; it is hard to measure how successful university brands are when there is little empirical literature on the aims of branding in universities.

Originality/ value. From an academic viewpoint gaps in current literature on branding in the education context are identified and the need for a model of brand management that addresses the particular qualities of higher education is reinforced.

Type of paper. Research paper

Keywords

Higher education branding, higher education brands, university branding, HE branding, education brands.

Introduction

The particular contribution of this research is its context; whilst there has been considerable work on what constitutes a successful brand in commercial organisations, this work questions what constitutes and underpins a 'successful' brand among UK universities.

The rationale for the work is that UK higher education institutions (HEIs) are behaving increasingly as corporations (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Bunzel, 2007). The view of education as a 'quasi-commercial service industry' (Brookes, 2003) shapes most areas of activity, not least branding and reputation management. Stamp (2004) offers a number of factors that have driven the UK higher education (HE) branding agenda, including; tuition fees, competitive differentiation, league tables, organisations attaining university status and the mis-match between brand perceptions and delivery

Brand management is a central organisational competence that needs to be understood and developed (Louro and Cunha, 2001), as strong brands affect almost all marketing activity and are claimed to receive preferential evaluations of attribute and benefit information as well as generally higher overall preference (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003. Aaker, 1991). They can also be important when consumers are making an initial choice (Kay, 2006). However, much academic work focuses on advantages of brands in relation to product marketing and, although associations with league table rankings have been made, the desired outcomes of branding universities may need further investigation. It seems clear, though, that the desire to brand has significant implications in an age of increasing competition among universities, both internationally and nationally (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). The challenge for HEIs may be that whilst product branding theory has evolved and its techniques are now established, the application to services is a little more uncertain, (De Chernatony et al, 2005) and the more specialist areas of marketing, such as education, are even less developed (Hankinson, 2004).

Aims of the research

It seems that an area in the field of university branding that is lacking is understanding of what defines a 'successful' brand and the approaches that can lead to building these brands. The research reported in this paper sought to commence filling that gap via a study of 22 opinion formers. This work builds upon Chapleo (2005), looking more closely at those institutions perceived to be 'successful' and seeking to explore any commonalities of approach or circumstance.

The objectives are therefore:

- To explore the 'marketing variables' associated with branding activity for UK higher education institutions (HEIs) identified as having 'successful' brands.
- To explore commonalities of UK HEIs identified as having 'successful' brands.
- To further the debate and inform practice on the issues surrounding university branding.

A literature review was undertaken to identify the current knowledge in the areas of what constitutes a successful brand, branding in higher education and specifically the extent to which understanding of successful brands has been applied to the UK university sector.

Interviewees in this research were given a definition of a successful university brand, arrived at through the literature, when asked to discuss those UK University brands regarded as successful. This was important to ensure consistency of understanding and is explored in the literature review.

Literature review

A review of the literature was undertaken to explore current knowledge on successful brands, application of branding to higher education, and in particular the level of understanding of successful branding of higher education.

Defining brands

It is evident that there is agreement among most writers that brand encompasses what could be termed the 'rational' and the 'emotional' elements (Le Pla and Parker, 2002; Balmer and Greyser, 2003). Hart and Murphy (1998, p.61) summarise this neatly, proposing that "the brand is a synthesis of all the elements, physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional".

Although arguably simplifying matters somewhat, the branding literature can be broadly divided in terms of 'rational' aspects or the wider view of 'rational plus emotional' perspectives. The latter appears to be generally embraced, but this is still some way from actually agreeing a brand definition. Hankinson (2004) believes that branding theory has its roots in product marketing, and consequently application to specialised areas, such as education, is limited.

In the context of research of this nature, however, there was a need for a consistent definition of a 'successful brand', which will be explored in the following section.

Successful Brands

The concept of 'success' in any aspect of the organisational and business arena is subjective, and this could be argued to be particularly so when applied to a concept as intangible as brand management. A real understanding of branding, however, may require researchers to continually ask why some organisations are more successful than others in brand building (Urde, 2003).

According to De Chernatony et al, (1998) marketing success is well defined as a concept, but no definitive source exists that focuses on brand success. He postulates that a definition of 'brand success' is, however, essential for improving understanding branding's effectiveness. A number of variables seem to be present in successful brands - it can be hard to isolate brand success from overall business success but the two are different (De Chernatony et al, 1998). Certainly the concept of market share seems to be present in most definitions of brand success present in commercial brands and Bunzel (2007) suggests that universities may substitute league table positioning for market share, so perhaps this is closer to a definition of a successful university brand. Whether universities accept that league tables are a measure of their brand success is as yet unproven.

De Chernatony et al, (1998, p778) ultimately conclude that "brand success is a multi-dimensional construct comprising both business based and consumer based criteria". These views suggest that that one of the defining characteristics between successful and failed brands is that successful brands show a greater degree of congruence between the values firms develop for their brands and the rational and emotional needs of their consumers.

Other writers go as far as actually suggesting a definition for a successful brand, stating that it is "a name, symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the 'product' of a particular organisation as having a sustainable competitive advantage"(Doyle 1989, p5). Doyle (2001) suggests that the creation of successful brands requires three things: an effective product, a distinctive identity and added values. The idea of differentiation being critical to a 'successful' brand is supported by Aaker (2003).

This concept of distinctive values that meet consumers' perceived needs is echoed by De Chernatony and McDonald (2000, p20), who suggest that a successful brand is "an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs most closely". It seems that the literature surrounding brand success has evolved to the point where empirically reached definitions of success in branding, whilst showing variance, are available.

Whilst it is acknowledged that further work may be needed, for the purpose of this paper, a definition of 'success' as applied to 'university brands' was necessary, as the aim of this research was to identify constructs that may underpin these successful brands. Reference was made to the key literature defining brands in the wider context, in particular those of Doyle (1989), Aaker (2003), De Chernatony et al (1998) and De Chernatony et al, (2005) and these were synthesised in Chapleo (2005) so that the respondents, when invited to identify 'successful university brands', were asked to consider those that were *clear and consistent (in demonstrating a distinct competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer/ stakeholder groups*.

In conclusion, this definition was arrived at by conducting a survey of the available literature and attempts to apply it to the particular context of universities. However, in attempting to do this, another point becomes apparent; it seems that some university branding may have an unclear purpose (Bunzel, 2007) and further work is desirable to empirically establish what universities seek to achieve through branding and therefore what constitutes 'branding success'. This gap in the literature is certainly an associated area of research for the future. It was clearly necessary to reach a good working definition of a successful brand for this research but the whole subject area

of 'success' among brands is an area of academic research in its own right, and certainly in the university context one that is little explored – if a purpose of academic research may be to throw up new areas to question as well as try to answer existing ones, then 'what do universities precisely seek to achieve through branding' fulfils the former purpose!

The concept of branding in higher education

Branding UK HEIs has been a contentious issue – some question the value of branding as a concept and its applicability to the HE sector (Jevons, 2006). However, increasing competition among UK universities for domestic and international students in response to diminishing government funding and internationalisation of the student market has driven UK universities to focus on clearly articulating their brands (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007).

It has been suggested that “Higher Education Institutions need to be managed more and more as corporate brands” (Whelan & Wohlfeil, 2006, p317), but despite the fact that there have been a number of studies that examined image and reputation, the notion of branding has barely made its mark on higher education marketing literature (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) and empirical papers that relate to HE branding are scarce (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). This seems strange when one considers that higher education and branding go back a long way (Temple, 2006) and that practitioners have increasingly embraced branding in higher education. Certainly there seems to be a consensus that marketing’s adoption by diverse sectors, including education, is no longer under debate (Shepherd, 2005) although it is conceded that actually implementing techniques of branding may still be the subject of resistance.

Some writers argue that branding as a concept applies as well to HE as to other sectors (Opoku, Abratt and Pitt, 2006), and the classic functions that brands perform apply equally well. Others, however, argue that brands for higher education institutions are inherently more complex and that conventional brand management techniques are inadequate in this market, having been borrowed from the business sector but not necessarily adapted (Maringe, 2005; Jevons, 2006). Bunzel (2007, p.153) qualifies this, arguing that the only aspect of brand that is subjective and can be influenced by branding is peer assessment. Whilst the reality, he believes, is that consumers are aware of these brands and focus attention on better ones, they are ultimately evidenced through rankings and there is “little evidence to show that a university branding programme really creates a change in perception or ranking of a university”.

Image and reputation of some universities have been argued to be more important factors than actual teaching quality (Mazzarol, 1998) and logic would dictate that communicating the image would therefore assume high importance – suggesting a necessary role for branding. Indeed, Bulotaite (2003, p.451), believes that universities are complex organisations but that branding can simplify this complexity and promote “attraction and loyalty to the organisation”. The complexity could, however, be an argument for branding’s role to clarify positioning, as overall perceived quality is arguably a more abstract concept than individual attributes of a university (Aaker and Keller, 1990).

Johnston (2001), however, believes that UK universities have a long way to go in terms of understanding and incorporating the branding concept. It seems that necessity is forcing UK universities to adopt the concepts and practices of branding, but that the current perceived wisdom may not necessarily be suited to the specific needs of the university sector.

It has been suggested that providing information to assist students in choosing educational institutions requires the development of unique selling points, and the effective communication of these to potential students (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004). This arrival at unique selling points and neat communication of these through the brand is in itself not necessarily straightforward, however – it can be argued that “much of what is described as branding in higher education would be better labelled as reputation management or even public relations” (Temple, 2006 p.18). Temple argues that the brand of a university emerges as a function of how well the institution performs in meeting client needs, and is therefore the *result* of being effective as an institution, rather than its *basis*.

Perhaps the ultimate aim of this section should be to arrive at a definition of higher education brands, through which we may move closer to understanding what is required of a successful brand. Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2007 p4) suggest that a university brand is “a manifestation

of the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrolment decisions" whilst Bulotaite (2003) suggests that 'when someone mentions the name of a university it will immediately evoke 'associations, emotions, images and faces' and that the role of university branding is to build, manage and develop these impressions.

This would seem to correspond to a reasonable extent with the definition adopted in this research, as referred to earlier in this literature review.

What *does* lead to successful HEI brands?

The concept of successful brands in HEIs needs some discussion. Whilst the branding literature suggests that successful brands are a worthy independent marketing goal (Kay, 2006) there is little evidence of any work that establishes the precise advantages of successful brands in the university context. It could be argued that the motivation of branding is often to enhance reputation and to positively influence the university's rankings (Bunzel, 2007) and that therefore market share is replaced with league table position.

It has been suggested that HE brands need to be focussed on market related strengths, rather than generalist approaches, for them to be successful (Schubert, 2007). Bulotaite (2003) believes that university brands actually have the potential to create stronger feelings than most brands and that the key to doing this successfully is to create a 'unique communicative identity'. Jevons (2006), however, argues that universities may talk of differentiation through their brands but that they fail to 'practice what they preach'.

In summary, it seems that what existing work has been undertaken in the area of applying branding theory to HE institutions has largely been borrowed from non-education sectors (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, 2005) and little empirical work has been undertaken to establish what underpins a successful university brand. In short, 'what does lead to successful HEI brands?' requires further exploration. This work is therefore considered timely and appropriate in furthering understanding in this field.

Conclusion – current literature

Clearly a considerable amount of empirical work has been undertaken on the concept of branding in general, and there is an increasing amount of work on HE branding, probably corresponding with increased importance on the practitioner agenda. Definitions of successful brands, whilst the matter of some debate, are available, but the same cannot be said of successful brands in the context of HE. Through the literature, a working definition of successful HE brand was constructed, to allow exploration of the factors underpinning this success. It is conceded that, whilst every effort was made to arrive at this definition through careful use of literature, defining successful university brands appears to be an area for future study in itself, as does the explicit purpose for much university branding.

In summary, the literature, and the need to understand the common factors of brands perceived as successful, led the author to set the qualitative objectives as detailed in this paper. What also becomes apparent is that associated future studies will be needed in an area that is topical, but that is still evolving in academic terms.

Methodology

This research was exploratory in nature; the principal focus was to 'seek a deeper understanding of factors' (Chisnall, 2001) involved in successfully branding UK universities. Interviews and smaller samples were therefore considered appropriate (Christy and Wood, 1999. De Chernatony et al, 1998)

The broad approach was a phenomenon driven inductive one that sought to understand the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants (Bryman and Bell, 2003). However, it is accepted that in qualitative research of this nature boundaries are never quite as solid as a rationalist might desire (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The sample size, whilst appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, can at best be argued to offer indicative results or 'generalisations' that put flesh on the bones of general constructs (Miles and Huberman 1994) and it is accepted that results are representative but not necessarily conclusive. The particular questions explored in the context of the interviews linked back to the objectives of identifying commonalities between successful university brands.

Twenty two Interviews were conducted among HEI Heads of Marketing/ External Relations (HOM) and Heads of Careers (HOC) for UK universities over an eight-month period between February and September 2007. The sample comprised respondents from 11 universities identified in previous research (Chapleo, 2005) to have successful brands. In this 2005 paper the successfully branded UK universities were identified by research carried out with 40 higher education opinion formers broadly consistent with a Delphi technique (Proctor, 2000) that focuses on future trends, using trendsetters in any market as a barometer.

Chapleo's (2005) definition of what comprises a successful university brand was agreed with respondents and they were then asked to discuss qualities identified in Chapleo (2005) as associated with successfully branded universities. In addition they were allowed to offer their own opinions on what underpinned a successful university brand. The sample in this research, reflecting that in Chapleo (2005) therefore comprised 4 newer universities (1992 and post-1992), 'Red-Brick, 3 middle group universities (1950s-1960s) and 4 older universities (incorporated before 1950).

The sample size of 22 was appropriate based on recommendations by McGivern (2003) who suggests that sample sizes of between 20 and 30 as appropriate to understand interviewees' collective views on a topic. Senior marketing, external relations and careers personnel were selected as they represented experts with a breadth of experience who can draw on their specialist knowledge to define the fundamental characteristics of relevant matters (Tremblay, 1982; De Chernatony and Segal Horn, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be most suitable, as "complex and ambiguous issues can be penetrated" (Gummeson, 2005, p. 309) providing an illustration of the participants' true feelings on an issue (Chisnall, 1992). This technique is reinforced by other branding studies such as Hankinson (2004). An interview guide was used to steer the discussion, but respondents were also invited to expand upon ideas and concepts as they wished. A copy of the interview guide is included in appendix 1.

The average duration of each interview was 19 minutes, which it is accepted is comparatively short for exploratory work, but includes a small number of respondents who gave rather succinct answers to aspects of the questions.

To assist in the content analysis process interviews were recorded (Goodman, 1999) and transcribed. The analysis was informed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who advocate

coding that identifies any commonalities or trends in responses, and the particular qualitative approach of Schilling (2006) in ‘condensing content analysis through paraphrasing’ to ‘reduce the material while preserving the essential contents’ and then structuring the content analysis by coding and attaching each statement or phrase to one of the defined dimensions. These dimensions were derived from theory and prior research and related to the questions explored. Once this initial content analysis was completed, the results were checked by an independent research assistant as providing an accurate summary, and then findings of a qualitative nature drawn out by viewing the summary in the context of the interview questions. This part of the process was informed by Flick (2006) and utilises the benefits of qualitative research by allowing a degree of subjective judgement on the part of the researcher and therefore hopefully data of a ‘richer’ nature (Daymon and Holloway, 2004).

It is important to recognise that the anonymity demanded by participants made the attribution of direct quotes challenging. Nevertheless, a number of pertinent quotes were assigned by job title and age category of university (as detailed above) in an attempt to partly address this issue.

Findings

Size of marketing function, growth and structure

It was acknowledged that defining the size of a university ‘marketing function’ proves problematic, as what constitutes ‘marketing’ varies between institutions. Similarly there was little suggestion of a consistent structure for the marketing function. Two issues were evident among these ‘successful’ higher education (HE) brands, however:

1) Central marketing teams have grown over recent years – almost all respondents had witnessed growth among marketing as an organisational function. It was hard to establish quite how much the central marketing function specifically had grown, as definitions of the ‘marketing department’ varied and many institutions had marketing roles outside what they term ‘central marketing’. Moreover, the borders between marketing and external relations, international and student recruitment varied greatly. The exception to this growth of marketing staff were much older self termed ‘selecting institutions’ which may have no central ‘marketing function’, but rather concentrated efforts on ‘press and PR’, sometimes having a sizeable department in this area.

2) Many institutions now also had marketing posts within faculties, almost an “account handler role” (newer university HOM). This is not a new approach, but seems, on the basis of this sample, to be one which is becoming increasingly commonplace as an attempt to address the devolved faculty/ school structure of HEIs. It also seems that, whilst, ‘responsibility for the brand’ was recognised in most institutions as falling under several individuals’ remit, only one newer university had actually gone as far as appointing a formal ‘brand manager’ role – certainly it seemed that the newer universities interviewed were more likely to name individuals who had some formal responsibility for brand management.

Resources available for branding activity

This question suggested some interesting points. Several respondents believed that they did not have sufficient resources to undertake all branding activity effectively. This, however, was tempered by an equal number who suggested that resources were ‘reasonable’ or ‘sufficient’, but that the issue was more to do with “people getting behind the brand” (newer university HOM), ‘engagement’ or ‘buy-in’. As this respondent termed it “marketing communications can only go so far, the challenge for us is that we cannot build a brand in a classic commercial way and there is little we can do about this”. They argued that this made branding more ‘expensive and clunky’ than it should be and seems to add weight to the view that branding in HEIs is not served well by established brand management models.

Researching the brand

Among the sample it was evident that all HEIs had undertaken some form of research into their brand, or at least were about to do so. Whilst this varied in scope and audiences, as some talked of ‘perceptual audits’ and others of ‘stakeholder analysis’, it is perhaps indicative of the need to understand and attempt to manage perception throughout the sector.

Support from leadership

Respondents were questioned on the extent to which the ‘head’ of their HEI was supportive of the concept of branding and results suggested unanimously that they were ‘supportive’ or ‘very supportive’. Whether this is indicative of a new awareness, or indeed of a new breed, of chief executives of HEIs is open to conjecture. It does seem interesting that those institutions seen as having successful brands also seem to have support for branding from the very top, and this clearly has a role to play.

Location as a factor

Location is clearly an important part in many ‘successful’ brands, but was not recognised as such across all institutions. Certainly the views of respondents from UK cities that have undergone some renaissance of image (e.g. Manchester), are considered desirable from a lifestyle perspective (e.g. Bournemouth) or indeed are global centres (e.g. London) were that location had a very important part to play on the success of the brand. Indeed, one middle group HOM talked of the unique power of a university brand to transform the city/ town brand they are located in. Clearly the suggestion is that there can be a great deal of synergy between a successful university brand and the town/ city brand.

Closely related to location, is the area of international branding. This was seen as a crucial area for future attention, particularly for older and middle group universities, but it was argued by several respondents, in particular one middle group HOM, that international branding poses a great challenge for UK universities. The view was that “there are very few *real* international brands among UK universities ...with the possible exception of London Business School”. Space and scope did not allow, but this important area is undoubtedly worthy of closer investigation in its own right. Certainly even the oldest institutions among the sample (and arguably those with the most aspirational reputations) believed that there was room for improvement in the ‘strength’ of their international brand.

View on reasons for success of brand - Attributes of a successful HEI brand

This is arguably the question of the greatest value, as it employs the particular qualities of qualitative exploratory research in seeking the views of opinion formers on the work’s core rationale, in an attempt to uncover further issues.

Clear vision

A number of institutions talked of ‘strong strategic agendas’ or a ‘clear vision’ being crucial to their ‘successful’ brand. One large older institution HOM emphasised the importance of a vision, and translating this to clear prioritised goals that were ‘bought into’ by all staff – another older institution HOM termed this as “a clear internal policy” that communicates a brand that is “the sum of its parts” (a diverse institution, but one that is communicated consistently externally)

It was also apparent that all the institutions in the sample believed that they had a ‘deliberate positioning strategy’- this, unsurprisingly, seems to be important to a successful brand.

Internal support/ ‘buy-in’

This is an area of great difficulty for HEIs, but also seemingly one of importance. In the view of several respondents this is closely akin to culture, and indeed the HOM of one of the most frequently cited ‘successful’ brands, (a middle group university), argued that that their brand stems from “a collective view of culture and a way of thinking from the early years”.

Subsequently, it is suggested, targets and outputs arise which “some people then collectively term the brand”. The concept of the culture of an organisation is clearly complex and would require far

more depth than available here, but it impacts upon brand success in a number of areas. One older university HOM, for example, attributed brand success largely to their collegiate structure that is “an excellent academic model” that leads to “extraordinary academic wealth”.

Support of leadership

The significance of this issue has already been discussed. It certainly seems that almost all of the chief executives among the sample of ‘successful’ university brands were thought to be very supportive of branding as a concept. It was apparent that a chief executive could not only play a significant role in a successful brand, but that significant risk is posed by opposing views of leadership. As one highly successful middle group university HOM argued “the brand is vulnerable to personal whim of the chief executive to a greater extent than many commercial brands”.

Press coverage and Public Relations

Press and publicity activity appears to be the communication tool of choice for ‘successful’ university brands. This emphasis was particularly pronounced among the ‘older’ institutions, where it constituted the majority of what they identified as marketing activity and therefore marketing personnel employed.

Value of marketing communications

This area is contentious in terms of its contribution to a ‘successful’ brand. One newer university that, perhaps surprisingly, was cited as a ‘successful’ brand exemplifies this. However, upon investigation among the sample, and indeed in the view of their own HOM, this was largely high awareness rather than necessarily a wholly ‘successful’ brand. This institution spends a considerable sum on ‘above the line’ marketing communications, and arguably this accounts for awareness. Care evidently needs to be exercised, however, as the correlation between high marketing spend and a ‘successful’ university brand seems tenuous.

Brand experience

An emergent area that was mentioned by several respondents, especially among newer universities, was the idea of differentiating the brand based upon ‘experiences’. One new university HOM talked of moving past the idea of differentiating on buildings etc, suggesting that the ‘brand experience’ was a crucial part of their ‘successful’ brand. This is, in essence, about people (and their role in the experience) as part of the brand offer.

Conclusions

It seems that there is a clear wish among UK universities to embrace the branding concept and articulate their brands, as suggested in the literature (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007). However, there was limited suggestion of a uniform strategy for doing this, although a number of factors associated with ‘successful’ brands seemed to be evident. These are worthy of closer investigation and can be termed as ‘attributes associated with a successfully branded university’. These are represented in table 1. The two columns correspond to those attributes that, on the basis of these interviews, demonstrated a clear association with ‘successful’ brands and those attributes that may have some association with ‘successful’ brands, but for which the link seems tenuous.

| | |
|--|---|
| Evidence of association with a successfully branded university | Possible association with a successfully branded university |
| Support from leadership | Numbers of marketing staff |
| Clear Vision | Individuals with brand guardian roles |
| Internal Support (or ‘buy in’) | Brand has been researched and is understood |
| Location - synergy with brand of city / town | Use of marketing communications |

Table 1: attributes associated with a successfully branded university

Marketing has 'grown' as an organisational function in most HEIs, but it is debatable whether this correlates closely with the 'successful' brands investigated in this sample. Respondents certainly did not cite this as a factor, although clearly a proactively managed 'brand' in the full sense of the word requires certain knowledge and personnel to do so effectively.

Public Relations, and particularly press coverage, was an interesting factor. This marketing communications tool seemed to be favoured by many institutions in the sample, especially in 'older' universities where there was reliance upon it as the key brand communication tool. Whether this is pragmatic, as it can be seen as lower cost, or whether it indeed is the most appropriate tool for building a 'successful' brand is again open to some debate, but there is no doubt that it is synonymous with the 'successful' brands in this sample.

Wider marketing communications were considered less clearly associated with 'successful' university brand building, although at least two 'newer' brands do expend considerable resources on advertising in particular. The link between brand and marketing communications in anything more than an awareness sense, as in some commercial arenas, seems to require greater investigation. It may be that, as literature suggests (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, 2005), commercial approaches have been borrowed but are not necessarily adapted to the specific needs of the sector

On the marketing 'spend' theme, it was interesting that budget was not necessarily thought by many to be a limiting factor in brand building to the extent that might be expected. Whilst resource was not a critical issue, then, the element of 'buy in' or 'engagement' with the brand from the internal audience was considered to be so by many of the sample.

The opinion that universities are complex organisations and differentiation therefore could be problematic was evident and supports Jevons (2006). Arguably branding could help simplify positioning (Bulotaite, 2003) and one emergent area where newer universities in particular seem to be talking of differentiating is that of 'experiential brands'. Whether the concept of 'experiential branding' offers a genuine basis for brand differentiation in this sector remains is still unclear.

Sample respondents made frequent references to supportive and informed leadership as an important factor in building and then managing a 'successful' brand. There was also a potential risk identified because brands were suggested to be vulnerable to personal 'whim' on occasion. Perhaps the factor that was considered most important among the sample as being a prerequisite for a 'successful' brand, (and one that is closely linked with the previous point) is the need for a 'clear vision' – a purposeful longer term strategy and sense of identity 'from the early days'. The institutions that were most strongly identified as having 'successful' brands were those that clearly articulated that a vision and purpose had, and continued to be, in place.

The greatest challenge for the future, however, appeared to be the building of true 'international brands'. This obviously affects some institutions more than others depending on their 'market focuses', but was thought to be an area where many institutions have considerable work to do.

Beyond the immediate scope of the research, wider issues were evident when the findings were viewed in the context of the existing literature. It seems that much HE branding practice borrows heavily from commercial knowledge and there has been limited effort to 'domesticate' branding theory to the HE sector (Maringe, 2005).

This can lead to unclear objectives (Bunzel, 2007) and inappropriate allocation of resources.

There is also perhaps an implicit assumption that branding is desirable and increasingly necessary for universities, without empirical proof of the benefits (Bunzel, 2007)

Overall this research, exploratory as it was, emphasised that this is very much an emergent area and that knowledge of several related areas, as detailed above, would be greatly enhanced by closer empirical examination.

Implications for practitioners

It is apparent that there are challenges facing UK universities in terms of brand management, but there are a number of positive steps that university leaders and marketers may take towards building successful brands.

Several factors are worthy of particular consideration:

- Clear vision and the support of leadership seem to be factors that particularly support successful brand building.
- HEIs seem to be experimenting with the optimum structure and role of marketing as a function, with widely differing structures. Currently few HEIs seem to have anyone with explicit and exclusive brand responsibility (nb a 'brand manager' role).
- As in previous studies, the challenge of 'getting staff behind the brand' presents a great challenge, but it was interesting that international branding was also cited as a great challenge for UK HE overall.
- Finally, the role of traditional marketing communications tools such as advertising is subject to some debate but many of the sample respondents did not necessarily perceive a crucial role for marketing communications in building a successful university brand.

Further Research

This work raises several questions that may be in need of further exploration:

Firstly, work on the objectives of HE branding programmes appears to be desirable, as this is a little explored but important area.

International branding was identified as a particular issue, and certainly the perception of UK HEIs internationally is an area worthy of considerable investigation.

The natural progression of this work is to elicit constructs associated with successful institutions, with a view to ranking these and moving towards an index of the factors associated with successful university brands. This is driven by the ultimate aim of suggesting appropriate models for managing a brand in the particular context of higher education. As has already been argued, branding in UK HEIs is not served well by established brand management models.

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Appendix 1

Questions

Marketing Profiling Information

1. Is the marketing team growing at your institution? Discuss
2. How is it structured? (e.g. 'Marcoms' team/ web design etc)
3. What are the physical representations of the brand?
4. Have you researched the brand in last 5 years?
5. Do you put 'sufficient' resource into branding? (Any discussion of Marketing budget 50-100k, 100-150k, 150-200k, 200k plus)
6. Do you have anyone with specific brand responsibility?

Brand strategy information

7. Is your positioning deliberate / intentional - if so what are core elements of positioning statements?
8. Is your VC brand supportive? Please expand upon this
9. How strong do you see your brand as :
 - i. Regionally
 - ii. Nationally
 - iii. Internationally
10. Is your location part of your brand?
11. Is your heritage part of your brand?
12. Is your reputation part of your brand?
13. What actions are you taking to build an International brand?
14. Overall, to what do you attribute your 'successful' / clear brand (or indeed other successful brands) ?

Please discuss and expand as you wish