



Six Principles of Branding and Marketing for Academic Institutions



In the world of academia, especially for researchers who are focused on the pursuit and generation of knowledge, marketing and branding are often thought of as necessary evils or neglected altogether. But to be successful in their core work, academic institutions have to reach their stakeholders with a unique, compelling and credible value proposition. They have to be able to attract new professors who are looking to grow their programs at a top institution in their field, donors who want their name associated with reputable organizations

and worthwhile endeavours, and students who want clarity about the type of experience and the quality of education they are going to receive. This requires marketing and branding to be embraced as a core part of institutional strategy development with these six principles in mind:

1) A university's brand and its marketing approach must be enabled by and reflective of its mission, vision and strategic investments. Anything from new faculty and administrative hires all the way to infrastructure enhancements, programming decisions and organizational policies must embody and be driven by the competitive niche that the institution is intending to occupy. Marketing and branding is in essence understanding what audience, which need and what flavour of services the institution wishes to address and strategically funneling funds to execute and promote this plan.

2) An institution's brand is a poignant expression of its value proposition and identity. It must represent a set of values that attract and guide the university's target constituents (including its staff), eliciting excitement, passion and appropriate decision making, going beyond logos and taglines, which are notoriously difficult to keep consistent across multitudes of faculties, departments and entities.

3) Research programs shouldn't operate in a vacuum. While research programs must maintain autonomy and freedom to ask questions and advance the frontiers of knowledge (and they need adequate focus and resources to achieve this), it is



imperative that they are carefully and strategically integrated with the university's other functionalities, for instance education or technology development, in order to further the university's reputation with prospective and existing students, donors, faculty members and other influencers.

4) Conversely, brands should not be defined by key programs or research centres.

The university's brand should embody a broader issue, approach or topic that serves to focus its offerings to its stakeholders. Placing a star program at the centre of a university's brand can cause internal dissatisfaction and unnecessary rivalry. Additionally, the university's value proposition can become obsolete, should similar, more compelling programs pop up at other competing institutions.

5) Successful academic brands occupy a unique space with credibility. While all academic institutions strive for excellence, ones that are perceived as excellent focus on a particular niche, are first to claim it and have enough of a track record, appropriate partners, geographic location and infrastructure for their brand position to be believable and accepted.

6) Diffuse, all-pleasing brands don't communicate much at all. Successful strategic planning requires institutions to make tough decisions about who they want to serve and what they are competitively and credibly positioned to bring to these stakeholders. Successful branding and marketing are then predicated on effective distillation and simplification of the institution's intended area of focus and value proposition. While this focus can at times overshadow other university strengths, once the institution has gained a foothold in its intended space, it can diversify and lay claim to neighbouring areas with its baseline reputation of excellence.

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