

Undergraduate Research Conference and Brand Positioning: Identifying Strategic Factors

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Abstract

Strategic brand positioning is very important for undergraduate research conferences (URCs) in today's highly competitive and growing URC marketplace. Often URCs are being created (discipline specific – e.g., Chemistry, Math, Psychology and others reaching across disciplines) to provide college undergraduates with opportunities to present their original research to audiences beyond their local campus URC. The increasing number of state, regional, and national URCs presents significant marketing issues for conference management (both existing and new). These include determining how to position a URC brand in a growing and highly competitive marketplace where a couple of major widely known direct competitors with brand loyal customers hold most of the market share. How should management strategically position the brand to attract and keep customers? Some answers are found in the literature and some come from this current study that examined key factors strategic to positioning a regional URC brand. This strategic positioning is from the perspective of the customer. Thus, the research team surveyed customers (undergraduate students) of a major URC and students on a campus at a medium size liberal arts university in the Southeastern USA where a major URC occurred during the time of the study.

Findings of the study show that differentiation of the brand should come through a focus on containing the overall cost of the conference, availability of funding to students, the value of the conference to respondent's education, and availability of networking opportunities (both career and graduate school). However, a concentration strategy with a foundation built on key components that does not focus too much attention to the little things is a good fit for a new regional URC (Miller 1992). The goals of the URC (i.e., unique vision, values, voice, personality) must align with the culture and values of the target market neither over-positioning (i.e., consumer perceives the URC as expensive, but does not recognize the breath and value of the brand) or under-positioning (i.e., message is too vague thus the consumer has little idea what the URC stands for) the brand (Wilson & Gilligan 2005). Other implications from the study are discussed in detail within the paper.

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers, and Practitioners: Undergraduate research has grown in importance to a quality education in the United States. The findings of this study provide insights into key factors for successfully positioning of an undergraduate research conference's brand among a growing number of research conference opportunities.

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