

Do universities have ‘successful’ brands?

Introduction

In UK Higher Education (HE) there appears to be increased recognition by both managers and academics of the significance of brands as sources of sustained competitive advantage¹, and this has seen branding widely discussed in the education press². Indeed, many institutions are investing considerable sums in development and management of their brands³.

However, the whole discipline of brand management has been described as “a cacophony of simultaneously competing and overlapping approaches”⁴, and it seems reasonable to suggest that this may be exacerbated by the complexity of branding in the HE context. Exploratory investigation of whether higher education institutions have successfully developed brands, and what common properties any successful institutions share therefore seems both timely and appropriate.

This research builds on the author’s earlier work on branding in higher education that considered the extent to which marketing as a discipline had developed in UK HE and the extent to which university vice-chancellors and chief executives understood and embraced branding. This work appears as papers in the Case Journal^{5, 6}.

Objectives

The objectives of this research were;

- To identify whether any UK higher education institutions were perceived to have ‘successful’ brands
- To explore the factors that were perceived to be associated with success of identified institutions
- To further the debate on the importance and role of brand management in UK universities

Terms of reference

A key term certainly in need of clarification for the purpose of this paper is success as applied to ‘successful university brands’. Whilst the long term aim of subsequent research is to identify what constructs comprise and underpin successful university brands, this research considered which institutions had successful brands.

The various definitions, in particular those of Doyle⁷ and De Chernatony, D’All et al⁸ were incorporated and adapted for the purpose of this research so that respondents, when asked to identify ‘successful brands’, were asked to consider those that are clear and consistent (in demonstrating a competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer groups.

It is acknowledged that this may be a somewhat limited tool with a subjective term such as branding but as this work merely sought to explore opinion formers’ views on which institutions were worthy of closer examination, it was considered reasonable. The whole subject area of ‘success’ among brands is an area of academic research in its own right.

A further term may require some clarification; a number of respondents suggested distinctions between the perceived success of university brand and reputation. This infers a distinction between the two terms although this was by no means universally the case. This is perhaps again an area worthy of exploration in its own right, but that is not within the scope of this paper. Some issues are explored by Frost and Cooke⁹ who conclude that brand and reputation are “actually aspects of the same thing” and that people may find it useful to make a distinction but that “such distinctions are impractical”. For this reason in this paper the term brand is generally used but

where interviewees argued that the reputation of their institution differed greatly from that of the brand, that is stated.

Literature review

What are brands?

There seems to be no simple answer to the question of what a brand actually is. The concepts surrounding brands are unusual in that, despite considerable discussion there are still limited agreed common models or practice. Indeed, Hankinson 10 argues that there is no one accepted definition of a brand.

A survey of literature reveals certain commonalities but also wide variance among the definitions. Kapferer stops short of actually attempting to neatly encapsulate the term brand in a short phrase 11, in 2001 stating “brand is a deceptively simple concept....but very few people are able to propose a satisfying definition” 12.

Aaker 13, perhaps representing a U.S. perspective, suggests that a brand is concerned with thoughts, feelings and imagery and that these are mentally linked to that brand in the consumer’s memory.

Despite the suggestion that Kapferer and Aaker represent somewhat different perspectives on branding 14 both these writers discuss brand in wide terms; encompassing what could be termed the ‘rational’ and the ‘emotional’. This interpretation, however, is not wholly embraced by all writers; Andreasen and Kotler 15 seem to allude to a definition of brand that is more focused on the rational than the emotional although in other writings Kotler 16 does appear to embrace both approaches.

Van Auken (2002) 17 cites a seemingly rational definition of brand but qualifies this when he states that “more importantly, a brand is the source of a promise for the consumer”.

A survey of the literature would therefore seem to indicate that a number of sources focus on the rational aspects of the brand, but further exploration suggests that this is not generally the case. Despite the variation in definitions which is increasingly apparent, it is evident that there is agreement among most writers that brand is more than just a logo, symbol or design. Hart and Murphy 18 summarise this neatly, proposing that “the brand is a synthesis of all the elements, physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional”.

This wider view is endorsed by LePla and Parker 19, Balmer and Greyser 20, Ellwood 21 and Hankinson and Cowking 22 who all talk of rational aspects but qualify this by also referring to emotional aspects such ‘personality’.

The branding literature can, therefore, be broadly divided in terms of ‘rational’ aspects or the wider view of ‘rational plus emotional’ perspectives. The latter appears to be generally embraced 23, but this is still a long way from actually agreeing a brand definition. Patterson 24 and De Chernatony 25 consider that there are numerous overlapping definitions.

In their paper aiming to summarise and conclude on the varying and sometimes confusing perspectives of branding De Chernatony and D’All Olmo Riley 26 refer to ‘the recent academic literature which advocates brands as complex entities blending both tangible and intangible elements’.

In conclusion, when tackling the whole difficult area of defining brands and branding, it is perhaps pertinent to conclude by restating Kapferer’s 27 view that “in reality, no one is talking about precisely the same thing”. In the context of this research, however, there was a need to offer some consistency not only in definition of a brand, but also in a ‘successful brand’, as explored below.

Successful Brands

The concept of 'success' in any aspect of the organisational and business arena is subjective, and it is particularly so when applied to a concept as intangible as brand management. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that some brands are more 'successful' than others. Urde 28 states that throughout his research he is "continually asking why some organisations are more successful than others when it comes to brand building?"

The idea of 'success' in brands is explicitly explored by De Chernatony et al 29 who argue that marketing success is well defined as a concept, but that no definitive source existed that focused on brand success.

There are, however, sources of literature on brand success worthy of exploration. Doyle 30 notably actually suggests 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". The idea of a sustainable competitive advantage certainly seems to have relevance in seeking a definition of a successful brand in UK HE, but it can perhaps be built upon by Doyle's later comments when he opines that successful brands are those which create an image or personality by encouraging customers to perceive the attributes they aspire to as being strongly associated with the brand. These attributes, according to Doyle, may be real and objective or abstract and emotional; a definition which has strong resonance with earlier talk of 'functionality' and 'personality'.

Faulkner and Bowman 31 distinguish between an organisation's internal and external success criteria and this concept can be extended to consider the business based measures of brand success and the consumer based measures. De Chernatony et al 32 considered these measures, and the relationship between consumer based criteria and market share, and argued that the results indicated that 'successful' brands do not differ in how well people regard them or how loyal their buyers are, but in the number of buyers they have and in how many people regard them well! They therefore proposed that "brand success is a multi-dimensional construct comprising both business based and consumer based criteria". Adapting these views into practical terms, it can be argued that one of the discriminating 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.

Succinct overall definitions of successful brands do exist, however; De Chernatony and McDonald 33 propose 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". The various definitions, in particular those of Doyle 34 and De Chernatony et al 35 were considered and adapted for the purpose of this research so that respondents, when asked to identify 'successful brands, were asked to consider those that are 'clear and consistent (in demonstrating a competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer groups'.

Trends in the concept of branding in higher education

The concept of brands and brand management in the wider non-profit sector has been a focus of academic research for some years, with writers such as Hankinson and Cowking 36, De Chernatony 37 and Kapferer 38 exploring these areas.

However, whilst marketing in education in its wider context is discussed by academic papers such as Brookes 39, there appears to be limited discussion of branding as a specific area.

Conversely, branding in the context of higher education is an area which has been on the agenda of practitioners for some time. Media articles by Bodoh and Mighall, suggest that "branding is emerging as a hot topic for those who want to consolidate their positions or save their skins" but suggest that "brands will present some real challenges in a sector that has been slow to embrace the basic principles of branding"⁴⁰. Whilst the branding issue has become more topical in very recent years, writings in 2000-2001 could imply that addressing the issues is a faltering process; Johnston sums up the consensus from practice journals when he states, "the higher education system certainly has a

long way to go in terms of understanding and incorporating the branding concept" 41. Bean suggests that "ironically, as an industry sector education has the least sophisticated brands with which to relate to its target groups" 42

The USA appears to be ahead of the UK in the acceptance and implementation of branding as a concept in higher education. One suggested reason for this is that the U.S. has gone through the clash of cultures between traditional academic values and market focused values ten years earlier 43. Work by writers such as Sevier 44 and Kotler 45 demonstrate this, suggesting that branding in HE has become accepted practice. It seems that the UK is following in the US footsteps in this respect and it is timely and appropriate to investigate further aspects of branding in the UK higher education context.

Methodology

This work is essentially a qualitative review using literature and findings to begin the ultimate process of developing a model for viewing branding in the education sector. The initial stage of the research involves qualitative interviews with key opinion former groups to identify target institutions perceived as having 'successful' brands.

Qualitative research was therefore considered appropriate as it "is diagnostic; it seeks to discover what may account for certain kinds of behaviour; for example brand loyalty. It seeks deeper understanding of factors.."46, in particular in-depth interviews, which enable a more accurate picture of respondents' true feelings on an issue to be deduced.

The approach of conducting interviews with opinion makers and decision takers is one adapted from a 'delphi technique' which focuses on future trends, using trendsetters in any market as a barometer and can aid in "identifying the value system" 47

Semi structured interviews, primarily by telephone, were conducted with 40 opinion formers, randomly selected from across UK universities and colleges, as follows:

- 20 'marketing opinion formers' (MOFs) : senior managers in HE marketing / external relations.
- 20 'careers opinion formers'(COFs) : senior career advisors (half from higher education and half from further education)

Findings

Which UK universities were perceived to have a successful brand?

A number of institutions were cited as having 'successful brands' to some extent:

Warwick: this institution was the mostly commonly suggested as an example of a successful brand. 15 marketing opinion formers (MOFs) mentioned Warwick although far fewer careers opinion formers (COFs) did so.

Manchester University : The comparatively recently merged Manchester University was the second most frequently cited example, with 6 MOFs and 6 COFs suggesting it as an example.

Middlesex: this was joint third most frequently cited, by 6 MOFs but no COFs.

Oxford Brookes : joint third most frequently cited, again entirely by MOFs (6)

City : City was cited by 4 MOFs and 2 COFs.

Luton: Luton is perhaps something of an anomaly among these brands, being suggested by 4 MOFs and 2 COFs as having a clear brand, but not necessarily a successful one, although views on this varied widely, as is explored later.

A number of other institutions are worthy of mention, but formed a marked second tier where they were cited by between 2 and 4 respondents:

LSE

Loughborough

Nottingham

Salford

Bath

South Bank

Open University

Cranfield

London Metropolitan University

Obviously the samples are not of sufficient size to be able to draw even preliminary quantitative conclusions; however, these particular institutions are perhaps worthy of further investigation, especially those most frequently cited.

Respondents associations with these brands?

Respondents were asked to elaborate on why they perceived the institutions they cited as having 'successful brands'.

Warwick –Warwick was the most frequently suggested as having a 'successful' brand, but this was almost entirely due to MOFs rather than COFs. Its brand was thought to "have a clear differentiator in its high involvement with industry" (MOF) and its business school was suggested as the driving force behind the differentiation, as it "deliberately manages its public profile" (MOF). A number of respondents, however, could not suggest why they perceived Warwick as having a successful brand. Its peer group was suggested among older universities, one respondent arguing that it was 'grouped with institutions of this era but not sure how they are different' (MOF).

Manchester It was suggested that the comparatively recent merger means it has a high profile, but that it was "too early to call" on the brand (MOF) Others suggested that specific values included "historic but dynamic - good reputation academically – masses of students – social and cultural life" (COF) One respondent argued that whilst it had a high profile, it was "questionable how far the actual brand has developed" (COF)

Middlesex – This institution was cited seemingly largely due to visual awareness or marketing communications. The visual identity was argued to be “pushed through clearly and consistently”(MOF) and the fact that Middlesex have “changed their logo and deliberately do spend money” was cited. The international aspect to their marketing communications was cited by several respondents and it was thought that “they tie in visual brand very well, especially from the overseas point of view” (MOF) It was interesting that in common with Warwick, it was marketing professionals (MOFs) who regarded them as having a successful brand, raising the question as to whether this is registering to the same extent with customer groups rather than peers?

Oxford Brookes - were thought to be “clear and confident where they are going” (MOF) and particular values were cited as “innovative brand that communicated two clear brand values ; employability and feel of city/ town (COF)”. This aspect of the town or city brand being partially inseparable with the university brand was also mentioned in the context of other cities such as Manchester and City University.

City – City was suggested to have a differentiated brand through its location and mission. Clearly though visual communications were important with this institution as “strong visual identity” was mentioned (COF) City was suggested to be “not a typical University because of its situation” and it was thought that the brand has “cachet” but is “less to do with student experience than taking advantage of location and links to career ladders” (COF)

Luton This was an interesting brand as it seemed to have varying connotations in the minds of respondents. In general those MOFs that cited it thought of it as doing a good job and having positives associated with the brand despite difficulties. As one put it, “it works hard and has done well despite bad publicity (MOF) There was also talk of it being a brand that “aligns reputation and brand well” (MOF). Although only two COFs cited Luton, their perceptions were rather more negative and there was talk of it being a weak brand (COF). This seems to suggest that Bad PR is important, but again points towards a difference in perception between marketers and careers professionals.

LSE . This was considered a ‘good’ and ‘clear’ brand although also suggested to be a ‘niche brand’. The factors suggested to account for this concerned “history and leveraging” (MOF)

Reputation or brand

A number of institutions were considered to have clear ‘reputations’, but not necessarily ‘brands’. One interviewee justified this by stating that they are “not really brands as they don’t think across audiences” (MOF) Although it was suggested that “none of the ‘old guard’ have differentiated brands” (MOF), Oxford and Cambridge in particular were interesting; interviewees generally thought of these as having ‘reputations’ not ‘brands’ but three interviewees thought they did have brands by default, suggesting that they “have a brand but don’t manage it” (MOF) In summary, one interviewee asked the intriguing question “are universities situated to generic brands, or better to generic reputation? The reputation and brand of many universities aren’t necessarily in alignment” (COF)

Overall Points

A number of key themes became apparent that can be summarised through particular

qualitative quotes

Little Real Differentiation

The general consensus is that there is really comparatively little real brand differentiation in the UK HE sector. As one MOF suggested “there are 128 universities and few are different” Whilst the majority of interviewees could suggest some institutions that in their opinion had ‘successful brands’, comparatively few could suggest more than three or four names. This was particularly the case with COFs, and it was argued that “there are few national brands”, although there was a notable trend for COFs to discuss regional brands to a greater extent than MOFs. It was suggested that “newer universities tend to do better at branding” (MOF) although it was also thought that the Russell Group (a group of 19 prestigious research-led UK universities) has an overall brand and institutions are rather homogenous within this (COF)

Not ‘geared’ for branding – internally or externally

Generally participants viewed universities’ internal structure and resource to not aid any real branding effort. One interviewee considered that “infrastructure and budgets don’t really allow commercial style branding” (MOF) and another that when universities try to build clear brands they “run into problems quite quickly” (MOF). This may well be partly due to resource constraints but it was also considered that the internal culture had a part to play in this, as there is resistance to the very process in some institutions. One interviewee thought that a “strong brand is anathema in a university” (MOF)

Silo Mentality

The issue that parts of universities can sometimes build strong sub brands, and arguably these can have higher visibility than the overall institution, was emphasised by the interviewees in this sample. One interviewee described this as “the silo mentality, where faculty marketing is often conflicting with the university brand” (MOF). Business Schools were thought to be particularly prone to this in the UK Higher education sector (MOF)

Buyer Behaviour

Several respondents argued that brand building in a commercial style is hindered by the fact that “buyer behaviour does not fit the same way” (MOF). This was not expanded upon but factors such as the increasing importance of parents in the decision making process were given as examples.

Location

Several interviewees thought that “location does come into brand but perhaps shouldn’t”(MOF). The overall consensus appears to be that the image or brand of the city is to some degree inseparable from that of the university. One interviewee elaborated on this with examples; “city location is crucial to brand perception – Bristol, Manchester & Leeds have benefited from the city’s brand whilst Exeter, Birmingham and York have not benefited in same way” (COF)

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to identify institutions that were perceived to have successful brands and begin to explore what made them so. Although the exploratory nature means that no hard conclusions can be made, there appears to be little commonality in those institutions that are perceived to be further along the road towards ‘successful branding’. A number of factors are

worthy of further exploration, however:

Relationship between brand and reputation. There is clearly some overlap between these factors, and it is interesting that those institutions cited as having ‘successful brands’ were largely seen as having good reputations as well. It is therefore sensible to presume that a good reputation is certainly advantageous in building a successful brand if capitalised upon.

Public Relations Strategy. A number of interviewees talked of institutions with successful brands “leveraging the brand” through dialogue with stakeholders – it seems that working with publics to keep a consistent message though a high media profile may be important to successful brands. Manchester and Warwick were cited as examples of this, although Manchester’s comparatively recent merger has undoubtedly been advantageous in maintaining a media profile.

Little real differentiation. The research suggests that there is little substantial differentiation between UK universities at present, and that the current nature of universities does not aid identification of real points of differentiation. As one marketing head stated “a clear differentiator helps in building a successful brand, but is hard to do”.

Budgets & Culture do not support branding. Related to the above point is the argument that various factors hinder building successful brands. Key among these are the often limited (in comparison to commercial brands) budgets, and the internal culture, which was suggested sometimes to amount to “resistance to the branding process”.

Location and Institutional Brand. The consensus was that location is to some degree inseparable from the university brand, although this may not be welcomed by senior management. Therefore UK cities that were seen to have undergone a “renaissance” and be seen to some extent as ‘fashionable’ conferred some of those advantages on their universities. Manchester, Bristol and Leeds were cited as examples of this, but it was thought that cities such as Exeter, Birmingham and York had not yet benefited to the same extent.

Consistent Visual Identity. Whilst the consensus is that brand is much more than visual identity alone, interviewees frequently mentioned the visual element in ‘successful brands’ and it can be argued that consistent, clear and appropriate visual identity and communications goes some way to help promote a clear brand image. Middlesex was cited as an example of a successful visual communicator.

See attached sections;

Further Research

Implications for Practice

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