

The world of brand and marketing communications is on the move. Here are our thoughts on the challenges and opportunities emerging in a new brand world.

Identity crisis in academia: *What's the next move for University brands?*



Apocalyptic scenarios are being hastily sketched out right across the higher education sector. The burning issues of funding and student fees cut right at the heart of current systems of provision. But, whatever results from the debate, the entire sector is sure to emerge as something different, not least in the way that future generations will regard the whole institution of higher education and the fundamental purpose and worth of universities.

For a very long time now there has been a consensus that universities are ‘a good thing’ and that, in line with everything else in a modern democratic state, they should be available to all, in principle. All, that is, who have the intellect and potential to profit from higher-level scholarship and the experience of academic life. More than that, for recent generations ‘going to uni’ has become a rite of passage for many, as students make the transition from teenage to adulthood.

Widening access has been a key strategy of government, based on the perceived importance of the ‘knowledge economy’ to the UK’s success in the world. Now things have changed, as we know. The whole idea of a university education is being re-examined, with a focus on who pays for what, when and how.

The questions we are asking, when the dust has settled and reforms implemented, are: what do universities now stand for and how do they differentiate themselves in a market-oriented world? To find an answer, as with every brand, it is always worth looking back, even before we look forward to the future. Brands are the

embodiment of multiple interactions and experiences with something, be it a tangible product, a service, a company or an institution. In this sense universities are no different. Time can be a great brand builder. For a thousand years our older universities have been developing and evolving to become what they are today. Tradition and heritage (the words we use to reflect the meaning embedded in these institutions) are an irrefutable part of how they are perceived. Such brands have a patina – ‘the soft glow... produced by age and polishing’ as the *Oxford Dictionary* informs us.

It is equally true that the old universities still carry forward behaviours, cultures and patterns of operating that in many ways remain unchanged. So powerful was their influence in the 19th century that the great metropolitan universities copied them, and the ‘redbricks’ of the mid 20th century followed them, who, in turn were the aspiration, if not the inspiration, for the polytechnics that ‘traded up’ to university status. The curious thing is this: would any university look and operate the way it does, if it had been designed to meet the needs of the up-coming generations of school leavers? I doubt it.

So, in looking forward we see, in the very near future, some challenges that lie deeper than the immediate debates around funding and fees. What should a truly modern university look like? Excellence in scholarship and research perhaps, but for what purpose, for whom and for what end?

In a very real sense these questions are not ‘academic’. They are simply the questions being asked by 16 and 17 year olds as they contemplate their futures. Without ready and credible answers to these questions, universities may cease in time to command the respect and investment they have received in the past, nor will they attract the students that make their existence possible.

In the next few years as universities struggle to survive and thrive, how many, if not those at the venerable end of the spectrum who will continue to enjoy a level of patronage, will be looking radically at the ways in which they deliver teaching and conduct research? Much as it may go against the grain and the natural instincts of academics and university managers, it is instructive to look at the successes and failures of corporate institutions. Many great names, and brands, have gone to the wall simply because, like prehistoric creatures, they either did not anticipate change or could not adapt when change was forced upon them. Most successful businesses have dramatically transformed their products, services and operating models. While universities may seek to demonstrate the many ways in which they have embraced technology, for example, they operate in a fundamentally unreformed environment.

It is time for some universities to break cover, to offer high quality, relevant education that makes sense for tomorrow’s students. Realistically, this may not

happen overnight, but a radical move on the part of the braver in the sector could signal the need for repositioning their brands to communicate their difference in intent and action. No longer would there be, as now, a succession of ‘me toos’, all competing with each other to provide qualifications of equal (and sometimes dubious) value and commodity style delivery, a pattern replicated in how they describe themselves and articulate their brands. The opportunity for innovation is clear. Step forward the first university to challenge the status quo and show the way ahead.

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Lloyd Northover is a brand strategy and communications consultancy, with over 35 years experience in the public and private sector. We have worked with over 32 universities and higher education establishments in the UK.

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