

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.



How we see it: *Merging and emerging. Future prospects for university brands*

‘The only national market that is more competitive than higher education, where we’ve got 200 odd providers, is canned beer.’

This recent comment from a director of corporate affairs at a UK university¹ highlights one important aspect of the sector’s dilemma when planning how to differentiate higher education brands. The breadth of provision is currently extensive, but is likely to reduce over the next few years as the impact of funding and fee changes cause universities to re-assess the viability of their own independence or consider the option of collaboration or merger with other institutions.

Unlike the UK beer market, which 40 years ago (when the Campaign for Real Ale was founded) was dominated by a small number of big breweries with a relatively limited range of products, the HE sector may now be travelling in the opposite direction. Fewer, bigger universities and fewer, bigger brands may be the destination to which the sector is heading. In Wales, for example, this process is already starting, as proposals for consolidation are now firmly on the agenda.

The challenges of mergers are no less significant for universities than for private sector companies. Despite the relentless march of M&A activity in the corporate world, it has become a truism that most mergers ‘fail’. In corporate terms this usually means that they fail to increase shareholder value, to say nothing of their impact on customers. In the world of M&A, brands come and go with greater rapidity as the years pass, and with them (sometimes, but not always) customer loyalty, employee commitment and corporate culture. In fact, one of the hardest tasks in a merger is the integration of cultures and values, not systems and processes. That is the generally accepted learning from the corporate world.



Culture and values are right at the heart of what any university is and does. Without these being deeply embedded and widely shared, no higher educational institution has a valid foundation for its existence: each must stand for something that is more than the provision of teaching or research.

A former vice chancellor² recently stated ‘universities have identities and personalities – and here I’m thinking of values, even souls’. He then continues to distinguish these attributes from what he describes as “brands”. This misunderstands the true nature of brands: they are not, or should not be, the result of a superficial image makeover exercise. Brands draw their strength and authenticity directly from a university’s values, and indeed its soul. As such, brands reflect the culture of a university, whether that process is actively planned or not. The same writer also notes that ‘all the pressures are to treat vice-chancellors as chief executives of large corporate organisations’. If he is right, this suggests that universities will increasingly see themselves as entrepreneurial bodies, perhaps acknowledging the metaphor of the canned beer market, where often very similar products (even indistinguishable to the majority in blind tastings) are marketed on the basis of a set of brand associations in order to raise them above ‘commodity’ status.

To avoid the accusation of simply following the marketing logic of corporate organisations (‘differentiate or die’), universities must be clear about what they want to be and how genuinely distinctive they are in what they offer: courses, campus, culture, community. Of course, these essential components are not as straightforward as they seem, when viewed in the context of a merger. The inherent danger is that attempts to ‘blend’ the best of both institutions may result in more blandness than distinctiveness.

While acknowledging existing cultural characteristics, it may be more appropriate for some universities to re-think their brands as something new that ‘emerges’ from the combining of institutions rather than simply ‘merges’ the two brands. Change, particularly from the outside, can be a spur to radical change within. As universities seek to position themselves in today’s competitive environment through merger or close collaboration, they need to explore how a strategic review can facilitate the emergence of a new brand - One that doesn’t get left on the supermarket shelf. Cheers!

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¹ Richard Taylor, University of Leicester, quoted in the Guardian, 14 March 2011

² Peter Scott, professor of higher education studies at the Institute of Education, formerly vice chancellor of Kingston University, quoted in the Guardian, 22 February 2011