

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.

Unpredictable change: *It's here to stay. A challenge for every university*



One of the biggest challenges for any organisation in a competitive marketplace is how to communicate what it's about to its customers. For many universities in the UK that represents a challenge, one which has recently taken on a whole new meaning with the scale of change being forced upon the higher education sector. Adaptation is becoming the order of the day.

Back in the pre-tuition fees world of 2004, the then head of the Higher Education Funding Council, Howard Newby¹, warned that 'it is going to be really important that all institutions understand their market and their position in the market'. That is equally true some seven years on, except that today it may be not just important but also vital to survival. The first step for any university in being able to articulate its proposition to the student community – the 'market' – is to agree it internally. Without that crucial first step any external communication on 'what we offer' or 'what kind of institution we are' is in danger of being just words with little basis in reality.

The experience students actually enjoy once they arrive at university will only match the promise if the reality lives up to that expectation. Ideally the experience should be consistent right across the board – course, campus, culture and community. Student experience is not one-dimensional phenomenon.

Successful communication to any target market is about so much more than 'getting the marketing team to put some literature and a website together'.

For universities today, it needs to be the end result of internal conversations to decide as an institution, who you are, what you do and what makes you different. Only once all parts of the institution, both administrative and academic staff, have debated and agreed on their proposed proposition, and crucially agreed that they can deliver it, can a targeted external communications job begin.

However, research tells us this first step is fraught with difficulties. One of the biggest issues many universities face at present² is *internal engagement*. Given that universities have been on the receiving end of huge changes in the last few years, it's not surprising that working in higher education today must often feel rather uncomfortable.

Plenty of management tools have been developed over the years to distil into tidy process diagrams the tsunami of emotions that traumatic organisational change unleashes in us. Perhaps the clearest and most instructive is the framework of five stages of bereavement produced by Dr Elisabeth Kubler-Ross over 40 years ago³. That original work has been the foundation stone of pretty much all subsequent theory and management practice on how human emotion, and consequently human behaviour, is affected by large-scale organisational change.

In a nutshell, the natural human reaction to potential change is to perceive the change negatively, regardless of whether or not it is known if the change is good or bad. From this starting point people typically go through a cycle of emotional states: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually on to acceptance. These are not necessarily linear, nor does everyone go through every stage. Sometimes we revert to an earlier stage, and sometimes we can get stuck at a particular point. So, if we multiply all those different emotions by the number of people affected one way or another by the enforced changes flowing through our universities right now, it's really no wonder that researchers tell us that it's hard to get any traction on internal engagement. Equally, there has probably never been a more important time to meet the challenge.

It might seem a high risk strategy, but gathering together all the sceptics and non-believers, as well as the more accepting, to ask the questions and force a conversation about the university's proposition to its student market may also engender a level of emotional engagement from staff who are possibly feeling under threat and slightly out of control. Sometimes it's just better to be invited to contribute to building the institution's future, even if you are still personally angry or in denial. That way staff get to make a choice, either to take part in creating the new proposition, or to sit on the side-lines.

Getting the chance to take part can also help move people along towards an acceptance of the new reality. Just as grief and grieving are messy, untidy, and frankly scary, subjects for most of us, so is organisational change. But just maybe,

if people are given the opportunity to take part in answering the question of what their particular university should look like, for what purpose, for whom and for what end, it can help their sense of loss. And crucially, in doing so it will help build a more sustainable proposition for the future of the university, and a more credible promise to the students who choose it, simply because those who will have to deliver that proposition and promise will have taken part in the shaping process.

Carl Lygo, Chief Executive of BPP, the private higher education provider, commented recently: 'What I worry about is whether we are continuing to build mausoleums to a 19th century method of learning.'⁴ Internal engagement is also a way of challenging orthodox thinking and making sure an institution's proposition is relevant to tomorrow's students.

From our own experience at Lloyd Northover we have seen how universities that grasp the opportunities can become tomorrow's winners. We believe the opportunities for innovation are both apparent and immediate. The current crisis of change that has been so debilitating for many UK universities can become the starting point to help re-frame a market-focused proposition and to ensure that everyone in the institution is on the inside track.

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¹ Howard Newby: quoted in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, in an article entitled *Customer students to call the tune* by Anthea Lipsett, 11 September 2004

² Chris Chapleo: *What defines successful university brands?* *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 23 (2), 2010 pp 169-183

³ Elisabeth Kubler Ross: www.EKRfoundation.org

⁴ Carl Lygo: quoted from the *Guardian Higher Education Summit*, in an article entitled *Universities optimistic despite cuts* by Harriet Swain, 22 March 2011