

# MORE MARKETING, MORE MISSION

How Technology is Driving the Branding of Higher Education—and Why that Might be Good for Us

By José Antonio Bowen

The news is that CMO's (chief marketing officers) have arrived on college campuses. *The Wall Street Journal* ("Marketing Pros: Big Brand on Campus," August 15, 2012) suggests that budget cuts, rising tuition and more competition for students have led to new branding efforts, but like most of the general public, they might equally wonder *what took us so long?*

It is also true that technology is about to increase competition. In one way, technology levels the playing field: every college can now offer its own version of Economics 101 to the world. With everyone frantically measuring outcomes, will the "best" courses emerge as market leaders? Not universally. As the marketing pros know, increased competition also makes brand awareness more important. We don't know if a student actually learns more at Yale, but parents keep sending students because being a part of the Yale brand opens career doors. Technology will change our branding problems and increase our need for consistent messaging, but it also highlights a more fundamental and long-standing problem of higher education.

Our products are largely the same on every campus. Most of us offer nearly identical 4-year, 120-credit degrees with similar majors that are advertised in familiar brochures where mixed-race groups of students talk earnestly to tweed-clad professors on grassy campuses about personal growth, life-long memories and alumni connections. What's to market? "We're the same, only better!"

For decades, we've made this worse by limiting our messages and mission statements to platitudes about excellence and quality. Then, as if

to underscore the irony of academic institutions not understanding that those were meaningless differentiators, we have allowed a single set of ratings by *U.S. News and World Report* to define excellence. Hundreds of American universities have a board-approved goal of cracking the top 25 or top 50 club, but we can't all be in the top 50 and we should not settle for one definition of quality. It is poor marketing, but it is an even worse organizational strategy.

Such undifferentiated competition has not been good for students or universities. Just like any other organization, a university needs a focused and unique mission. It is silly (and confusing to consumers) all to claim that we are more "excellent" than the next school. If we all continue to chase the same set of metrics in the same rankings, we make the playing field too narrow and serve only a tiny sliver of students. We don't actually want all of our universities to be like Harvard.

This is an opportunity to start a new conversation about both value and distinctiveness. Maybe our dorms are better or your rock wall is higher, but which schools focus on job skills, or a broader education? Maybe we offer a five-year degree (with an entry year for high school dropouts) while you offer majors that no one else does. What about a school that requires real science literacy for non-majors or one that emphasizes slow thinking or oral communication? What about programs for parents? The marketing teams will have a hard time until we start to think more carefully about our individual missions and products.

How is a communication officer going to distinguish the North Carolina State University's dedication to "excellent teaching" from the "ex-

cellence in teaching” at the University of Oklahoma? More urgently, how do we distinguish the benefit of our highly expensive excellent teaching, from the now free and increasingly excellent teaching now taking place online? It’s nice that we all want to be “one of the world’s premier institutions of higher education, devoted to transforming the lives of our students” (Florida State University), but is it good for higher education or society that we are all pursuing the same singular mission?

The biggest differentiator in higher education remains location. If there is a difference between the mission of Kansas State (“to foster excellent teaching, research, and service that develop a highly skilled and educated citizenry necessary to advancing the well-being of Kansas, the nation, and the international community”) and the University of Texas (“to provide high-quality educational opportunities for the enhancement of the human resources of Texas, the nation, and the world through intellectual and personal growth”), it is only in which state they serve. We all desire to “advance the intellectual and social condition of the people of the State through quality programs of teaching, research, and service” (University of Alabama). Alumni networks are indeed a benefit of college, and since those benefits are intensified locally, there is a real life advantage to attending a college near where you want to work. Ironically, the local brand advantage of our product is one thing we are reluctant to use in our marketing: don’t look for the tagline “wear purple to your job interview.”

We’ve actually had plenty of marketing in higher education, but we call it athletics. It is easy to underestimate how name recognition brings value to our regions and institutions. State legislators and city councils like seeing the name of their state or city on television and sweatshirts, with or without the word “university”

(so the California State University, Fresno, brands itself Fresno State). When Georgetown won the NCAA Basketball tournament in 1984, it got a boost in applications the next year, but so did George Washington University and George Mason University. Athletics budgets are large, but marketers know the media impact of a winning team is enormous, cutting through the market noise with a positive message about the university.

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But even if you could spend an amount equal to the athletics budget on your campus on advertising for your university, do you have a distinct enough message that it would cut through the market noise as effectively? (The University of Phoenix may not have sports teams—yet—but buying the stadium name for the Arizona Cardinal’s was a savvy move.) The difference between our badger and your beaver has become the difference in our brands.

Now technology has given us new geographically unspecific online products that are increasing competition and providing new price and brand pressure. Our response should be to focus on our unique value: what is it that we can do better in a physical or residential classroom? (I’ve given my own answer in *Teaching Naked: How Moving Tech-*

*nology out of your College Classroom will Improve Student Learning*, Jossey-Bass, 2012.) After all, the internet has made learning exponentially easier. It used to be that universities had a monopoly on quantum mechanics lectures, now Stanford and MIT are giving those away. The availability of these free resources should also make all teaching better. No one needs to spend another minute writing an introductory lecture on the periodic table. If students are going to pay high tuition, or even just buy gas to drive to campus and search for the elusive parking space, then we must offer them a classroom experience that goes beyond the free (and increasingly excellent) content available on the internet.

Many colleges, however, hope to continue to sell a very expensive “experience.” In the last decades, the residence halls, tanning beds and football stadiums may have increased applications, but they also chain us to higher costs forever. The online competition will not have this extra cost. If our mission is really to deliver an excellent education (none of our mission statements say “to provide students with the best four-years of your life!”) we should probably look more closely at what unique educational value we can provide.

Universities are already segmented by types of students and areas of content, especially in the arts and professional areas like nursing, broadcasting, or business. We have not seen as much segmentation for undergraduate writing or pre-med, but we will. The new business model of the “long tail” suggests that technology will foster more segmentation and allow more niche markets to emerge. (Chris Anderson has described the new business model of selling a relatively large number of unique items while selling relatively small numbers of each as a “long tail” distribution of goods. See *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More*, Hyperion,

2006.) In this same way, in addition to specializing in content areas or even broad types of students (like commuter vs. residential or part-time vs. full-time), schools could focus on even smaller sub-categories.

Instead of all trying to be more like the residential leafy campuses with research programs (that trained virtually all of our faculty) we might examine the needs of students in our local area. Again, our campuses are already mostly distinguished by their location: even Ivy League schools have a higher in-region student profile. State schools already have an in-state monopoly on tuition costs and we already know that the benefits of our alumni networks are mostly regional.

One of the lessons of Borders bookstores is to leverage your assets. When Borders arrived, it had something the smaller independents did not have: inventory. As Amazon began to compete with Borders for inventory, Borders should have found some way to leverage the loyalty of its existing customers to stay vital in the marketplace. Instead of reducing staff and letting the stores get run-down, Borders should have done the opposite: give people more reasons to visit. So the “college as experience” strategy will work for the most elite students and those who simply must join a frat. That probably is not the *U.S. News* top 100, but it is the schools that have a unique national brand. From a marketing perspective it matters little if the brand is based upon sports, academics or alumni: either parents will pay for your brand or they won't. Borders is gone, but many of the more idiosyncratic independent booksellers that once feared Borders survive. Universities will each need to find a niche; becoming more idiosyncratic might be a better strategy than becoming more excellent.

There is a reason why there is only one Amazon: they are the best and cheapest at what they do. If you want to compete, you need to offer some-

thing better, cheaper or different. Higher education has become too generic. With the same increasingly expensive products on every campus, we mostly compete through discounting. While online degrees won't affect the best brands or appeal to the best students, they will carve into the market share in the middle. Like it or not, online products are more convenient and they will force physical universities to place more emphasis on convenience. If that is all we do, however, it will only be a temporary fix. For universities in the middle, a new culture of innovation and change will be required. To survive we will need to offer more value for someone. I am not suggesting that we cede higher quality education at low cost to the online providers, but rather that we understand there is where the most competition will be.

Real marketing will be good for higher education. It is a chance to tell prospective students about what is different about your campus or your courses. The questions marketers ask will now be crucial: Who are you serving? What do your students and communities need and want? Who benefits? How does your cost vs. benefit compare? What is your added value? Most of us are wasting resources trying to be “one of the nation's top educational institutions” when instead we should be investing in providing our mostly local consumers with more reasons to choose us over cheaper online alternatives. The campus marketing push should stimulate a conversation about the unique mission of each institution.

This is a pretty radical idea. As a faculty member, I recognize my own desire to be left alone to teach what I want to teach and how I want to teach it—just bring me students. As one of my most distinguished faculty told the marketing team, “I can only tell you what is in the can. You need to figure out how to label that.” I am suggesting that we flip this process.

To ask “what unique product might we offer that the market needs?” is routine for other organizations. But it will be new for higher education.

Marketers can help us build brands and find new labels to put on our educational products. Before we slap a new label on our can, however, we need to stop and think about what we want in it. This is an opportunity. While technology will massively increase the generic competition for higher education, most of us have been preparing by using the same old strategy. For-profit schools will continue to outspend not-for-profit schools on marketing, but the response should not be to have even glossier brochures. We need a better, more refined message, but that will require a better and more refined mission. Now, at the beginning of this enormous disruption to higher education, there are millions of niche markets to fill and all of us already enjoy some local advantage. Let's think about what we do that is excellent, but also distinctive. What's in your can? ■



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