

Education Research & Consulting



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■ Marketing and Branding in Higher Education

Eduvisors is a research and consulting firm dedicated to providing cost-effective advisory services to institutions and students across K-12, college and university education. Considered an authority on research driven education trends and best practices, our strategic services help colleges and universities measurably improve performance by making the most of their investments.



With skyrocketing fees in higher education and a very crowded and competitive market place, the reputation of your university will play an even more critical role in student - and academic - recruitment. Your reputation however is built on much more than results and research status.

Prospective students and other stakeholders will build a view of your institution from many sources with your official publications being just one. Everything from signage, location, how the phone is answered and building condition to web blogs and conversations with friends will be

factors. Managing the messages relayed by these diverse channels is the role of marketing and in particular, brand management.

Despite this vital role, marketing is little understood in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in India and often perceived as a function by which the latest prospectus is published and is rarely part of the development of the organizational strategy. It appears that marketing in the HEI sector has failed to market its value and promote its potential contribution. At Eduvisors we hope to address that situation and present our thoughts about where marketing sits within a HEI and what its role could or should be to meet the challenges faced by the Higher Education sector.

Is Marketing Important?

So why should marketing be regarded as so important? Most HEIs develop corporate strategies; some linked to a vision as to where they want to go and what sort of an institution they want to be. These are typically translated into plans and actions and may be broken down further into departmental strategies and plans and so on, and so the academic year starts. However, the glue that is often missing in this process is the marketing contribution. Consider the following questions:

- Does your vision or strategy set out how you want to look and feel to students, prospective students and the wider community?
- If so, what are you doing to achieve this and how is your success measured?
- Are you providing services people want now and how do you know what they will want in the future?
- How well are your recruitment activities working and how do you capitalize on your successes and learn from your failures?
- Is there a mechanism in place for feeding this information back into the strategy and planning process?



If you can readily answer all of these questions then you are doing better than most. All of these questions are aspects of marketing and should be considered if you want to effectively meet the aims and objectives you have set yourselves. Indeed, it could be argued that they are some of the fundamental building blocks for developing your corporate strategies and plans in the first place. Without consideration of these, you are setting sail without a map to show you **where you are, where you want to be and how far you have travelled.**

Marketing Strategy

So where do you start in developing a marketing strategy? In an organization with devolved marketing you will probably need to think about developing local marketing plans that are aligned with corporate plans. A way of doing this is to incorporate a marketing strategy framework as part of the corporate document that guides the development of lower level strategies and plans. This may include the setting of expectations, standards and targets.



Developing a marketing strategy can be a daunting prospect for any organization akin to a student staring at a blank sheet of paper with a 5000 word essay to write.

Like the student, you should look to others for inspiration and learn from organizations who have been there, done that. This way you don't waste time reinventing the wheel thus allowing you to fast-track your development.

Benchmarking your current marketing function can be a quick and effective way to identify strengths, underlying issues and gaps to address. You can set up your own benchmarking group, or may already be in one, however there are quicker, less resource intensive options. A number of consultancies will be able to benchmark your performance against other organizations and you can even do it yourself using the Benchmark Index through your local Business Links. Though an objective view point will invariably be more revealing.

Benchmarking will also help you gauge your current organizational arrangements for managing and administering marketing functions across your institution. HEIs are often complex structures that have grown organically and serve a wide range of very different stakeholders.

As a result, lines of communication and responsibility may have become unclear or even not exist. The shift towards more student focused organizations will further stretch these lines. To be a truly student focused organization and to deliver effective marketing can only be achieved where communication and reporting lines are clear, understood by all and most importantly, meet the current requirements of the organization. If this does not describe your institution you will hamstring your marketing strategy and its implementation unless you undertake an organizational review at the same time.

So, is structured marketing important?

It helps you set out what sort of an organization you want to be. It supports and helps you achieve your aims and objectives. It can support decision making through hard evidence. It can help ensure your institution maintains direction through time. It can flag potential issues relating to a course or product before they become real issues. It can help you address the changes that will come about through the introduction of course fees. It will help you face up to the growing competition in Higher Education. The answer is yes, and probably more so now than at any other time.



Brands are big news. The term is regularly used in the media, in the workplace and even in your local pub. Some place a financial value on it and consumers make purchasing decisions based on it. Ask any organization, be it a University or a multinational, if their brand is important and they'll say yes. But ask them, what is brand and why is it important and you're likely to get a confused, inaccurate response.

The simple truth is that most organizations do not understand the difference between brand and logo. For a Higher Education Institution, brand is a crucial factor in whether a prospective student decides to apply to study with you or not. In this article we hope to clearly explain the difference and illustrate how an understanding can enable you to use branding to support your organization's objectives.

What We Mean By 'Brand'

Brand is much more than a logo, typeface or house style. While these can act as easily recognised shorthand for your brand they are more accurately described as your visual identity. Brand is the effect on the stakeholder of what you do and how you do it. It is built by the experience stakeholders have of your products and services and their interaction with your organization. For your institution, how your courses and programs are perceived by prospective students and the perceived quality of this offering are all aspects of your brand and will play a key part in influencing the student's decision; unlike your logo.

Brand Essence - A Statement Of How A Brand Is Defined

At the 'core' is the institution itself. Moving out, the institution is represented by a visual identity and a series of facts that underpin the institution's brand. These set out how the HEI wishes to present itself to the outside world (and also internally to its own staff and students), and can include, for instance, rankings or facts and figures on performance, some of which the institution may well prefer not to have presented.



Moving further out again, we have how the institution is perceived by the outside world - or the interpretation of the messages that have been sent out by it. These may include, public perceptions and stereotypes regarding the difference between 'traditional old' universities and 'new' universities, which often do not consider the current realities and may even be unfair.

The interpretation of these messages can be considered in terms of the rational and emotional aspects of that perception - everything from 'what this brand means to me' to 'if I was associated with it, how would it make me feel'.

Your brand can cover your organization as a whole or separate products and services and helps your audience in their decision-making, creating a perceived knowledge of what they are going to receive or experience - before they commit.

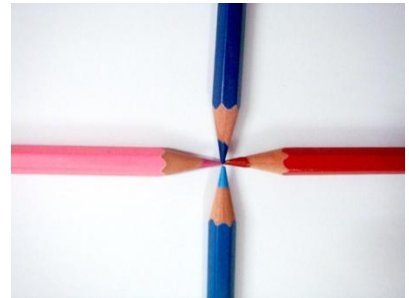
Your audience, be they customers, students or stakeholders, will already have a view of your organization and its offerings. Whether or not you treat it as such, this is your brand. Brand building simply means communicating your message to your audience more effectively so that they immediately associate your organization with their requirements.

Managing Multiple Brands Within Organizations

Many organizations in higher education are umbrella organizations housing individual business units which may have little in common and target completely different audiences with separate requirements. This can create a complex relationship with many, seemingly unrelated brands.

For instance, the branding behind an eminent and established medical school will be very different from a fledgling vocational training business. Understanding and mapping these relationships is essential if you are to assess the value or otherwise of the sub-brands to the organizational brand and vice versa.

The relationship between brands is referred to as the brand architecture. The architecture should define the different leagues of branding within the organization; how the organizational brand and sub-brands relate to and support each other; and how the sub-brands reflect or reinforce the core purpose of the organizational brand to which they belong.



It is not uncommon to find Schools whose brands are better known and more established than their parent institutions, as well as the converse. Understanding these interrelationships and their subsequent impact upon one another is fundamental to managing the overall organizational brand and the overall message that an institution is wishing to project to its target audience and stakeholders.

Typically the relationships between brands fall into one of three categories:

- A single brand across the organization where one name is used for all activities and this name is how the organization is referred to by all stakeholders;
- An endorsed brand is where the parent brand adds credibility to the secondary brand. Think of the relationship between the model and make of your car; and
- A house of brands where the individual sub-brands are presented to the stakeholders with little or no link to the parent brand

Of these, the endorsed brand is on the rise. This is in part due to the public demand for transparency and a desire to know who they are ultimately dealing with.

The Benefits Of Understanding Your Brand

Your organization may fit neatly into one of these options or you may find you are a hybrid of them. Nevertheless, understanding your brand and mapping your brand architecture are important and can bring tangible improvements, such as:

- Strengthening the brand experience for your audience and ensuring it reinforces and builds the parent brand;
- Providing a framework for the sub-brands and products to adapt their offerings and positioning to their individual markets;
- Providing a strategic framework to assess the product portfolio and inform decisions on the relevancy and benefits of sub-brands and products to the overall organizational offering;
- Identifying gaps or missed opportunities in the organizational offering;
- Identifying core brands throughout the organization that should be high profile due to their potential to deliver on the primary organizational objective; and
- Supporting the organization in providing a clear offering to its different markets and avoid misperceptions or confusion amongst your audience that can lead to lost business.

Above All Else - Don't Forget This...

We refer to 'audience' many times in this article. Regardless of how you define them - students, local residents, media, etc. - one truth is certain: you cannot understand your brand without talking to them and finding out what they understand your brand to be and what they want it to be. Reviewing your branding without consulting your audience is like reviewing a new car without turning the engine on and taking it for a drive - you can see it looks good but does it deliver on its looks?

Eduvisors is a research and consulting firm dedicated to providing strategic business advisory services to institutions and other stakeholders in Higher Education.

For further details, please contact us at info@eduvisors.org



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Thank You

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