Branding Isn't a Dirty Word

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By Robert A. Weisbuch

I live for competition. When I was a kid I would read Consumer Reports voraciously, once even persuading my mom to purchase 35 brands of soap so that I could employ the neighborhood kids to make my own consumer report. (Not surprisingly, SweetHeart, a luxury bar, finished first. Lava, a bar far too rough for 8-year-old hands, trailed the pack.) From this, my interest in marketing naturally follows.

Earlier in my life, when I was chairing the undergraduate program at the University of Michigan and we wanted to attract more majors, I suggested to my colleagues that we advertise on the sides of local buses. There really aren't many buses in Ann Arbor, but, still, I thought the novelty would be noticed. "Bob, look," said my friend Michael Clark, now an associate executive vice chancellor at the University of California at Irvine. "Your tendency is OK, but
couldn't you make it more FM and less AM?"

Today my vulgarities still require curbing. My colleagues here at Drew didn't like my idea for making the university's name better known. I proposed a split-screen ad with, say, a bulldog on one side and a splendid photo of our gorgeous campus on the other. "Not Drool . . .," the copy would read, "Drew. A university in a forest 30 minutes from Manhattan." Another version might feature Drew Carey in an outlandish shtick costume. "Not Drew Carey. Drew University."

You get the idea, and you also must get why it was not merely rejected but actively scorned by our communications director.

We did try a campaign this past fall with a different kind of gimmick. It involved a No. 2 pencil, the kind students once used to take standardized tests before computers and confusion. It's bright green, our university color. On the side is printed the words, "SAT Optional -- Think Outside the Lines -- Discover Drew." The pencil comes with a brochure -- the kind that was employed to advertise the Mini Cooper. The brochure begins with a multiple-choice question: "Drew University has made the SAT optional because . . . (A) Drew treats all applicants as individuals, not numbers. (B) Many talented students don't perform well on standardized tests . . .," and so on. The correct answer is "D" -- all of the above.
Mailed to guidance counselors and handed out at college fairs, that little piece of business got an astonishingly big response, much to our pleasure. Wit is not usually associated with recruiting undergraduates, and I have always thought that advertising can be especially effective when it imports the conventions associated with one kind of product into the realm of a vastly different product, like having a razor take a "road test" on a face.

I just used the word "advertising," as you may have noticed, and you may well have read the first paragraphs of this column with a vague sense of unease or sharp disapproval. Drew is a university, after all, not a shaving cream or a beverage.

Professors typically bridle at the very word "marketing," much less "advertising," and for good reason. Marketing and advertising are means to employ persuasion, not toward the good, but amorally, toward a commercial end that may be socially beneficial or harmful. As academic rhetoricians, which all of us are whatever our disciplines, we mean to alert students to the wiles of persuasion and employ language for the discovery of what is real.

But the reality is that we in academe exist in a competitive environment, and while we are painfully aware of certain excesses and compromises that the competition among us encourages (please, fellow presidents, stop sending me all of that junk mail in
the hope that I will rank you higher in the next reputational survey),
we also are aware that the competition keeps us working to provide
a better education for our students. And, finally, isn't there
something upper-crust elitist and deadening in refusing to offer
ourselves and our institutions in an outgoing manner?

Drew, like many smaller colleges and universities, is often
described, not inaccurately, as "a hidden gem." After a time, one
gets tired of waiting for Harrison Ford to appear on the horizon to
discover the buried treasure. In fact, I discovered that Drew was
frequently hiding itself. In one small but telling example, a
university coffee cup I was given early on had a logo facing the
sipper. The side facing the world was blank. That's why I made
hiring a chief communications officer my first priority as president.

The pencil campaign was an initial stab at promoting greater
awareness, but it was just the warm-up for the main act -- branding.

Anyone who has started down that path knows the process begins
with much soul-searching. What makes us unique? What kinds of
students are we hoping to attract? In a crowded educational
landscape, what piece of real estate can we own? Those questions
have the power to help an institution stand out from the pack. But
they have a potential downside or two. In touting your one-of-
a-kindness, you may distort the natural shape of the institution.
Branding also requires you to define your university, and in saying what you are, you imply what you are not.

In developing a brand, the focus is typically put on the few areas in which you excel or that give you the greatest competitive advantage. But "spires of excellence," as the phrase goes, somehow conjures for me the image of a craggy, demonic landscape. What about all those neglected departments and programs on the flat plain? Isn't a liberal-arts education supposed to be about all the arts and sciences, not just a favored few?

And so, a leading question for us may become, How does this campus gain distinction without twisting itself into an unnatural shape merely to be distinct? Posed more positively, How do we identify and magnify the collective characteristics that define a Drew experience and make it unlike that of its peers?

That holistic approach may not be branding in the traditional sense, but if we are proud of an academic landscape that has always offered students an enormous range of choices, something I believe is the glory of this republic, then it's a worthy question for each of our institutions.

Indeed, if we blend that self-definition with one that might seem nearly opposite, asking ourselves if there are ways to become distinctive by creating coalitions among different kinds of
educational institutions (high schools, community colleges, four-year comprehensive colleges, research universities), and coalitions with agencies in the various social sectors (public education, government, business), we might create an academic landscape with more range and choice than at present, and with more coherence.

That is my hope -- that institutional self-interest and even self-promotion might support the public good, rather than ignoring or undercutting it. In the meantime, a confession: I still like the drooling dog idea.

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