

Branding the University: Is That Where We're @ ?

STEVE PENFOLD

From: Bob Stanwick, Vice President, Inwood Branding Consultants

To: Jessica Lupin, Director of Communications, University of Barrie

Re: @ctivating the university brand

In line with our earlier discussions, you will find below a summary of our recent focus group sessions. We found several problems in the existing University of Barrie identity, but there is still an opportunity to re-define your institution through a dynamic branding campaign.

A Brand-Nu Inno-U: “University of Barrie” has a certain descriptive merit, but the name market tested as stale, staid, and boring. Our branding approach is built around a new moniker, “Innovation University @ Barrie.” This name focus-grouped particularly well in the business and alumni communities, with scores of over 9/10 on our proprietary Positive Association Scale (PAS). Though members of the student-consumer community told us they found it long and awkward, they responded more positively to the short form “Inno-U,” especially when phrased idiomatically and in terms of self-directed, individual actualization: “B U at Inno-U,” “Learnin’ TRU at Inno-U,” etc.

Activate Action!: The existing university motto (“Knowledge, Virtue, Justice”) is lame and old-fashioned. While these basic concepts could be translated into 21st century language (e.g. “knowledge” focus-grouped at a PAS of 4, but “content” at 8; “justice” rated a PAS of 3, but “VALU” a 9), we rejected this approach. McCooper’s 4th Axiom of Branding tells us that “Verbs are grammar’s entrepreneurs, full of energy and action.” But the existing motto is composed entirely of nouns, which McCooper calls the “welfare bums of language, just sitting there waiting for something to happen:” Since youth today want extreme and dynamic experiences, we suggest a branding concept that focuses on VERBS.

Abstract!: A brand slogan needs to boil the product down to an easily deliverable message, like Coke’s “The Real Thing.” Your critics will insist that universities are complex institutions that deliver a wide variety of services and experiences. Science and humanities departments inhabit different intellectual worlds, they will say, and commuters and residence students have conflicting ideas about the institution. We see this more as

a challenge than an obstacle. Inno-U's brand simply requires a level of uber-abstraction not typical of normal brand campaigns.

@ctivate!: After subjecting several options to focus-group testing ("Imagine," "Embrace," "Envision," etc.), we decided that "@ctivate!" best encapsulates our new vision for Inno-U. It is dynamic and action-oriented, but flexible enough to apply to many situations: in classrooms, students can @ctivate learning; if they do 15 all-nighters in a row and get deathly ill, they can @ctivate healing at our new public-private partnership health centre; in the campus pub, they can de-@ctivate inhibitions; at the end of four years' paying Inno-U tuition, we can @ctivate foreclosure. Throughout all these experiences, students can both @ctivate self and @ctivate Inno-U.

@ctivate! the Brand: A U-brand needs to go beyond traditional identifiers like signage, letterhead, and coat of arms. We intend to @ctivate! the brand in all aspects of the university experience, from internal communication, to classrooms, assignments, and everyday speech. This total approach goes beyond the slogan: we need to instill the underlying concept in the mental hardware of Inno-U and its communities. Even the mundane activities that make up the real university experience can be @ctivated into dynamic moments of creation and fulfilment: "type" could be "@ctivate technology"; edit could be "embrace change"; proofread could be "re-fashion belief"; cram could be "learn at the speed of light"; and pay/borrow could be "invest in thought futures."

De-@ctivate!: Internal Resistance: In focus groups, some faculty expressed concern about "@ctivate" as an organizing principle of the Inno-U experience. One stated: "We spend so much time encouraging our students to be precise, how can you tell them university is about being vague?" Since McCooper argues that even criticism increases brand awareness, faculty should be encouraged to @ctivate! their own critical skills (and those of their student-consumers), seeing the very limitations of the brand as "an opportunity to maximize the pedagogical impact of this central animating idea."

Summary: The challenges of @ctivating Inno-U for the 21st century are great, but the perils of inaction are much greater. Without dramatic action, it is even conceivable that students will come to believe that their Inno-U degree is not a product that can be reduced to vague abstractions that look good on billboards and web pages. They might even come to

think that a university branding campaign is a futile exercise and a colossal waste of scarce public dollars. To avoid these alarming developments, we recommend moving ahead with a fully resourced brand campaign as soon as possible.

Steve Penfold is Academic Matters' humour columnist He moonlights as an assistant professor of history at the University of Toronto.

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Embrace Your Outer Cabbage

STEVE PENFOLD

I can think of nothing more disturbing than teaching at a university where almost one-third of professors are considered HOT. That's right: of the 3,008 University of Toronto professors assessed on RateMyProfessor.com (RMP), fully 809 of them have received the coveted tamale, indicating that at least one student thinks they are attractive. That's pretty much the sum total of what I learned from eight hours exploring RMP, an excruciatingly painful task foisted on me by the malevolent editor of this magazine.

Do I even need to say that RMP runs against the historic mission of universities? I don't mean it cheapens higher learning or encourages superficial judgements about teachers. RMP does that, to be sure, ratcheting up the consumerist language to a comically superficial level. Most of the comments on the site wouldn't qualify as mediocre movie reviews, and I doubt even Jerry Springer would be much impressed by the level of expression. "She sux" is a common retort, followed closely by "He's so-o-o-o-o boring." Spicy stuff.

But accusing RMP of superficial consumerism is like shooting fish in a barrel. Any D-level undergraduate could come up with that slag. The consumerism of RMP is just so-o-o-o-o-o blatant, and the controls on content so sadly lacking that I sometimes find it hard to work up genuine moral outrage. Besides, we grade undergraduates, holding at least one important aspect of their lives in our hands, so if they want to insult our fashion sense on-line, then oh well, whatever, never mind.

Still, even if the site is mainly "st-u-u-u-pid;" it is a lot like this purported "humour" column: something I hope never ends up in my tenure file. The ratings can be embarrassing, cruel, and even creepy, and I'd hate to think they would ever be put to real use. Despite the superficial resemblance, these are not student evaluations, which at least are somewhat systematic and occasionally helpful. Student evaluations may not have fulfilled their original democratic purpose, and they have attracted controversy, but I always learn something from them. RMP, however, is less an extension of student evaluations than student gossip. This, sadly, is one of the key themes of the Internet: four billion opinions, but so few of them useful or important.

Still, at my seventh painful hour on RMP, I started worrying about those tamales and the historic mission of universities. In the initial nineteenth-century wave of university-building, most were founded by religious dominations (sic) anxious to inculcate Christian values in the young. This religious mission soon floundered. Christ was widely praised as a teacher (earning 12 much-coveted “sandals” on RateMyMessiah.com), but most of his publications were written by research assistants, and he was denied tenure by his host institution.

Over time, then, the central mission of universities changed, eventually settling on its fundamental present-day purpose: to provide a refuge for the socially awkward and physically unattractive. Oh, sure, we came up with some good propaganda to justify our existence: the socialization of the middle class; nodes of innovative research; nexus of critical thinking; spaces of interstitial empowerment; sites of collective memory; all that jazz. But these were never more than clever sound bites for the consumption of the cooler people who ran corporations and governments — those Alpha personality types who were probably popular in high school. Any honest professor will admit that her career path pretty much constituted falling off the bottom of the global ladder of cool and landing on campus with a happy-sounding thud.

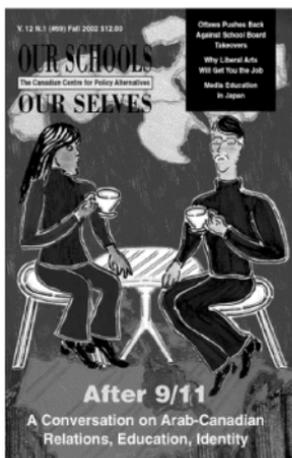
And there’s the rub. I don’t know a tamale from a cabbage, but I guess in the comparatively sparse aesthetic geography of academia, one-third of University of Toronto professors may actually be HOT. It’s like my Uncle Ralph used to say: “A corpse is like caviar to a buzzard.” It’s all relative. But we spent two centuries creating our Garden of Geekish Paradise, so the last thing we need is the future generation running about the place planting tamales.

All things considered, I’d rather be a cabbage. It’s not an attractive vegetable, but it has lots of layers and delivers a healthy amount of fibre. Put this on RMP: “With Professor Penfold, you can really make some good cole slaw. Très cruciferous.” Bring tamales into the Garden, though, and the cabbages won’t stand a chance. Pretty soon we’re all going to be dressing fashionably, building athletic bodies, and taking regular showers. And that just ain’t the job that I signed up for.

Steve Penfold is Academic Matters’ humour columnist He moonlights as an assistant professor of history at the University of Toronto.

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