University Branding 2.0—Harnessing the Power of Social Media for Open-Source Branding and Brand Co-Creation of Colleges and Universities

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Over the last decade, universities have increasingly participated in branding or attempts at brand-building (Girard et. al. 2016). External environmental factors like increased competition in the higher education marketplace, rising tuition costs that focus attention on value and quality, the elevated profile of college rankings (Bunzel 2007), and changing consumer (i.e. student) expectations and lifestyles driven by rapid advances in technology have contributed to a growing interest by many universities in leveraging their distinctive institutional values to create competitive advantages and better communicate their institution's identity. In short, such a perfect storm of environmental trends means universities are more interested in branding and its benefits to higher education marketing than they have ever been (Ng & Forbes 2009).

This paper contrasts traditional approaches to university branding—approaches that emphasize a university's need to make the appropriate brand associations and internally generate its brand message—with the open-source or co-creative approach to branding. Open-source branding relies on user-generated online content—content created by consumers on social media platforms—to shape and communicate a brand's image. While open-source branding is riskier, because it removes control of a brand's story from the marketer and shares it with the consumer, it more accurately reflects the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of consumers and is a superior builder of brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, and brand community. An explanation of open-source branding is provided along with recommendations for how

to apply open-source branding via social media platforms to university brand-building strategies.

Traditional Approaches to University Branding

So, how does a university typically build its brand? Jevons (2006) contends that the average institution of higher learning has taken a very traditional approach to branding, i.e. by focusing on the internal brand message which it seeks to control through advertising and other forms of broadcast messaging. The components of the brand message are often based on what administrators view as their best qualities or qualities they believe students desire when choosing an institution of higher learning. This type of approach has been referred to as internal brand messaging (Black 2008).

Research indicates the internal approach to college branding has produced limited success (Black 2008; Bunzel 2007; Jevons 2006). Bunzel (2007) found universities that explicitly focused on brand-building via mass media and central message control produced no significant gains in third-party rankings or brand trust among students. A number of reasons have been offered in explanation for the lackluster results: universities don't understand what drives brand equity in their institutions (Ng & Forbes 2009); branding at complex non-profits such as universities should not take the same approach as that used in commercial organizations (Black 2008); universities have failed to take a holistic approach to brand building because they do not understand the brand "ecosystem" and thus fail to account for interdependencies between brand drivers (Pinar et al 2011); and the brand message promulgated is too often one that is internal (created by administrators) rather than external (organically determined based on the perceptions of students, alumni, and other external constituents) (Black 2008). This latter approach is called consumer-based brand equity (CBBE).

An emerging preference for CBBE approaches to brand-building has led to research that focuses on student perceptions of the importance of various dimensions of university brand equity (Pinar et. al. 2011). This approach gives the consumer (i.e.

the student) a voice in the brand-building process and means as Black (2008) says that "positioning and messaging are grounded in the current reality" rather than based merely on "institutional aspirations" or a "flavor-of-the-month" quality.

Although the perceptions of students are considered in CBBE, it and other traditional approaches to branding emphasize maximizing *a priori* endogenous organization traits or dimensions as the key process in building a brand. For example, one recent study of the CBBE method subdivides the most important drivers of university brand equity into core versus supporting dimensions (Girard et. al. 2016). Included in the drivers are the core dimensions of Perceived Quality, Learning Environment, Brand Trust, Emotional Environment, University Reputation, Brand Associations, and Brand Awareness and the support dimensions of Physical Facilities, Library Services, Dining Services, and Residence Halls. Students were then asked to rate the various dimensions according to how important each was in influencing the student's perception of the institution's image, their decision to matriculate there, and their continuing loyalty to the institution. The study uncovered a network of significant interdependencies among these dimensions (e.g. perceptions of Library Services affected perceptions of Perceived Quality which affected perceptions of Learning Environment, etc.) and they were found to vary in importance according to students' gender, class, and living arrangement (on versus off campus) (e.g. students living on campus rated Dining Services and Residence Halls as more important than did off-campus students). The findings led the authors to recommend that universities approach their brand-building by focusing on the most important core dimensions of brand equity: perceived quality and learning environment. The components of these dimensions were then delineated to include: faculty instructional quality, faculty expertise, state-of-the-art technology, faculty availability and empathy, accessible learning support services, and high academic standards.

Open-Source Branding

What is open-source branding and how does it differ from traditional approaches to brand-building? Open-source branding is designed to take advantage of brand-related content that is produced by the consumers of a product or service and not by the marketer. Every day, millions of ordinary people unwittingly publish their own brand-related content by taking advantage of all the social media sites that invite users to post personal information, photos, videos, opinions, and knowledge. The personal "documentaries" that result often incorporate products or brands because brands help people accomplish self-expression, communicate their personalities, further a story, or make a point (Pharr 2012). As people include brands in their online conversations, one very important side effect is that the brand's message is increasingly shaped and delivered by the individuals and not the marketer. The term that has been coined to describe this phenomenon is "open-source branding" (Fournier & Avery 2011).

Open-source branding hinges on *user-generated content* (UGC) and some marketing scholars say it has the potential to make traditional push-based marketing messages virtually passé (Pharr 2011). User-generated content exists because people are no longer merely consuming marketing content, they are producing it themselves by creating, editing, organizing, and sharing information, reshaping the contributions of others, and engaging in peer-to-peer discussion. Krishnamurthy et. al. (2008) define user-generated content as "opinions, advice, and commentary about products, brands, organizations, and services—usually informed by personal experiences—that exist in consumer-generated postings on social media sites, internet discussion boards, forums, user groups, and web logs, and can include text, images, photos, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media." (p. 1)

Because many brands and products appear in the "footage" of social networking sites or get discussed on blogs or in discussion forums, it is critical for organizations to develop effective ways to participate in the open-source branding process. Those who don't risk the possibility of their brand image largely falling out from under organization control (Fournier & Avery 2011). In the next section, we

argue why universities are prime candidates for using open-source branding and how they may harness the power of social media for building brands.

Brand-Building through Value Co-Creation with Students

The majority of today's college students are a subset of Generation Y (loosely defined as those born between 1981 and 1999) also known as "Millennials". Millennials are the first generation to have grown up with the internet and are routinely expected to be highly skilled in the digital environment. Due to Millennials' high level of comfort and skill with technology, managers, researchers, and organizations in general are keenly interested in the way information technology affects how Millennials behave and make decisions (Bolton et. al. 2013).

Generation Y is particularly known for its consuming use of social media. Millennials both work and play on social media platforms and use the platforms to search for, share, and contribute all manner of online content. Research has determined that most Generation Y cohorts use social media to interact with each other and prefer social media to more traditional methods of communication. In addition, Generation Y users not only consume content but are prolific creators of content (UGC), unlike older generations who prefer to browse or more passively consume social media (Bolton et. al. 2013).

Demographic researchers believe Generation Y's social media use has profound effects on a wide range of Millennial attitudes and behaviors, including market-related behaviors like engagement with brands and organizations, participation in the value co- creation process, brand loyalty, purchase behavior, and expectations regarding service and post-purchase satisfaction (Berry et. al. 2010). The emerging profile and empirical data on Millennials implies they not only prefer to engage with others via social media, they prefer to engage with organizations and brands via social media platforms that allow them to express themselves and share or create content.

The relative inefficacy of traditional push-based branding in the new world of social media has recently led marketers to develop and favor a brand value co-creation process. Brand co-creation highlights the flaw in the traditional approach to brand-building that the task of brand management is to build brand loyalty through mass media communication campaigns. Boyle (2007) argues there is, at best, only a tenuous link between the activities of brand managers and the creation of brand loyalty (the ultimate goal of branding). In the co-creation process, brand loyalty is dependent on the effects of product/service consumption on consumers' beliefs and brand associations. Advertising cannot build brand loyalty; it can only create informational beliefs and pre-consumption associations. It is the consumer's consumption experience and reactions to it that ultimately determine the feelings and loyalty toward the brand. When consumer have forums for sharing these experiences and eliciting direct responses from the company and others, they share more fully in creating and telling a brand's story.

In the process model of brand co-creation, brand value is created or enhanced in four ways: (1) by developing new products/services/offerings, (2) by exploring alternative modes of marketing communications, (3) by building customer relationships, and (4) by ensuring equity between brand price and consumer value (Boyle 2007). Social media and brand-related user-generated content lend themselves to all these activities.

First, companies through the use of social media have unprecedented opportunities to build or strengthen relationships with customers by inviting customers to engage with their brands by creating or posting user-generated brand-related content, by interacting with each other, and by fostering a sense of community among consumers. In fact, building a brand through the use of an online brand community is recognized as an excellent pull-based way to build brand equity and loyalty (Wirtz et. al. 2013). An online brand community (OBC) is a collective of brand admirers who principally communicate online. The community is a virtual space for members or visitors to discuss their love (or dislike!) for the brand, ask questions of other users, and share their stories or insights. These communities can take many

forms; some are community governed while others are heavily administered by the organization. Regardless of origin or governance, such communities can offer many benefits to organizations if used correctly. The organization can enjoy enhanced consumer insight, closer customer relationships, increased brand satisfaction, and improved customer loyalty, while OBC members can make friends, learn from other members, and enhance self-esteem (Wirtz et. al. 2013). In addition, many OBC members feel they can trust the information they get from other members, often more so than the company itself. To this end, research shows brand managers (e.g. university administrators) should not to be too controlling of the brand community—genuine co-ownership is needed between brand and community for the relationship to work (Wirtz et. al. 2013).

Next, while traditional mass-media advertising remains the dominant form of marketing communication used by firms in trying to build brands (Boyle 2007), it may not necessarily be the most effective way of creating brand awareness or positive brand associations among Generation Y. Studies have shown that not only do Millennials prefer social media over traditional media (Bolton et. al. 2013) but there is a growing body of evidence that product recommendations, reviews, and brand-related content generated by individual consumers and posted on social media have a level of credibility difficult for marketers of producer-generated content (PGC) to match (Pharr 2012). The use of social media content as "advertising" is based on the accepted view that word-of-mouth communications from referents are the most persuasive and attempt to harness the strongest of all consumer triggers – the personal recommendation (Boyle 2007). For social media UCG to deliver the reach of mass media along with the credibility of word-of-mouth recommendations, many organizations hope for positive or entertaining brand-related UCG to go viral. When content goes viral, it is rapidly passed along from one user to another to achieve a very large reach. At that point, the original user-generated content has also become user-conveyed content, with the latter better known as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). Although the two are closely aligned and often confused, UGC is generated by or originates with users while e-WOM is conveyed or passed along by users.

Because e-WOM disseminates UGC and increases its exposure, UGC is thought to have less influence without e-WOM (Pharr 2012). Furthermore, because UGC is considerably more influential when coupled with e-WOM, marketers should take advantage of opportunities to stimulate positive e-WOM whenever possible. While organizations may be powerless to control what consumers are posting about their brands, they can gain influence in the open-source branding process by passing along positive UGC to customers and potential customers in hopes that some of it will captivate consumers and go viral.

When it comes to alternative modes of marketing communication via social media, marketers have the choice of several platforms including video publishing sites (e.g. YouTube), discussion forums, online communities, blogging as well as micro-blogging sites (e.g. Twitter) and video messaging sites (e.g. SnapChat). Following is a list of the most common social media applications: blogging; microblogging (e.g. Twitter); video messaging (e.g. SnapChat); product/service co-creation (offer customization sites) (e.g. NIKEiD); social bookmarking (e.g. StumbleUpon); forums/discussion boards (e.g. Google Groups); product reviews (e.g. Amazon); social networks (e.g. Facebook); business/professional networks (e.g. LinkedIn); video sharing (e.g. YouTube); photo sharing (e.g. InstaGram, Tumblr); and wikis (e.g. Wikipedia). This list shows the diversity in social media sites beyond Facebook available to brand marketers. While many organizations today have a Facebook profile page and look upon it as one of their most basic online marketing venues, those that embrace open-source branding might easily move beyond their simple brand profile on Facebook to experiment with more engaging content that builds excitement about the brand. Zhang (2010) identifies six major types of branded engagement available inside Facebook: contests, games, events, videos, downloads, and sweepstakes. These applications are referred to as "branded" engagement because they integrate persuasive brand-oriented information with engaging activity. Historically, many of these applications have been underused. Alcorn (2010), for example, recommends the use of Facebook event profiles over that of the Facebook page for many brands because: (1) events can be directly created and hosted by

organizations but not by Facebook profile pages (a practice disallowed on Facebook), (2) and because events excel at providing engaging content that can be immediately acted upon and that is more easily measured.

Lastly, social media have also emerged as a potential source of market intelligence that may be used to further brand value co-creation as well as innovation in the organization. Companies large and small monitor social networking sites and user-generated content (UGC) to collect relevant information pertaining to marketing their offerings.   The content created and passed along by customers can become a resource for creative ideas to improve products and services, as a supporting tool for changing the company culture, and as a valuable source of information and ideas to improve brand image and relations with consumers. Research also demonstrates that the marketing intelligence gained via social media has profoundly influenced the design and implementation of new market offerings as well as customer relationship management practices among organizations that target or cater to Generation Y consumers (Berry et al., 2010).

Implications for Using Social Networking

The potential for open-source brand-building via social media applications implies several caveats for universities that desire to employ social media in their marketing communications programs. First, universities that want to take full advantage of the open-source branding approach must consider a fundamental change in the nature of their institutional communications. Broadcast should no longer dominate. Universities need to actively engage with their constituents in a *conversation*. The concept of a brand can no longer be developed exclusively by administrators in the ivory tower; the conversations "in the community" will determine the true nature of the brand. Social media is about the conversation.

Universities need to keep this in mind and participate in the conversation by talking with their constituents and not at them.

Second, universities must be equally eager to engage the social network on the pluses and minuses of their offerings and then be proactive in making changes or providing consumers with services that meet their needs. This means the organization must be willing to respond to and act on negative as well as positive information. Universities must use the insights gained from the conversation to evolve, innovate, engage in continuous quality improvement, and add value to their offerings in order to take anything positive away from the open-source branding experience. Next, it cannot be emphasized enough that administrators must make sure that the university's social networking platforms and nature of its participation are relevant and respectful of collaborators. Encouraging or stimulating UGC that is never acted on or trying to shut down adverse comments rather than addressing the root causes of criticism will be seen as abuse and, ultimately, trust in the brand (i.e. the university) will be destroyed. Moreover, if universities ignore the photos, blogs, and conversations going on around them, the potential benefits of being involved in the first place will be lost.

Lastly, universities should make social media part of a larger brand building strategy. Too many organizations today are rushing in to utilize social media applications without first developing a strategy or knowing how to leverage social media platforms for brand-building ends. Platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are too often treated as stand-alone elements rather than part of an integrated system. Brand objectives and performance metrics that emphasize the relationship-building strengths of social network marketing should be emphasized. Then the information gained from social media must be soundly interpreted and acted upon to be useful.

Finally, it should also be remembered that, although today's students are digital natives who grew up with social media and 24/7 connectedness and find it easier than any previous generation to create and share information, the foundational

process that underlies a strong university brand remains unchanged: creating and delivering a strong student experience will translate into a strong university brand. Today's universities must realize that given the widespread adoption and use of social media by Generation Y, organizations that stimulate engagement, build relationships, and co- create value with their customers via the creative and effective use of social media stand to reap significant rewards when it comes to branding the institution.

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