Using Digital Content Marketing to Build the College Brand:
Leveraging a Content-Rich Website into a Distinctive University Brand

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Introduction

One of the realities of the internet age that marketers must come to grips with is that buyer behavior has dramatically changed. Consumers increasingly refuse to be interrupted by outbound marketing messages. Instead, consumers seek out marketing content when and where they want it, and increasingly rely on social media to gather and evaluate information about purchases or intended purchases. Gone are the days when marketers could convince broad swaths of their target markets of the advantages and benefits of purchasing their products via mass-media company-controlled advertising (Scott 2015).

The new marketing reality has had a dramatic impact on the methods by which organizations seek to develop their brands (Murthy 2011, Boyle 2007). The process of brand-building has moved from one of monolog to one of dialog, where marketers seek to meaningfully engage, share information and ideas, and even "co-create" the brand's story with buyers and prospective buyers. Social media, in particular, play a vital role in the process of brand development and brand image management, even if not always used strategically by organizations (Pharr 2012).

Over the last decade, colleges and universities have increasingly participated in 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 driven by rapid advances in technology have contributed to a growing interest by many institutions in leveraging their institutional values to create competitive advantages and distinctive brand profiles. Pharr (2016) argues these environmental forces have resulted in a "perfect storm" that has focused unprecedented attention on higher education marketing, in general, and university branding, in particular.

A review of recent branding literature reveals three strategies by which university brand development has been primarily attempted: (1) internal branding; (2) consumer-based branding; (3) and open-source branding. This paper proposes a fourth means of university brand development that relies on digital content marketing. After comparing and evaluating each form of branding, the paper focuses on the modern alternative approach known as content-rich branding.

Traditional Approaches to University Branding

How does a university typically build its brand? It would appear most have taken the traditional route of internal branding (Black 2008). With a strategy of internal branding, the brand message is chosen by university administrators and communicated primarily through mass-media advertising and other forms of broadcast messaging or outbound marketing (e.g. direct mail campaigns).

Research indicates the internal approach to college branding has produced limited success (Black 2008, Bunzel 2007, Jevons 2006). Bunzel (2007), for example, 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); and universities do not understand the brand "ecosystem" and fail to account for interdependencies between brand drivers (Pinar et al 2011).

Given that one of the biggest criticisms of internal branding has been that the brand message is created by administrators rather than organically determined based on the perceptions of students, alumni, and other external

constituents, a second approach called consumer-based branding has been applied in higher education institutions (Pinar et. al. 2011). Consumer-based branding gives the consumers (i.e. students and other university stakeholders) a voice in the brand-building process. Its proponents say that it ensures a university's positioning and messaging are grounded in the current reality rather than based merely on institutional aspirations or a "flavor-of-the-month" approach (Black 2008).

A preference for the consumer-based approach to brand-building has led to research into student perceptions of the importance of various dimensions of university brand equity (Pinar et. al. 2011). For example, one recent study subdivides the most important drivers of university brand equity into core versus supporting dimensions (Girard et. al. 2016). Included in the core dimensions are Perceived Quality, Learning Environment, Brand Trust, Emotional Environment, University Reputation, Brand Associations, and Brand Awareness. The support dimensions include Physical Facilities, Library Services, Dining Services, and Residence Halls. The research 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). Under this approach, antecedents of core dimensions also become important. For example, the components of Perceived Quality and Learning Environment include such factors as faculty instructional quality, faculty expertise, state-of-the-art technology, faculty availability and empathy, accessible learning support services, and high academic standards (Girard et. al. 2016).

Although the perceptions of students are considered in the consumer-based approach, both it and internal branding emphasize *a priori* endogenous organization traits or dimensions as the key factors in building a brand. The major difference between the two approaches is that administrators' values and perceptions are emphasized in internal branding while student and stakeholder values and perceptions are emphasized in consumer-based branding. Open-source branding takes an even more radical approach to stakeholder participation in the brand-building process.

The Non-Traditional Approach to University Branding: Open-Source Branding
Open-source branding hinges on *user-generated content* (UGC). Krishnamurthy et al. (2008) define user-generated content as information about products, brands, ideas, organizations, and services, usually informed by personal experiences, that exists in consumer-generated postings on social media sites, internet discussion boards, forums, user groups, and blogs, and includes text, images, photos, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media. User-generated content exists because people no longer merely consume marketing content; they produce it themselves by creating, editing, organizing, and sharing information, reshaping the contributions of others, and engaging in peer-to-peer discussion.

In the era of user-generated content, marketing researchers have warned of the possibility of brand image falling out from under organizational control and into the hands of consumers through a process called open-source branding (Pharr 2012). 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 posting personal information, photos, videos, opinions, and knowledge that incorporate products or brands to social media sites. As people include brands in their online behavior, 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).

Researchers (Berry et. al. 2010) extol the virtues of open-source branding especially to organizations that target millennials (those born between 1981 and 1999) because millennials prefer social media to more traditional methods of communication, are prolific creators of content (i.e. UGC) (Bolton et. al. 2013), and prefer to engage with organizations and brands that allow them to express themselves by sharing or creating content. Pharr (2016)

contends that open-source branding is a natural choice for universities, whose primary target market fits squarely into the millennial demographic, and offers a model for transitioning from consumer-based branding to open-source branding for universities. Among the caveats mentioned are that universities wanting to take full advantage of the open-source branding approach must change their institutional communications from broadcast-dominated to conversational through heavy reliance on social media platforms that permit and encourage user-generated content (Pharr 2016).

Using Digital Content Marketing for College Branding
The pronounced change in buyer behavior away from outbound marketing has fostered the growth of another emergent method of brand building that involves a reliance on digital content marketing. The Content Marketing Institute (https://contentmarketinginstitute.com) defines digital content marketing as "a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action." Holliman and Rowley (2014) define digital content marketing as "an inbound marketing technique, effected through web page, social media and value-added content" and go on to explain that digital content marketing requires brands to take a 'publishing' approach to marketing, which involves developing a deep understanding of the audience's information needs. The implications for brand-building of this marketing approach are becoming more widely acknowledged (see Chapman 2017, Panda-Ved 2016, Baltes 2015, Holliman & Rowley 2014, Kaba et al. 2012). Baltes (2015) contends that, when used appropriately and done consistently, content marketing is not overtly intended to support the sales process but rather to "position an [organization] within a space" in an attempt to either create or reinforce the desired brand messaging. Other advocates endorse content marketing as "a useful tool for achieving and sustaining trusted brand status" but warn that it requires a change from 'selling' to 'helping' in an organization's marketing orientation (Chapman 2017, Holliman & Rowley 2014).

Why Content Marketing?
The internet has revolutionized the way consumers search for and process information, including product- and brand-related information. Content marketing is designed to engage consumers who are actively searching for guidance and information before making a complex purchase decision by delivering to them relevant and valuable information. The reliance of digital content marketing on "content" makes the nature of the content central to the branding approach. Forrester digital research company (www.forrester.com) defines branded marketing content as "content that is developed or curated by a brand to provide added consumer value such as education. It is designed to build brand consideration and affinity, not sell a product or service. It is not a paid advertisement, sponsorship, or product placement."

To effectively use content marketing for branding, the marketer must understand that content and advertising are not the same thing. Customers and prospective customers do not go to the internet looking for advertising; they go looking for information (Scott 2015, Murthy 2011). While many organizations say they are interested in using content marketing, industry practitioners contend many of the same organizations simply re-work their company print advertisements or marketing sales collateral to serve as digital marketing content (Scott 2015).

The focus of content marketing is not on pitching or selling an organization's offerings. Rather, as an organization provides relevant and useful content to prospects and customers in order to help them solve their problems or meet their needs, the organization becomes a valuable resource and acknowledged expert in its product or service domain. With the right kind of content and over time, the organization is able to win the trust and admiration of individuals, parlay their interest into a lasting relationship, and build a powerful brand image.

A Model for Branding via Digital Content Marketing
How can a college or university use digital content marketing to build its brand? Following are the essential steps.
      Step 1: Understand your buyer. This is perhaps the most crucial part of the digital content marketing process. Since the crux of content marketing is useful content, it follows that marketers much understand prospective buyers' needs and wants in order to deliver content that is both relevant and useful to them. Content

marketing practitioners recommend building "buyer personas" of each target market. A buyer persona is an in-depth description of a type of buyer identified as having a specific interest in the organization or its offerings or having a problem that the organization's product or service solves (Scott 2015). A buyer persona differs from a target market in that a target market may contain groups of customers each having a different buyer persona.

To get some idea of the various buyer personas that an organization serves, the organization should study its website traffic, target markets, and product category or industry. Extensive research into the ways various individuals gather and use product-related information, the kinds of information they look for and engage with, and their needs or problems are all essential in developing effective buyer personas. For example, a college may study visitors to its website and discover at least five different buyer personas that have some interest in the organization. See Table 1 for a list of five buyer personas for a typical college website.

Table 1. Five Buyer Personas for a College Website:
Prospective Students: Traditional—High school students nearing graduation
Prospective Students: Nontraditional—Aged 25 and up with no prior college credit
Existing Buyers: Current students
Younger Alumni: Graduated in last 15 years
Parents of Traditional College Students

The development of buyer personas is to force the marketer's complete attention onto the buyer rather than on the offering itself. The internal branding method, historically favored by college administrators, focuses on the traits and characteristics of the college rather than on the constituents served by the college. Extensive research may be needed to develop an in-depth profile of each buyer persona and determine that persona's information needs. The marketer should be able to answer the following questions (adapted from Scott 2015) with regard to each identified buyer persona:

- What are the problems or needs from this person's perspective?
- What words and phrases do the buyer personas use when describing or expounding upon their problems or needs?
- What media do the buyer personas rely on for answers to or help with the problems?
- Do they use a search engine for information or help with the problem? What words and phrases do they enter in the search process?
- What things are important in helping to solve the problem or meet the buyer persona's needs?
- What images and multimedia appeal most to the buyer personas?
- What are the buyer personas' goals with regard to solving their problems or meeting their needs?

Since the intent of content marketing is not to pitch or sell a product, the marketer must step out of its role as one who wants to promote a product and view the decision through the eyes of its various buyer personas. As the marketer begins to deeply understand the questions and problems faced by its prospects in making the purchase decision, it can provide valuable and helpful information to them to assist in the decision process.

Step 2—Create Compelling and Engaging Content. The heart of the content-marketing approach to brand-building is the content itself. Industry trade association research (www.demandmetric.com) indicates that today's consumers are becoming increasingly indifferent to paid advertising (e.g. 86% of people skip television advertisements, 44% of people ignore direct mail, and 91% of email users unsubscribe from company emails), making the provision of valuable content that consumers choose to engage with even more important in establishing brand image (Pande-Ved 2016). Content marketing gives consumers virtually complete control over the brand content they want to engage with.

A review of industry guidelines for developing effective marketing content suggests organizations should resist the tendency even to mention their own companies or brands when providing relevant content (Scott 2015). Content should encompass information that answers the consumer's questions or meets the consumer's need for

pertinent information concerning the buying decision. In other words, the content must center on the buyer (i.e. the customer or the prospect) and not the seller (i.e. the company or organization). If prospects suspect that you are trying to sell them something, the marketer's authenticity is compromised and the brand's integrity suffers (although this assumption has not been rigorously empirically tested).

One can find many helpful tips and guidelines for creating or compiling content at industry and trade association websites. Practitioners stress that content should be insightful (Scott 2015), genuine or candid—not hyped or phony (Baltes 2015), helpful or assistive (Chapman 2017), and consistent (Panda-Ved 2016). Consistency implies that buyers and prospects can expect content to be regularly published by the organization and that it will be of a uniform high level of quality and relevance. The development of consistent, high-quality, valuable, and compelling content as the primary means for marketing and branding an organization is the central challenge of effective content marketing.

Baltes (2015) recommends that content be a combination of created (original), curated, and syndicated collateral to allow an organization to better take advantage of all the best information out there. Content may take the form of articles, blogs, infographics, photos, videos, webcasts, podcasts, eBooks, white papers, case studies, newsletters, research reports, and the like. In a study of buyer attitudes toward content marketing, Murthy (2011) found a large majority of prospective buyers (62%) felt audio or video included as part of any written collateral had a more positive impact than written material alone.

Table 2 provides an example of different forms of content that may be effective for a college of business wishing to build its brand around having an excellent marketing program. (See Table 2 below.) If prospects are unsure whether to study business or what to select as a business major, they need information about the business fields and assistance with the major selection process. If a college provides this kind of helpful and compelling information, the college may become known as a trusted resource in all matters concerning the study of business and business careers. Students can be encouraged to major in business (in this case, marketing) without the college ever mentioning its faculty, accreditation, co-curricular services, or curriculum.

The stock of content depicted in the above examples—if updated regularly, expanded with new valuable information, and archived to permit longevity and continual use—may be more effective at building the college's brand as expert, student-centered, and innovative than if the college simply promoted itself as student-centered and innovative.

Table 2. Varying Forms of Content for a College of Business Website
NEWS STORIES:
•Marketing Adds Interns Faster than Any Business Field
•American Marketing Association Offers Students Affordable 'Bridge' Membership to Valuable Marketing Network
•College Marketing Club Provides Student-Organization Website Design Training
BLOG POSTS:
•Why Marketing Majors Need Quantitative Skills
•How to Build a Mentoring Relationship with a Faculty Member
INFORMATIONAL LANDING PAGES:
•Looking for Your First Marketing Job? –Do's and Don'ts
•Is a Marketing Degree Right for Me? –Sizing up Marketing's Career Potential
RESEARCH REPORTS/WHITE PAPERS:
•Profit-Impact of Marketing Strategy: Marketing and Customer Orientation Leads to Financial Success
•Guidebook—How to Use Social Media to Build Your Personal Brand

Step 3—Identify Appropriate Content Delivery Channels. Content should be published to or made available on platforms where prospective buyer personas are present. Murthy (2011) found that consumers considered an organization's own website to be the most effective channel for publishing content, followed by email, search results, and blogs. Industry trade data confirms that organizations are increasingly using social media to leverage their content delivery and that search and social media linkages can effectively generate increased traffic to the content on an organization's website (Pande-Ved 2016). For example, an organization can increase the reach of its content by posting links on its Facebook and Twitter pages to various original content such as research reports or blog posts, by including links in email distributions, and by tagging posts with popular or descriptive hashtags.

Social media are fast becoming the preferred way many organizations prefer to distribute content. The online marketing trade association Demand Metric (www.demandmetric.com) recently published statistics that show 87 percent of B2B marketers distribute content via social media, using an average of five social media platforms in their approach. The association recommends the use of social media for content distribution since research shows that 80 percent of all U.S. internet users interact with social media and blogs and that social media and blogs account for almost one quarter (23%) of the time spent online by the typical internet user. Blogs, in particular, may be an effective platform for publishing or sharing content. Demand Metric found that blogs are responsible for four times (434%) more indexed pages and 97 percent more indexed links in search results than other types of online content. Indexed pages are those that have been found by search engines and deemed to have enough quality for relevant search phrases. This essentially means that indexed pages and links (versus non-indexed) show up in search results. This is one reason why it is so important for content marketers to know the information needs, words, and phrases used by their buyer personas when gathering information related to a purchase decision. It also makes it important for organizations that seek to use a content-rich branding approach to categorize, tag, and archive all digital marketing content.

Impact and Implications
No empirical research has been done to determine the effects of branded content on the perceptions of a college or university's brand image; research findings are available, however, on for-profit businesses. The Content Marketing Association (https://contentmarketinginstitute.com) claims content marketing is being used by many of the world's largest companies, including P&G, Microsoft, Cisco Systems, and John Deere. It further claims that content marketing is being developed and executed by small businesses and entrepreneurs around the world. Its industry trade statistics for 2017 show that 62 percent of surveyed content marketers rate their marketing as somewhat or much more successful than just one year ago. The top two factors attributed to the increased effectiveness are: better content creation (85%) and the development (or adjustment) of a content marketing strategy (72%) Half (50%) of surveyed organizations say better, more targeted content distribution has contributed to increased effectiveness. Another key finding is that top performers deliver content consistently. Eight-five percent of top performers delivered content consistently, compared to 58% of the overall sample and 32% of bottom performers. Finally, over 80 percent (84%) of content marketers say the main objective of using a content-marketing approach is "brand lift" (Murthy 2011). This signals the brand-building impact of delivering consistent, high-quality, relevant content to prospects and buyers.

Given the extent to which today's buyers and intended buyers use the internet to interact with brands and the ever more pronounced tendency to choose the brand content with which they engage, colleges and universities need to warm to models of brand-building that rely upon valuable and engaging brand content. The time when institutions could tightly control and promulgate a desired image via broadcast communication is quickly passing. Experimentation with and research into newer, more consumer-oriented models of brand-building are needed. This paper provides a framework and guidance for how colleges and universities may implement a contextually-contemporary, content-rich branding approach—an approach that coincides with the altered buying behavior of modern consumers in the internet age while leveraging the unique and profound power of social media.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper contrasts traditional approaches of university branding with open-source and content-rich branding. Content-rich branding as it may be applied within universities is explained and illustrated. With its focus on digital marketing content, this paper challenges the more traditional paradigms of university brand-building.

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TRACK: Internet/Social Media Marketing