

ENGAGING BUSINESS STUDENTS TO DEVELOP A PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL UNIVERSITY BRAND

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Abstract

According to Nair (2011), higher education is ripe for strategic transformation and this transformation is affecting all levels of institutions, from the well-known Ivy schools to small Christian, independent liberal arts colleges. As segments compete for distinctiveness, Nair points out it is only those institutions that take the time to consider their brand value as seen from the student and stakeholder perspective that will gain a competitive advantage in the long run. In response to these challenges, the workshop highlights the method by which the business school at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon has sought to interpret the undergraduate experience for a more effective positioning strategy and promotional campaign.

Going beyond quantitative measures, an in-depth, narrative approach is appropriated which aims to uncover what Kolter (2010) describes as students 'high order' values. Moreover, rather than taking the narratives in isolation from the surrounding social environment that informs the stories, the study takes a constructionist, narrative position that sees participants stories as culturally informed (Denzin & Lincoln 2011). Hence, the project goes further and aims to contextualize the narratives, paying close attention to the actions and texts that students and stakeholders commonly subscribe.

Undergraduate and MBA students at George Fox University carried out the study as part of a major market research project. In addition, the professor who supervised the research, enlisted the assistance of an award winning local design firm in Portland, Oregon, who takes a similar approach to interpreting consumers' needs, wants, and aspirations. The course professor, in association with the firm's market research director, designed the research instruments and interview schedules. In order to show multi-perspective detail, the MBA students gathered ethnographic and textual data as well as conducted and filmed narrative interviews. As a final stage, findings were provided to the undergraduate department chair and to the marketing communications department at George Fox University for further analysis and for the use in upcoming promotional materials.

The primary distinctive of this project was the overt use of students to inform and execute the process that led to the promotional campaign. Both an MBA-level marketing research course

and an undergraduate marketing communications course were an integral part of the design, research, and data assimilation and presentation steps. As part of their course study, the MBA students helped construct the survey instrument, executed the narrative interviews and coded the data. Their work was then handed off to an undergraduate marketing communications course, where the students took the themed responses and worked to develop a promotional brochure that best portrayed the “story” that was contained in the narratives. Not only were students able to work on a real-time project that permitted experience with the course content, but the students' perspective and “voice” were an integral asset throughout the project.

Workshop Presentation

The purpose of the workshop will be to exemplify the procedures taken and to make suggestions and recommendations for other universities seeking to adopt a similar approach. Headed up by two Professors from the George Fox University Business School, the workshop will cover the following:

Justine Haigh, Associate Professor of Marketing, will focus on the research methodology. Important elements of the research will be covered including the narrative qualitative approach taken, the creation of interview schedules and fieldwork guidelines, timelines, and other key support documentation created in cooperation with the local Portland design firm.

Ryan Halley, Undergraduate Department Chair, will explain the mechanics of managing the project, including how to facilitate the interactions and discussions between students, external agencies, and internal departments (Media Studies and Marketing Communications). An important focus for detailing this procedure is to ensure the delivery of a message consistent with the purpose, vision, and mission of the university business school.

Overall, the workshop will provide a comprehensive outline for implementation at the attendee's home institution. In response to the transforming nature of higher education, the importance of this approach cannot be over-stressed. This in-depth, qualitative study provides a more intimate portrayal of the student and stakeholder experience. Designed in collaboration with industry experts, the resultant outcome of the research is the creation of promotional messages that speak to deep human needs often not emphasized by other higher education marketing campaigns.

References available upon request