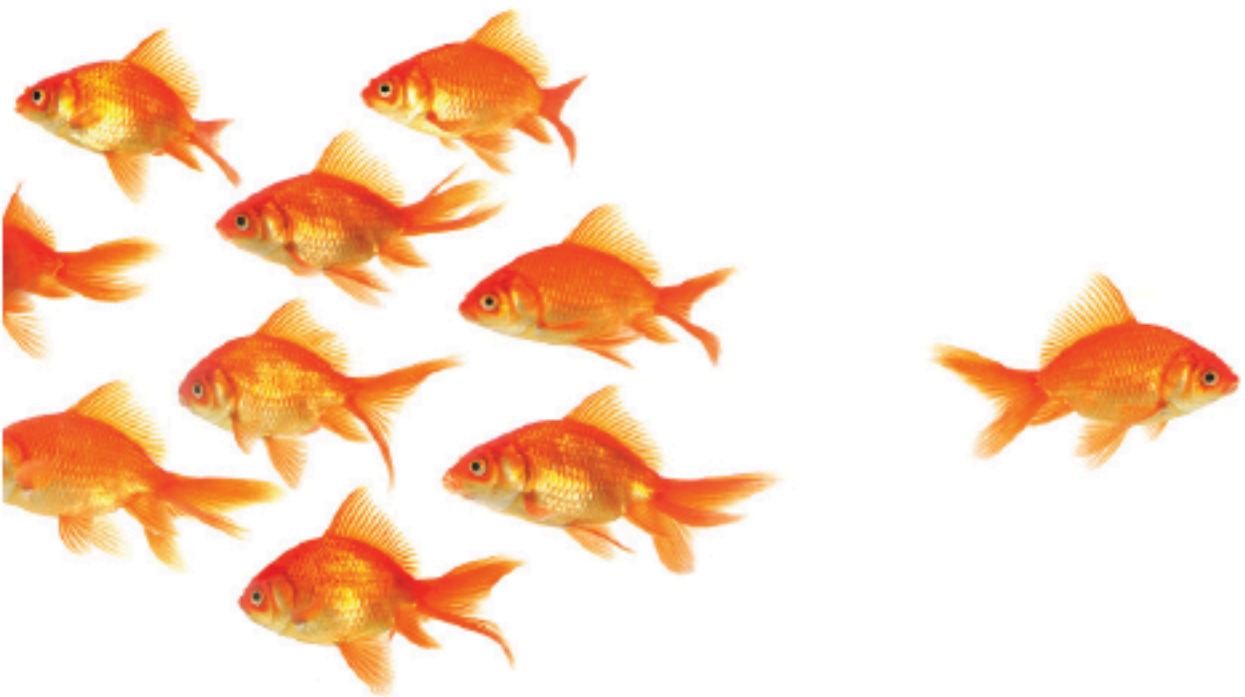


REVISED EDITION

АЯТИОС

BUILD A BETTER NONPROFIT

BRAND



ROBERT FERGUSON

Carleton University has the Right Dream. Now It Must Provide the Evidence

Knowledge Marketing Watch, December 2008.

What's ahead:

- **At a time when there seems to be great parity among universities, you would think more would be communicating the stories of their unique research.**
- **Administrators don't treat publishing as a mission-centric endeavor.**
- **Organizations are rewarded when they are seen to be fulfilling their missions.**
- **Harvard Business School Publishing ensures that, in the marketplace of ideas, Harvard's brand is always defensible.**

Carleton University wants a new image. Although it sees itself as “an extraordinarily fine scholarly community, striving continually for excellence in a vast canvas of intellectual endeavors from particle physics to classical poetics,” insiders have kept this insight largely to themselves. It finally seems to realize that allowing the school to be known only for a handful of programs, while letting its organizational brand remain under-developed, has been a mistake.

So a new strategic plan has assembled some appropriately-strong aspirational statements about repositioning the school. Carleton can now articulate what it wants to be: a local university, a national university “responsive to the needs of our country,” and a global institution. These are laudable, but achieving these goals, and holding each in balance, will be more challenging than the act of dreaming.

Schools pursue various forms of branding to enable them to be seen as well-differentiated, though many expect logos and merchandising to do the heavy lifting of communicating values. Recently, an alumni-led identity committee at Cornell, frustrated that the school seemed to be losing its Ivy League associations, persuaded university administrators to dump a new logo and revert to a simplified ver-

sion of its old traditional symbol. The committee's next step was to persuade school stores to stock vintage-style merchandise emphasizing Cornell's Ivy League status. Why? Because "we didn't have cool hats, we didn't have cool hoodies" and "Nobody was wearing our stuff." Merchandise may allow alumni to wax nostalgic, but it's false to assume a recognizable logo means the public intuitively grasps the school's intellectual achievements.

This committee has missed the point about what created the cherished brand in the first place.

Schools need to respect history's contribution to identity, but riding the coat-tails of tradition risks making the university look like it has passed its best-before date if its stories aren't kept fresh. Building the right brand the right way requires ongoing proof so potential supporters know the brand is up-to-date.

At a time when there seems to be great parity among colleges and universities, you would think more schools would be busy crafting and communicating the stories of their unique research. But a July 2007 report by education think tank Ithaka, entitled *University Publishing in a Digital Age*, reveals most universities don't have a publishing strategy properly integrated with their core activities and missions. University administrators, the report found, are surprisingly uninformed about publishing's connection to their core mission and don't treat publishing as an important, mission-centric endeavor – ironic considering each built his or her own academic careers on publishing. A new vision, claims Ithaka, is needed for an updated system of scholarly communication that will create the intellectual products of the future and extend awareness of the its intellectual ambition.

If Carleton expects its faculty members to be the "designers and custodians of the future" who will extend "the benefits of learning and knowledge to the furthest possible limits," the school must do more than state this mission and communicate "points of pride" through everyday marketing collateral: it has to provide hard evidence that engages and challenges peoples' thinking. Unfortunately, Carleton no longer has the in-house capabilities required to produce the necessary evidence. If it wants to be an intellectual leader, it will have to reestablish a more sophisticated version of the old Carleton University Press.

A good university press isn't exclusively about scholarly publications that enhance Carleton's image among academic circles. It is also about general-interest publishing that helps the school reach-out to a dramatically wider audience of readers, and about reaching out to people where they gather online. Publishing, in its many potential forms, is crucial to keeping the research and teaching missions of top schools appear relevant, dynamic, and, above all, defensible; about showing Carleton to be a trend-setter, not a follower. Scholarly publishing should be central to Carleton's communication plan, but it hasn't made the short list of proposed activities.

Perhaps someone complained about the expense. If so, they should be reminded that publishing's costs are a drop in the bucket compared to the costs of the proposed new building along the Rideau. Or they should consider Wharton business professor George Day's admonition that organizations wanting to reduce "customer" acquisition costs should replace their expense-driven mindsets with an investment mindset. Given that organizations are rewarded when they are seen to be fulfilling their missions, producing a compelling new strategy for scholarly communications is likely to lead to new sources of income and fuller brands.

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Harvard Business School recognized a long time ago that there was a broad audience wanting access to its expertise, but only so many seats it could fill. Publishing became an extension of its educational mission. The HBS label is on more than 7500 products, offering wide public and professional access through magazines, books, case study publishing, videos, interactive web sites, and newsletters, each product reinforcing the school's reputation for high intellectual standards.

These products generate a lot of money (in 2004, publishing generated about \$93 million in revenue for the school) but its publishing ventures are motivated by other factors. HBS wants to be known as key provider in the marketplace of ideas: its mission is to take the most important ideas on the most important issues facing leaders and communicate them. The school has nurtured this identity so successfully, and backs-up its claims to intellectual leadership so effectively, that HBS is forever top of mind as business's thought leader. Publishing ensures the HBS brand is always defensible: high quality, relevant, dynamic. Consequently, Harvard has no problem attracting the best and brightest students and faculty, or deep-pocketed donors.

The importance of original, compelling content cannot be overstated. In their 2001 book *The Attention Economy*, Thomas Davenport and John Beck wrote that "people with something to say, or a unique and creative way of saying it, are your organization's best hope of getting attention." Roger Martin, Dean of U of T's Rotman School of Business has taken this message to heart. Not only has he acknowledged that "for purposes of brand building at institutions of higher learning, proprietary content on topics of public interest is more powerful than advertising," he has recently taken the additional step of establishing a new joint imprint with University of Toronto Press. Although the Rotman School has been developing a global reputation for thought leadership in the years since Martin's tenure began, Martin believes "this new partnership with UTP will allow us to further our reputation for offering the very latest in business thinking."

Evidence of unique knowledge helps people understand the organization has valued assets.

Rotman seems to know intellectual property rights have become more important as other sources of competitive advantage become less important. Evidence of unique knowledge helps people understand the organization has valued assets; is a tool to help schools evolve beyond a local presence and reach targets in a fragmented marketplace, wherever they live; and, ultimately, helps them meet their financial goals. Isn't that what Carleton's strategic plan is all about?

Where is the Canadian University in the Marketplace of Ideas?

Contrabrand, 3 November, 2009

What's ahead:

- It only seems that intellectual leadership happens elsewhere because our scholarly accomplishments aren't effectively articulated.
- Big is not the solution: instead of new layers of bureaucracy, we need to renew the perception of each school as a leader in the marketplace of ideas.
- Our universities have to revitalize their flagging publishing capabilities if they want to make themselves heard and demonstrate each can support the national aspiration for intellectual leadership.
- Without effective communication, our universities can't overcome skepticism and build the trust essential to successful fundraising.

The debate about positioning Canadian universities as global leaders overlooks something basic. The problem is not about the need to build a better product; quality already exists. Nor is the problem a lack of innovation; great research already happens. The problem is we don't tell anyone about our accomplishments. As a result, it only seems that intellectual leadership happens elsewhere.

That's not, however, where discussion is headed: if "people aren't listening" to Canadian universities, as UBC president Stephen Toope claims, the leading imaginative solution seems to be channeling the bulk of scarce financial resources into a "Big 5" monolith and establishing a national education brand.

"Big" is not the solution. We will only prove Canada has a strong university sector if, first, there are a greater number of strong universities whose confident, individual brands collectively support our national aspiration for intellectual leadership and, second, if that reputation flourishes organically. So, instead of spending to remake the system with new layers of bureaucracy, we need to renew the perception of each school as a leader in the marketplace of ideas.

Each one must be encouraged to invest in the *right* kind of marketing. At present they look too narrowly at promotion. If the world isn't listening, perhaps it's because they aren't really saying anything. They can't command global attention because they don't articulate their uniqueness – the result of a longstanding belief that standard advertising and media relations tactics will do all the work that's needed.

Universities typically aim low by trying to please people with new buildings, advertising student-focused program benefits, or rekindling the warm fuzzy glow of nostalgia for alumni – not the tactics that embed a positive, durable perception of themselves as thought leaders.

How do you properly invest a university with meaning? Enhancing communication and outreach capabilities is the “little” solution that goes missing. People value those universities able to demonstrate intellectual leadership, challenge thinking, and inspire hope for a better future, but our organizations characteristically overlook this imperative.

The Educational Policy Institute's Alex Usher acknowledges “everybody wants to be like Harvard.” So why not model Harvard's success? It's no secret.

Harvard is great because it does “little” things well to establish quality perceptions. Publishing, in all its various forms – developing and selling mission-connected content – is the primary tool leveraged to position the university as the leader in the marketplace of ideas. Harvard Business School understands particularly well that offering multiple points of contact to leading ideas produces sustainable and profitable revenue streams; attracts friends and philanthropy; attracts the best and brightest students and faculty.

When Harvard speaks, people listen – and donate. That's the *real* benefit Canadian schools covet. “It comes down to money,” acknowledges University of Ottawa president Alan Rock, who claims the biggest challenge facing the sector is “to achieve levels of funding that will enable us to succeed in our mission.”

But without effective communication, our universities can't overcome skepticism and build the trust essential to successful fundraising. By pursuing the wrong marketing tactics, Canadian universities simply aren't equipped to compete for mind-share against global competitors for whom the cycle of research, accomplishment, and communication is a deeply engrained practice. Our universities have to follow Harvard's lead and revitalize their flagging publishing capabilities if they want to make themselves heard.

If Harvard's success proves a university's intellectual brand goes hand-in-hand with the transformation of scholarly communication, further evidence comes from educational think tank Ithaka. It's 2007 report, “*University Publishing in a Digital Age*,” acknowledged publishing is crucial to keeping the research and teaching mission of a university appear vibrant and relevant. Nevertheless, Ithaka accuses administrators

of remaining significantly detached from publishing's deep connection to their university's core mission, and resistant to attempts to launch a new scholarly communication vision that would better-reflect their school's unique intellectual ambitions.

Solving Canada's educational leadership issue requires neither big nor bureaucratic solutions. To reposition the university so it is understood to be the place to engage with leading ideas, to sustain a tradition of excellence, to ensure donors, foundations, and government understand their public value, our universities must be take greater responsibility for developing and promoting meaningful content. Proprietary content is more powerful than advertising, so our schools need to adopt the capabilities of a media company: a do-it-yourself communications ethos would firmly position them in the marketplace of ideas and ensure audiences know their missions are already being successfully accomplished.



EPILOGUE

Branding Isn't an Enigma, Organizations Are

What's ahead:

- **When people need to be part of a serious conversation, the museum or university should be positioned as the place to interact with leading ideas.**
- **Learning organizations must refine their approach to outreach: survival depends on securing new audiences, holding their attention and continuing to earn their trust.**
- **A revitalized publishing process should be a true partner in helping achieve a learning organization's holistic goals, not an add-on.**

What have I learned in ten years of consulting and writing about branding? That organizations don't really take differentiation seriously. They certainly want people to see them as leaders, and want the benefits that come with a recognizable brand – but without hassle, without being patient, without looking beyond conventional tactics. Then, when successful branding is elusive, they have the temerity to wonder why their expectations haven't been achieved.

This peculiar habit makes organizations more of an enigma than the process itself. Until organizations learn how to command and maintain attention they can't build defensible, meaningful, and enduring public brands.

There is, of course, a great societal need for learning organizations – universities and museums, for example – to succeed at this task. Traditional media has largely given-in to assumptions that audiences don't want their thinking challenged – with the attendant result, claims Susan Jacoby in *The Age of American Unreason*, that speech has been debased “in virtually everything broadcast and podcast.” Society needs a new generation of public intellectuals willing to provide meaningful, high-quality, important ideas.

Universities and museums provide the substantive thinking to raise the bar, so this could be their crucial opportunity to restate their importance, and elevate the basic trust and goodwill that already exists. When people need to be part of a serious

conversation, the museum or university should be actively positioning itself as the place to interact with leading ideas. After all, “it is the academic’s job in a free society to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn’t want to ask,” writes Louis Menand in *The Marketplace of Ideas*, “investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate.”

The bigger question is, perhaps, are these institutions willing to lead and moderate public discussion? Museums and universities both seem to take their trusted status (some might even say “sacred”) for granted, so many don’t believe in the need to reach out. Besides, there are often tensions within the institutions inhibiting outreach: university faculty – similarly, museum curators – don’t universally feel they need or want a larger public (neither seem to grasp who butters their bread); marketing, they say, is “not my job.”

Yet there is, perhaps, an even greater institutional need for universities and museums to succeed at effective branding: survival. Both are fundraising organizations that must be able to reach beyond their walls to convince donors the organization has a vision indicating how it will become sustainable. Partly as a result of faculty-curatorial resistance, “too few organizations,” says Michael Kaiser in *The Art of the Turn-around*, “spend the time or effort in marketing the entire institutional image required to get people excited about supporting” the organization. Consequently, branding – and, by extension, fundraising – get shunted to the side; the prevailing assumption, Kaiser maintains, is that “charming and professional fundraisers” rather than a dynamic marketing program will provide sufficient returns for the institution.

This is, however, a crucial time for branding at public institutions faced with the contradiction of crushing financial burdens yet tremendous pressure to demonstrate accountability, accessibility, and value. The knee-jerk reaction to money troubles – making cutbacks to marketing – only deprives organizations of the opportunity to know themselves better and to use these insights to boldly reposition themselves. Failing to experiment and innovate is, says Ken Auletta in *Googled*, like “committing suicide by neglect” if others are innovating around you. Instead of believing audiences “should already know us,” or that their existing story is sufficiently interesting, organizations need to be more aggressive about drawing people to new, appropriately-packaged content – especially as the marketplace of ideas proliferates and focusing becomes more of a challenge.

An organization’s survival depends on securing new audiences, holding their attention, and continuing to earn their trust – as opposed to continuing to take it for granted. Organizations successfully building for the future are using substantive communication and media multi-tasking to tie-into the values of an emerging generation. This is a brand-conscious generation favouring organizations positioned as trusted, credible leaders, and offering access to leading ideas, but this is not a generation con-

tent to sit quietly and listen to lectures. Instead, Don Tapscott tells us in *Grown-Up Digital*, it seeks ongoing connections, community, and interaction; participation, even responsibility.

To enhance reputation, to build and maintain a meaningful brand, learning organizations must refine their approach to outreach: the traditional focus on programming contributes only to the building of ramparts, making it difficult for outsiders to penetrate and understand what's going on inside. A strong identity does require programming, but also an equally strong ability to project: according to British author Richard Susskind, who told the *Globe and Mail*, "Neither marketing nor thought leadership, which increase spontaneous awareness of a firm's capabilities, can or should be conducted covertly."

As long as university administrators continue believing publishing's only value is as a "general service function for higher education," they will, claims Ithaka's study *University Publishing in a Digital Age*, continue to believe "they have more pressing concerns." They don't: the tangible return on a new style of university publishing that promotes the intellectual ambition of the institution has been overlooked. Similarly, as long as museum branding remains mired in blockbuster exhibitions, retail, dining, and architecture they will remain local – even neighbourhood – ventures.

The new leading learning organizations will be those able to widely project their expertise through engaging and informative Web sites featuring blogs, podcasts, ebooks, online magazines, even documentary films – and, yes, traditional books and magazines. A revitalized publishing process that says, in effect, "this is what we do, why we're good, why we're different" will be an essential activity recognized for directly advancing crucial institutional needs: brand awareness, evidence of mission achievement, operational choices, faculty recruitment and retention, marketing and fundraising – a true partner in helping achieve a learning organization's holistic goals, not an add-on.

In other words, a communicating brand enables programming and projecting to work in tandem. It removes the enigma of branding – which is, I believe, what I set out to write about ten years ago. Every story needs an ending: thanks for reading.