

# Global branding 101

by Robert Ferguson

**Universities are preparing for the post-pandemic world by refreshing their brands. The multiple impacts of COVID, technology, and globalization have altered how they see themselves, and how others see them. Some are worried about keeping the doors open; others about getting students**



**back in seats; everyone about how to get more donors excited about supporting their work. They'll try various ways to renew their stories for a new age of listeners, but will that work? Their high aspirations – especially if that includes becoming a global brand – won't be achievable just because it says so in their strategic plan, or because they spend lavishly on advertising. Recognizing the deep connection between scholarly publishing and the university's core mission and brand should be the primary lesson of global branding 101.**

## **Knowing what to be bold about**

The increasingly porous borders for intellectual goods has made Patrick Dean, principal of Kingston Ontario's Queen's University, determined to position his school as "an internationally recognized university of choice," and to build a name that becomes synonymous with global impact (disclosure: I'm an alumnus). Some argue it's easier for a university situated in large metropolitan settings to achieve internationalization, which means those that aren't – like Queen's – have to figure out how to transcend the limitation of location.

Location isn't everything in the global brand-name sweepstakes. Vancouver is an important metropolitan city on the Pacific Rim yet, in 2009, University of British Columbia president Stephen Toope was concerned the world wasn't listening – neither to UBC nor Canadian universities in general. His imaginative solution proposed consolidating Canada's five largest universities into a "Big Five" that would instantly create a global name brand. At the time we argued that if the world wasn't listening – if it seemed intellectual leadership happened elsewhere – maybe the problem wasn't size: perhaps Canadian universities weren't really saying anything.

## **Advertising is expensive...does it work?**

Universities want people to see them as leaders, and crave the benefits of a recognizable brand, but they rarely look beyond standard tactics. They rely on their longstanding belief that conventional advertising and traditional fundraising activities, will do all the work necessary to tell their story and raise adequate funds.

It turns out John Wanamaker's old saw from the early 20th century – "*Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half*" – is optimistic. According to a new study from Northwestern's Kellogg School that focused on 288 well-established consumer packaged goods, companies spent \$66 billion in 2019 running ads on traditional TV networks but the return on investment was dismal: "It's this big investment with questionable returns," according to Kellogg marketing professor Anna Tuchman. No firm in the study profited from the advertising after accounting for the expense



of buying the ads, so “It looks like the vast majority of firms are over-advertising or spending too much on advertising” and they should consider cutting TV commercial budgets in favour of other marketing strategies.

## **For purposes of brand building at institutions of higher learning, proprietary content on topics of public interest is more powerful than advertising.**

*Roger Martin, former dean of University of Toronto's  
Rotman School of Business*

Effective branding is an elusive concept for Canadian universities. Our universities simply aren't equipped to compete for mindshare against global competitors for whom the cycle of research, accomplishment, and communication is a deeply engrained practice because they don't articulate their uniqueness or try embedding perceptions of themselves as thought leaders – and without this they can't position themselves as leaders in the marketplace of ideas. A marketing campaign suggesting your brand is synonymous with global impact isn't a replacement for developing substantive content that proves your organization is the place to interact with leading ideas.

### **Where is scholarly publishing in the communication plan?**

Go way back to July 2007, when the education-focused think tank Ithaka issued an excellent (but under-appreciated and now-forgotten) report called *University Publishing in a Digital Age*. Publishing, the report noted, is crucial to keeping the research and teaching mission of a university appear vibrant and relevant, yet most universities lacked a publishing strategy properly integrated with their core activities and missions. The report found university administrators to be surprisingly uninformed about publishing's connection to their core mission, and that they didn't treat publishing as an important, mission-centric endeavor – ironic given that academia admonishes young scholars to “Publish or Perish,” and rewards them with career advancement for doing so.

Ithaka claimed a new vision was needed for an updated system of scholarly communication that would create the intellectual products of the future and extend awareness of its intellectual ambition – as the place to interact with leading ideas when people need to be part of a serious conversation. It still is.

Conventional branding tactics – whether new or old approaches – won't build the global brand Canadian universities want. The bottom line is that without effective and substantive communication, our universities can't build the trust necessary for successful fundraising. And when they trust an organization, people want to associate with, and support the organizations that bring them meaningful leading ideas. Scholarly publishing reveals the excellence underpinning a school, and ensures donors, foundations, and governments understand its public value. It isn't cheap, but neither are the old tactics that just don't work as people assume.

### **The Gold Standard**

Everybody envies Harvard Business School, so why not emulate its success through Harvard Business Publishing? 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. So it made publishing an extension of its educational mission and, because of that, it is not just a leader, it

is the leader. That means when Harvard speaks, people listen – and donate. It also attracts the best and brightest students and faculty.



Universities, like fundraising organizations in the arts and culture sector, must be able to reach beyond their walls to convince donors about the organization's vision, but too few of them, wrote Michael Kaiser in *The Art of the Turnaround*, "spend the time or effort in marketing the entire institutional image required to get people excited about supporting the organization." The prevailing assumption, maintains Kaiser, is that "charming and professional fundraisers" will provide sufficient returns for the institution.

Similarly, AOL founder and philanthropist Steve Case told the New York Times in 2006 that traditional fundraising had become hidebound and ineffective; he applauded the National Geographic Society's success at sustaining itself through publishing because it meant the Society "doesn't have to focus on collecting money or holding black-tie balls to raise money because its sales are sustaining its mission of educating the world about the world."

Harvard Business School has leveraged publishing to ensure people understand its whole brand. It has nurtured this identity so successfully, and built trust in its claims to intellectual leadership so effectively, that HBS is forever top of mind as business's thought leader. Publishing means the brand is always defensible.

### **The right approach to build a globally recognized brand**

To enable the internationalization Queen's wants – to be a top tier institution with a voice the world listens to – it has to be deliberate and more aggressive about reaching out with innovative and proprietary content, especially as the marketplace for ideas proliferates. In the late nineteenth century, Queen's principal George Grant created the journal *Queen's Quarterly* to raise the profile of Queen's knowledge around Canada: he knew leading with ideas would build the brand he wanted for his school. And today? How is *Queen's Quarterly* or the *Alumni Review* being leveraged? Are they conduits to the substantive ideas, thinking and research discoveries taking place on campus, and being published through its university press?

And why does Queen's share its publishing imprint, McGill-Queen's University Press, with one of its largest competitors? Oxford and Cambridge don't share their press. Maybe it saves a bit of money, but it defies good branding. It's worth remembering Wharton business professor George Day's 2007 book, *The Market Driven Organization: Understanding, Attracting, and Keeping Valuable Customers*, in which he implored organizations to replace their expense-driven mindsets with an investment mindset. Scholarly publishing is an investment that builds the brand.

The capability to communicate proprietary ideas is the requirement of being a global leader. Building a new, globally-impactful, Queen's brand won't be possible until Queen's sees the essence of its brand is as a place of ideas and develops a renewed focus on telling its stories. Turning its organization into the command post for a vital public conversation will be differentiating and transformative, and will lay the foundations for new relationships in Canada and around the world. Scholarly publishing is the catalyst.