

What's in a name?

by Jean-Pierre Veilleux

There are conventional (and even commonplace) reasons for organizations to consider rebranding: corporate mergers requiring value propositions to be recalibrated and made more relevant; changing markets and shifting consumer demands and expectations necessitating a measured



response; a brand image that no longer reflects contemporary attitudes or that fail to resonate with fickle audiences.

Rebrands requiring a name change, however, are less common, but may be deemed necessary when reputations are irreparably damaged by mistakes, misdeeds or shifting public attitudes. Such was the case with the Canadian subsidiary of Purdue Pharmaceuticals whose name needed to change to prevent further damage to its own brand.

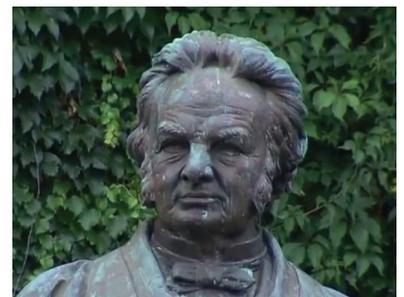
There is however an “new-ish” phenomenon at the forefront of a rebranding trend; historical revisionism (or presentism) is a concept that is relatively new, and trickier to navigate. It is a reflection of a new societal attitude that pushes for greater accountability, even if the offences it seeks to atone for took place in a somewhat distant past and in societal contexts where they may have been the norm or even conventional thinking, at the time.

So, what should an organization do about a name that connects it to a troubled past?

Who RU?

In 1948, Ontario created the first postsecondary institute to combine technical education with academic theory. At the time it seemed benign to name it after nineteenth-century Canada's leading thinker in public education: Egerton Ryerson – the province's first Superintendent of Education – had established Ontario's first teacher training college in 1851, on the very same site as the fledgling Institute. But decades later, Ryerson advocated assimilating indigenous children in separate, English-only, denominational boarding schools. The government adopted his opinions making them the framework for the tragic residential school system.

The late-May discovery of an unmarked grave containing the remains of 215 children at a former residential school site in Kamloops, B.C. ignited debate about the appropriateness of having the now-university bear Ryerson's name.



What is the best approach to move forward? Can the name Ryerson be rehabilitated? Should it be repurposed and given new associations? Or is the name just a wrecking machine that needs to change?

Those questions were answered this week when the Board of Directors of Ryerson University decided to heed a recommendation from its own task force to rename the school, amid mounting public pressure and students and indigenous faculty members protests and renewed calls to change the university's name. "For as long as the University is named after Egerton Ryerson, our narrative will be centred on his legacy," wrote the authors of the Standing Strong (Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh Win) Task Force report.

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We are not here taking a position on the Task Force's recommendation or the School's decision, but simply seeking to inject a measure of perspective, if that's even possible in these polarized public opinion times we live in.

RU thinking this through?

Should it matter that Egerton Ryerson's opinions were rooted in the conventional thinking of the day – or should he be given a pass because of it? Should Ryerson avoid the knee-jerk reaction? We need to strip emotions out of this decision. The point about any name is "do no harm." Maybe it is time to change it: the times have changed, to be sure. We now think differently about Ryerson's residential schools concept: it was wrong, the outcomes for many were horrific, and it is a legacy that haunts the Canadian identity.

If the name is poison, it's time to change the name. It is tempting for institutions to try weathering the storm, but activist stakeholders aren't inclined to give them a pass. So while the issue is unlikely to vanish, it's too late to get ahead in front of the reconciliation movement by finding other compromises.

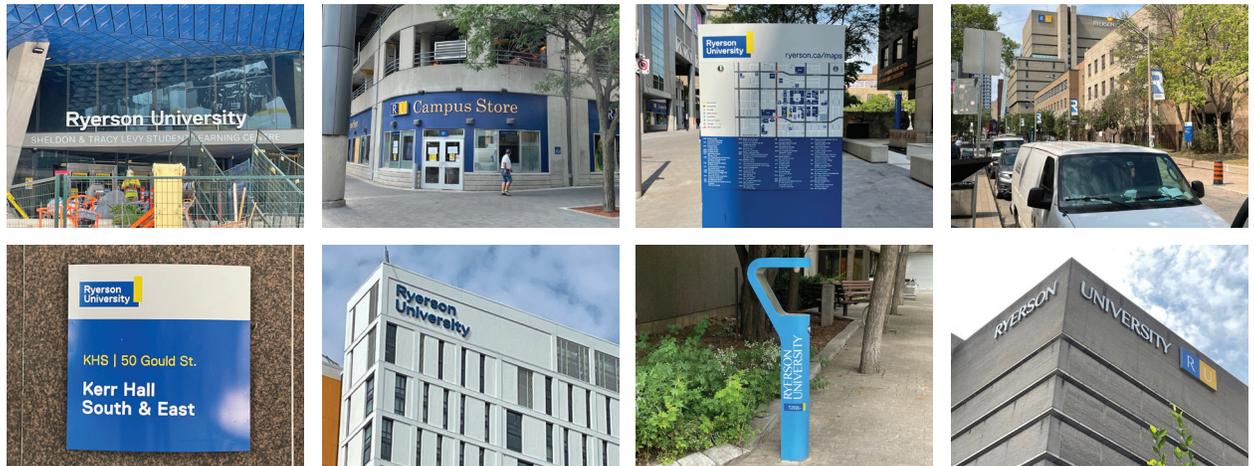
Nevertheless, adopting a new name for an established institution isn't a simple task – not in these times. Most schools bear the name of someone famous, or a wealthy donor who has helped the school financially. But that approach is still fraught: no one is perfectly innocent.

Your "name" represents what you stand for; how people see you. It is the so-called "north star" providing guidance to your strategy. What's in a name? The values you hold. Find a name that reflects the identity and purpose of the school.

Drug companies, and their seemingly weird approach to product naming, will tell you there is nothing in a name until you invest it with some meaning. Is this a chance to think about its purpose? Is that the key to safe naming in this age? It has to be changed to something that is more reflective of the purpose.

RU prepared for the change ahead?

Having gone through a few sizeable corporate rebranding exercises, we are keenly aware of what's about to hit Ryerson University from an implementation point-of-view. The magnitude of the exercise itself is mind-boggling and will leave the institution in a state of shock.



Moving beyond the actual process that will lead to a new name, are countless considerations that will weigh heavily on the school's resources. We recently took an informal tour of the downtown campus to try to ascertain the scope of the task ahead, based solely on branded assets visible from the street and concluded that undertaking the creation, management and deployment of building signage alone, notwithstanding the countless other branded assets, including everything from web-based, printed and innumerable digital materials, and everything in between, will be a gargantuan and costly task indeed. We believe the institution should start planning its strategy presently, in order to lessen the brunt of the impact on its resources down the road.

And while the institution should not avoid references to its former name, it will indeed need to recast its story for a new age. It should in fact seize this rebranding as an opportunity to cast itself as a new and future-forward institution, but one with credentials resting on a solid historical foundation.

It is also good to remember that many other institutions and public entities are currently undertaking similar reviews of their own brand, and the trend that we are currently seeing and that is driven by our more enlightened attitudes as a society, is only likely to accelerate. RU ready for it?

Retool Lab is a collaborative focused on helping cultural, entertainment and public institutions regroup, reshape, and retool their strategy to recover from the economic impact of the current crisis, and to use these insights as a springboard to thrive far into the future. You can contact us at info@retoollab.com or at www.retoollab.com