

“The Brand New U”

A Report from the Lawlor Review Conference

by Stephen B. Friedheim

It is a fact that an organization or a product that has a recognizable “brand” name has a better chance of success than one that is unfamiliar. The more successful the company or product becomes, the more valuable the brand name is. While it has been an important part of a business enterprise for years, the concept is now beginning to be reviewed—and adopted—by higher education institutions. At least two companies are actively engaged in promoting their services to institutions interested in the branding concepts.

One such company is Stamats Communications, headquartered in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which boasts a client list of 132 large and small, public and private colleges and universities ranging from Arizona State University to

Pepperdine University with one private career school: Central Pennsylvania College. The other is the Lawlor Group in Minneapolis, whose Web site carries a “partial list” of 52 clients ranging from St. John’s University to Vanderbilt

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University. Both organizations are marketing their services with an emphasis on “branding,” however, the real modus operandi to offering these sessions appears to center on a “door opener” to promote their marketing and advertising services to higher



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education. While these are central to best practices in using a brand, marketing and advertising are only a small part of brand value. Nonetheless, there are important things to be learned from their exploration and presentation of the branding topic.

Recently, I joined with a group of representatives from large and small, public and private, traditional higher education institutions to attend a one-day workshop in San Antonio on the topic: The Brand New U. Those

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attending the session carried job titles that primarily related to admissions and marketing.

During the day-long session two enlightened, corporate brand managers and one research authority on consumer attitudes, values, and lifestyles

presented a detailed overview of challenges facing higher education in attracting and retaining the desired student population using the concepts of branding as the road to admissions.

Building on the experiences of well-known commercial enterprises such as Coke, Disney, 3M, American Express, McGraw-Hill, Duracell, Samsung, Red Lobster, Infiniti, and Radio Shack, the group was led through the gymnastics of branding as practiced on a daily basis through constant attention to detail. It was clear from the questions asked by the educational marketers and admission folk that branding could be a welcomed concept, but getting support and involvement from everyone on campus was another thing; probably a *mission impossible*.

Frank Wrenn, manager of the Yankelovich MONITOR Client Service out of Atlanta, described the changing complexion of the marketplace. In their most recent annual survey, they noted that the Hispanic population was up 58 percent since 1990 and likely to continue to increase.

Teens were reflecting some remarkable changes from previous studies. For example, in the 9 to 17 year old group, 76 percent showed a growing confidence in themselves—they trust themselves to make good decisions. Sixty percent said that they were smarter than others of their same age. This change in attitude demonstrated an improving confidence that moved from “I can” to “I know” to “I expect.” They expect to be recognized as being smart to the degree that building “smart” into an approach to this market was probably “smart,” as Mr. Wrenn noted.

This smart quality translates into the need to market to this group with caution. They are media savvy and they want authenticity. “Tell it like it is!” They can handle it.

There is an *affluent attitude* that premeditates this group. Their goals are being rich in their lifetime (56 percent), being “very rich” (26 percent), and being “very happy” 74 percent. This is not a *dream* for them, as it was for their parents.

This is an *expectation*. They expect to be happy, and that is their true goal.

A high percentage—82 percent—of these young people said that it was important to them to feel that they are *in charge* of every aspect of their lives, which is up 18 percent since 1991. Success for them is defined as being in control.

The general affluence of the country has resulted in people reporting that it is less easy to tell how successful one is by the way they dress and the

cars they drive. What once was rare is now common: every car has a phone, everyone has a cell phone—or two—as well as a pager, overnight mail is a common occurrence, and so is valet parking.

Even our language has taken on a more affluent tone:

Then	Now
Used Cars	Pre-owned Vehicles
Spaghetti	Pasta ¹
Sherbet	Sorbet ¹

Teens reported that there was more open discussion with their parents than shown in earlier surveys. The indications are that this open dialogue experience works both ways: teens are more comfortable with their parents, and parents are likewise more open with their children. The Internet drives part of this phenomenon in that the teenagers are more comfortable in the world of electronics than their parents, so the teenagers are able to be the source of information and research more often than the other way round. This gives ground for communication and discussion about a whole variety of topics. Seventy-two percent of the teens reported that it was easy to do research on the Internet.

These teens are spending so much time with their personal computers—since most teens have one—that their exposure to television, radio, newspapers and general reading is on the decline. Life is moving at warp speed for young people; they have little patience when things don't work. They are not going to hang around waiting for it to be fixed. This idiosyncrasy translates into frustration when Web sites don't function as expected. Institutions that promote themselves on the Web must realize that when prospective students find their way to

the site, it had better “work” or they are “outta here” in short order.

Dean Adams, director, Corporate Brand Management² for 3M, headquartered in Minnesota, shared his experiences in working to bring the company's numerous products into alignment with the 3M brand. His view, which was shared by each speaker, was that a brand does not belong to the company, or in the case of his audience, an institution. *The customer owns the brand.* For 3M, a

privately held company that carefully guards its financial standing, a calculation of the value of their brand was something they refused to do in an attempt to guard its true value. When 3M refused to set a value on the company, *Forbes* magazine calculated the figure for an article they were publishing.

Forbes set Scotch Brand's value at \$2.4 billion and the Post-It Brand at \$1.1 billion, making them well worth the effort to protect and enhance them.

“Brand promise” is what the consumer learns to understand and expect. The promise is built on a familiarity with the product or service. But it is more simply “knowing something” about it; it extends to an expectation. In describing the development and evolution of a brand, Adams says that over time a brand diminishes in value if it is not subjected to innovation and reinvention. This is because the more popular the brand becomes, the more likely it is to be copied. The value of the brand declines when it no longer has the element of

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exclusivity—when every other provider includes the same attributes—as when anti-lock brakes become a standard, or when fuel-injection engines are on every model of every make. Or, in higher education, when traditional institutions copy the unique features of the career college sector, innovation and reinvention will become essential to reinforce the brand promise in the minds of the customer.

The development of customer loyalty is a never-ending process in which the customer is central to a circular series of activities beginning with a description of the *Market and Customer Segmentation*: determine the consumer of the product or service; who will buy it. This element drives the others. Step two is to determine the *Brand Promise Definition*. This is a time-consuming element, created with input and discussion from a variety of viewpoints, including participation

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from the customer in describing their brand expectations. Once established and agreed upon, the process moves to *Customer Relationship Management* in

which each contact with the customer or prospective customer reinforces the agreed upon promise.

Having put the relationship element in motion, the organization must begin to establish a measurement system phase to quantify the customer satisfaction and loyalty. With a measurement system in place, the organization is ready to reexamine the *Market and Customer Segmentation*. Are there new “products or services” to enhance the brand? Are there new sets of customers to whom the product or service should be promoted? Does the brand promise still

reflect the company’s position in the marketplace?

Adams told the higher education representatives that brand development for a product required a series of deliberate steps, which he described as:

- a. Define Brand Promise
- b. Deliver on the Promise
- c. Build Familiarity of the Brand
- d. Create a Business Plan
- e. Make the Offering Global
- f. Stay Committed to the Foundations of the Brand
- g. Management and Operational Policies of the Brand
- h. Measurement System

According to him, if the brand promise *can be measured, it can be managed*. He offered three questions to be posed to the consumer or customer:

- How satisfied are you now that you own the product or used the service?
- Would you repurchase the product or service knowing what you know now?
- Would you recommend that someone else buy the product or service?

He pointed out that these questions could work as well for colleges, as they do for 3M. He translated them into higher education use as:

- How satisfied are you with your decision to enroll at this institution?
- Knowing what you know now, would your decision be the same?
- Would you recommend this institution to someone else?

Using a 1 to 5-point scale on these three questions would indicate how effectively the institution was in delivering on its promise. The range of the five reaction choices could be:

1. Definitely Would
 2. Probably Would
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- 3. Might
- 4. Might Not
- 5. Definitely Would Not

At 3M they use a Brand Committee for each product or product group that is charged with the development of the Brand Policy. Out of the Brand Policy come *guidelines and checklists* that are integrated into the company's business policy. This process is designed to keep all elements of the organization in alignment with the Brand Policy. The Brand Policy Committees have the last word in how the product is to be seen and marketed. Alignment, he says, is the key to delivering on the brand promise. In higher education this observation ties into the need to establish a system to keep all employees, all departments "in the loop," to ensure that the brand is protected and enhanced. If the prospect or student gets a sense of conflict between the faculty and the admissions department as it relates to academic success of the students

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being enrolled, the brand has been tarnished. All the work to create and communicate the brand is for naught. A lack of alignment can be expensive.

It is essential to keep the customer in mind, which is the end user of the product or service. In the case of 3M for

example, they produce a product that makes it easier to clean carpets, and sell it only to carpet manufacturers. The carpet manufacturers in turn tout the inclusion of this unique 3M product in their carpet to differentiate their carpet for the other guys.

Who is the customer? What are their needs and wants? How is the brand different than the competition's brand?

How will the service be delivered? And finally, how will success be measured?

Buzz Leer, partner, Retail Identity Design, Lippincott & Margulies in San Francisco, was the wrap-up speaker on "Bringing Your Brand to Life."

He thinks that everyone must recognize that this is the age of "Oh-my-god." Moving, changing, and accelerating at warp speed, every organization is challenged to gain attention and acceptance by creating a *cause* rather than a *business*.

Businesses become successful by creating an understanding of the product or service they offer, as described in simple terms. For example, say "Maytag" and the word "dependability" comes to mind; or Nike, which is attached to "athletic performance"; or 3M, which is known as an "innovator."

Like the other speakers, Leer emphasized the fact that real branding is an "all hands" affair, a 24/7 event, and a personal commitment filled with integrity, consistency, and freshness. It doesn't come easily or inexpensively. He believes that brand image can be achieved by managing the *communications* to and the *experience* of the customer. The Disney brand is

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Retail Identity Design
Lippincott & Margulies

one of the best known because of the fact that all employees—known as “cast members”—understand and reflect the elements of the brand. So dedicated to this proposition are the

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“Disney dictators,” they might be described as the “Brand Nazis.”

Leer’s brand development advice is to stick with the three “Ds”: define, differentiate, and deliver. In order for a brand to be recognized, it

must be creditable, relevant, unique, and durable. When done properly, the foundations of branding are:

- communicate the business focus,
- facilitate the buying decision, and
- enhance the perceived values of the product or service.

He built on the thoughts of the other two speakers by saying that he believed there are six key questions that must be asked in the brand development process:

Audience:

- Who are our targets?
- What do they know about us?

Objectives:

- What do we want them to know?

Communications:

- How are we communicating to them?
- How should we be communicating to them?
- How should we be managing this?

To accomplish this objective, his formula requires a careful review of the customer’s physical and emotional experience with the product or service. In the case of a college, the review begins when a prospect receives some

promotional printed material or sees a commercial on TV and moves through a series of steps that include a campus visit, the registration process, etc.

Because his company specializes in the design of retail operations, such as Red Lobster and Radio Shack, he thinks in terms of customer communication and brand understanding.

In analyzing the company’s presentation to its customers, Leer sets up a continuum that requires the reviewer to fill in the key elements with description of location and desired activity. For a college review, he suggests that the reviewer examine each step that a prospective student might travel when arriving on the campus. For example, one **Touch Point** would be the *Registration Area*. Where does the *Registration Area* appear in the sequence of events (*#1 Activity*)? What are the tasks to be accomplished (*Elements*)? Finally, what experiences should the student have in the time that he/she spends in registration area (*moves quickly and easily*)?

Touch Points	Time/Space
<i>Registration Area</i>	<i>#1 Activity</i>
Elements	Experience/Objectives
<i>Paperwork</i>	<i>Moves quickly; easily</i>

When each **Touch Point** is analyzed from the customer’s perspective, the communication of the brand—or the confusion it offers—can be ascertained and changed where appropriate. Institutions that leave students standing in long lines outside the registration area are sending a negative message to their students on the very first day. Or, faculty members who tell their classes that “I don’t know why they make you buy *that* book; I will only use one or two chapters in it,” are also contributing to a negative attitude.

In thinking about a customer's experience with Red Lobster, he said that it begins with signage on the street, impressions of the parking lot, condition of the greenery by the building, appearance of the facility, attractiveness of the facility, welcoming gestures by the manager/servers, etc. For each of these *touch points*, there are considerations regarding how the elements result in experiences and objectives for the customer. The greater the attention to detail an organization takes in its examination of these *touch points*, the greater the likelihood that the desired brand image or promise will be reflected, understood, and appreciated. Conversely, it is easy to see how the brand image or promise can be destroyed if all of the *touch point* elements aren't in alignment.

Leer says that branding isn't a one-time activity; the brand cycle is to invent, to reinvent, and to repeat. He advocates the value of branding with a quote of Michelangelo:

The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss, but that our aim is too low and we reach it.

Between activities and presentations of the Lawlor Group and Stamats Communication, among others, it appears that an interest in effective branding in higher education will grow. As the concept grows, is embraced, and impacts enrollment and retention in a positive way, the marketplace for higher education services will become even more competitive than it is today. Perhaps the day of higher education branding is closer than we think.

¹ As in "trade school" and "career college."

² Note the obvious emphasis that 3M places on protecting its brand as indicated by the job title of Mr. Adams.