

Friedheim's Fingerprints: A Lifetime of Branding

by Stephen B. Friedheim, Brand Meister

Reinvention of self is a challenge at any age. Coming later in life, as it does in mine, is an interesting experiment that offers one an opportunity to select activities that are enjoyable, as well as beneficial. From all of my past occupational pursuits, my favorite has resulted from the opportunity to be a part of change, supported and enhanced through the application of "branding." Such experiences have been very rewarding and well-worth sharing.

My life for the past twenty-six years has centered on the least understood and least appreciated sectors of higher education—the private career colleges and schools. However, recently, more and more focus has been cast in this direction as more and more students have selected the education and training offerings available in these institutions. Articles reflecting on the success of these institutions have begun appearing in a

variety of publications, lauding the graduation rates, the placement rates, and deflecting the previously held animosity toward the for-profit motivation.

My experiences with branding came without reference to this term or its recognition of importance. Nevertheless, branding was a part of the activities that became valuable features in the operation of the Association of Independent Colleges and Schools (AICS) in the middle '70s. When I was selected to head-up this organization out of some 640 applications they received, I believe that one of the primary reasons was that I came with a plan—a program of services/benefits to be created by the organization for the members. AICS, an organization geared almost exclusively toward federal recognition for their accredited institutions, became one that identified and responded to the desires of a membership wanting help to become more effective, more productive, more



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respected, and more profitable. With the backing and support of John Hauer, then president of National College in Rapid City, South Dakota, and other locations, an AICS Board Member, who chaired the newly created Membership Services Committee, I created a series of workshops and management development manuals. Branding here meant building a membership services system and structure, enabling members to better communicate with one another, as well as to facilitate relationships with others in higher education, outside of the proprietary school field.

Ultimately, the opportunity to bring together the two largest private career school groups, AICS and the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools, presented itself. Visionaries such as Dr. Coleman Furr, president of Coleman College; Roger Hess, president of Tulsa Welding School; Tyler Swanson, president of Jamestown Business

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College; and William Kalaboke, currently president of the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, saw the potential to be gained by bringing these two groups into alignment and unification. The concept was not

adopted overwhelmingly by either group. The comfort of the status quo, as well as the concern for an appropriate fit among the diverse members, stood as a potential barrier to the creation of a new organization. Both associations viewed themselves through the brand glasses they had worn for many years. As a member of the negotiation team, I realized that bringing them together would take more than salesmanship on the part of the advocates; it would take the creation of a new and more beneficial

brand that could be perceived and embraced by the majority of both organizations.

Reviewing the history, traditions, and career education offerings represented in both organizations, it was clear that there were many similarities. These similarities had to be incorporated into the new organizational brand. The essence of the new association brand was:

- 1) *Defined* by the institutions' relationship to employers. (No other segment of higher education could claim this position.)
- 2) *Measured* by placement results. (These outcome measurements became imbedded in affiliated accrediting bodies criteria and required annual reports.)
- 3) *Impressed* policymakers with the results-oriented philosophy and put traditional education on the defensive...perhaps for the first time ever!

Once the fundamental issues regarding dues, distribution of reserves, election procedures, bylaws, etc., had been considered and resolved, the name became the next branding challenge. To accomplish that, a nationally known marketing firm, Reis and Trout, was engaged to provide suggestions for the name.

Their exploration and presentation was a casebook example of branding at its best. Their strategy, which they have used with hundreds of firms, starts with the premise that a brand begins with the ownership of a word that best describes the entity; a word that belongs solely to the entity. Their mission was to identify that word. After reviewing all of the literature from both groups, and interviewing various leaders on the staff and in the membership, Reis and Trout recommended a single suggested name. They explained their rationale for the suggestion without revealing their

recommendation. In examining the curriculum offerings that spanned a wide spectrum of subjects, they realized that preparing a student for the world of work was the primary role and goal. Such brand recognition would have to be evident in the new name—*Career*. That was the word that identified our category. No other sector of higher education could claim ownership for “Career.”

Similarly, Reis and Trout recognized that while the two organizations represented a wide array of educational presentations, under the banner of a variety of educational descriptors, i.e., school, academy, tech, training center, college, university, institute, etc., all offerings were at the postsecondary level. When they reviewed the most common word used to describe where students expect to go after high school, one word became obvious—*College*.

There were technical considerations that led to the sequence of the words selected to describe the new organization; again, fundamental principles of branding were put in play. How easy or difficult will it be for someone to recognize the logical members of the new organization? How will the name differentiate the organization from others in higher education? Where will the name appear in the phone book? If referred to by its initials, will the acronym produce something embarrassing?

Through the power of deduction and a little persuasion, the *Career College Association* came into being; providing the combined membership, and those who joined later, with a descriptor that established unity in the brand; easily understood by the variety of publics watching the organization evolve and hearing the positions it advocated.

The creation of CCA and the unification of the organized potential gave the private career college sector of higher education a new opportunity to be heard at various decision-making tables. The new brand, combined with a renewed

respect for *education that leads to employment*, has provided an opportunity for advocacy on behalf of the institutions and the students who choose to attend them. Slowly, “private career colleges and schools” is replacing the now demeaning “for-profit trade school” descriptor, having been tarnished by unpleasant experiences and negative press.

Reis and Trout taught us that brand

(or vision) is more than words; it is the articulated position that an organization creates for itself in the marketplace. Others have said that brand is even more demonstrative, standing for truth, trust, value, and honesty. The brand is a promise made to the customer, according to Alan Bergstrom, co-chairman and CEO of The Brand Consultancy. Scott Bedbury said in an article published by *The Lawlor Review*, “A brand is the sum total of everything a company does—the good, the bad, and even the off strategy—that creates a large context or an identity in the consumer’s mind.”

Some of the prime examples of success in the private career college sector of higher education are reflective of an understanding, appreciation, and implementation of the basic principles of branding that combine to establish a market niche or significant consumer recognition.

There are any number of such organizations whose branding activities deserve recognition. ITT Technical Institutes is one such success story. This growing group of 70 locations with 29,000+ students has mastered what heretofore has been an unachieved task: that of producing qualified, in-demand graduates at a significant number of multiple locations. ITT, under the leadership of

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Rene Champagne, has mastered the challenging task of replicating its presentation in each school, enabling the chain to ensure that employers throughout the country, looking for

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qualified, computer-competent graduates could find them in quantity. To recognize how significant ITT's achievement is, one

only has to recall the unfortunate experiences of others who have tried and failed, such as Lear-Siegler, LTV, Phillips Colleges, CareerCom, etc.

Branding is an activity that places a mark of distinction on the enterprise, giving it a measurable advantage in the marketplace. Perhaps the most successful example of branding can be found in Coca-Cola, the number one soft drink throughout the world. By earmarking the type style and special "Coca-Cola" red in each and every advertisement, the company enhances its memorable image with each and every impression. Compare the Coke price on the grocery shelf with nearly every other soft drink presentation. You'll note that the branding of Coke has enabled the product to not only command a higher percentage of the total soft drink market, but, in addition, command the highest price per can.

The branding techniques implemented by Coke, resulting in the achievement of the world's most popular soft drink, have been replicated by the company. It demonstrated that a brand cannot only be achieved in a vertical way by expanding the exposure of the product from print ads, to television commercials, to point-of-purchase advertising, and Internet exposure, but also horizontally through the development of successful derivatives such as, Diet Coke, Caffeine-Free Coke, Cherry Coke, etc.

Johnson & Wales University, with its

main campus in Providence, Rhode Island, achieves its special brand positioning in ways that are similar to Coke. J&W takes great care in the implementation of any addition to or modification of its curriculum offerings, to ensure that brand considerations have been thoroughly explored. President Jack Yena told me that the institution's dedication and devotion to the understanding and acceptance of a common brand definition has enabled the University to successfully move into new areas of opportunity. Over time this institution has evolved from a small, local business school, preparing young women (primarily) for office careers, to an internationally respected institution now branded as "America's Career University," with a host of employment potentials for its graduates beyond commencement. It didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen without a concerted concern for the brand.

"We employ an outside firm to provide us with a continuing fresh perspective of our brand," Jack said, "This ensures that we don't deviate from the brand presentation and confuse our audiences, whoever they may be. Parents, prospective students, guidance counselors, employers, all have an image and impression of us. The closer all of those images are aligned, the more powerful and productive our brand. It is all too easy for an institution to stumble in attempting to be all things to all viewers, resulting in brand confusion." This is not to say that the offerings of an institution can't have variety, they can. However, to be effective the presentation of the brand must be horizontally consistent, as in the case of Coke.

A couple of years ago, Jack invited me to speak to the University's leadership development class comprised of the up-and-coming members of their staff and faculty. "Recognizing Your **REAL**

Customer” was the topic I chose. In developing the opening of this presentation, I asked the J&W group attending this session to describe for me who they thought their customer was. Not surprisingly, they all told me that the students were their customers. I said that was interesting; however, I told them that if they really thought about it, they would understand why I thought they were wrong: Students are not the institution’s customer, certainly not an institution like Johnson & Wales University. Employers are! And if employers, as customers, were pleased with the institution’s product—the graduates, then the students, as clients, would be satisfied as well.

This was hard for them initially, and I understood that because it was a significant change for me, the creator of the “Students Come First!!” strategy as president of AICS, complete with booster buttons and a training program for adjunct faculty. After moving on from AICS to the presidency of a private business college in Dallas, it dawned on me that if our sector wanted to promote the true importance of employers, then our brand had to be corrected to reflect this fact. “Employers come first!!”

Jack listened to the presentation, realizing that there were few, if any other, institutions with better, more effective relationships with employers. No institution more than J&W had created so many employer involvement opportunities, such as **DACUM**, an acronym for Developing a Curriculum, which is achieved by involving employers on special committees to determine the competencies or tasks needed in a given job or occupational area. All of the employer-involved activities were designed to assist the J&W graduate with a “jump start” to a career. Then, as it had dawned on me, it dawned on him, “Employers are our

customers; students are our clients.” That revelation created a new branding opportunity for the institution; a branding opportunity that has now resulted in millions of dollars of support for the University from employers who are eager to have a favored position when looking for new employees.

The metamorphosis of the institution resulted in a deepening of their brand (originally defined by Mo Gaebe, who acquired the institution in 1947, as a “jobs school”) to imbedding **CAREER DEVELOPMENT** into the curriculum. They deepened the concept of placement from an “end of the line” activity to an “up front” and continuous part of the curriculum, which includes

- On campus recruiting;
- Creation of a special “Career Directions” textbook; and
- Implementation of the Career Passport, a compilation of each student’s work to be shared with employers during interviews.

“We deepened our brand even further by creating a *Covenant with Employers*,” Jack reports, “which describes how the University will prepare our students to be as effective as possible, using the employer’s criteria as the basis of the students’ course of study. Our *Covenants*

are individually negotiated with employer specific elements. When the *Covenant* is signed, Johnson & Wales is committed to provide specific skills and

competencies required for success on the job; and the employer is committed to provide a certain expected contribution to the University. So far, this deepening of our brand has brought \$2 million new dollars from one employer to the institution.”

Johnson & Wales’ belief in the branding process is supported by the continuous

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attention and emphasis it is given. A periodic survey of key members of the leadership helps to identify any confusion or “disconnect” in the understanding and the communicating of the brand. Multiple presentations of the brand that are inconsistent with one another is worse than having no brand identification at all.

Bob and Betty Obenhaus, founders and owners of MTI College of Business and Technology in the Houston area, have learned firsthand about the benefits of a well-articulated brand. MTI offers an Occupational Associate Degree to its

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graduates in a business and technology curriculum. By coordinating the development and modifications of the curriculum with local advisory committee members from the industries that hire its

graduates, the College has been careful to respond quickly to the technical changes advocated by committee. “This has resulted in very favorable opportunities for our graduates,” Bob Obenhaus reported to me. “The Occupational Associate Degree curriculum has been designed to include appropriate general education subjects, but the emphasis remains on the technical courses that make the graduate a valued employee upon graduation.”

Recently, MTI received notification from Dell Computers praising the graduates and indicating that the MTI graduates would receive preference in employment opportunities with Dell. “They told us flatly that they preferred our graduates because of the technical skills they could demonstrate,” he said. “What better indication of our value as an educational institution could we have?” he added rather proudly. Here is a brand that is understood and respected, and, obviously, works.

Branding principles can be applied to individuals, as well as organizations. My wife, Jan, for example, is in the process of recreating herself, as I am. Building on her experience in accreditation for over 30 years and school operations for more than forty years, she’s making herself available as a “Strategic Coach,” which will enable institutions to benefit from her expertise in a variety of areas. Coaching is something she has done for years, but not under a consulting label.

Her challenge is to create an awareness of the role of a “Strategic Coach,” which has not been a job title in regular use in our field. Her vision of the services she expects to deliver entails more than the average consultant’s role; her services contemplate an effort to “coach” institutions through any one of a number of “strategies,” which, once mastered by institutional staff and management, will establish a process to sustain the change and in time, improve upon it.

Her vision of her brand contains an expectation of her coaching an institution through a successful accreditation evaluation; for example, as one service area that moves the institution from a review of its current reality through the process including;

- the establishment of projects/ assignments;
- motivating staff to meet deadlines;
 - preparing faculty and staff for their roles;
- monitoring progress;
- establishing result areas;
- catalog review;
- document evaluation and development;
- self-study editing;
- Institutional Effectiveness Plan development and review; and
- training key personnel to accomplish goals and follow-up on results.

She expects to deepen her brand by including services related to coaching during a change of ownership, developing

new curriculums, and improving relationships with state regulators. Her experience in and beliefs about the values of accreditation are central to her special brand that assures that an institution can use the system to increase profitability, enhance performance and productivity, in and out of the classroom.

Speaking of accreditation, I find it interesting that there is a trend for nationally accredited institutions to move toward regional accreditation. Accreditation is certainly one element—one important element—of an institution's brand. There is an assumption, I'm sure, that achieving regional accreditation is a value-added element. The problem is that having switched from national to regional accreditation, some institutions discover that their brand is dysfunctional, since the emphasis of the process has shifted from being driven by *education for employment* to being driven by *education for life*—a much different concept.

Evidence of branding can be found in state associations, too. The Texas Association of Private Schools is a case in point. A few short years ago the organization was floundering under a negative cloud that resulted in a decline in membership—a tarnished image in the eyes of state licensing officials and legislators, compounded by a serious lack of financial resources. During a strategic planning session, I observed that, in my mind, the best way to overcome the negative image, as well as the hostilities toward and instability of the organization, could be radical: to create a totally new organization—a new brand. After some consideration, the leadership agreed that creating a new brand or image for TAPS would take too long and cost too much. So, creating a new organization with its own brand, reflective of a new spirit and a new commitment, became an appropriate

choice. The result was the creation of the Career Colleges and Schools of Texas, a brand that owes much of its success to the experiences of the Career College Association.

The organization took on new responsibilities for developing and delivering services needed by its members. The brand of the organization was one that displayed a series of services for the growth and development of its members. (Sound familiar?) With support from various publishers and other firms offering services to the member institutions, CCST produced a series of workshops and seminars on a variety of topics. Because the allied members were underwriting the costs, the revenue received through workshop registrations could be retained for future activities.

CCST recognized that the private career colleges were the only segment of higher education in Texas that did not benefit from some sort of student-support from the state. Employers throughout the state valued the graduates of these institutions and, in fact, relied on them to meet their employment needs. "Texas needs the graduates of the private career colleges and schools as much as it needs the graduates of the community college systems," the association announced. Having made the assertion, the organization set out to bring the need of support to the attention of the legislature. The goal was to create a special grant program, supported by an allocation from tax revenue, specifically for students attending private career colleges and schools.

In my role as Chairman of the CCST Image Committee, I realized that achieving this goal would take a significant effort on the part of all of the member institutions. The brand of the private career colleges would have to be so well presented, so well understood,

that the legislature would recognize that the students attending these institutions represented a valuable resource, appropriate for support from tax dollars, which had never been allocated to support this sector of higher education.

With the challenge clearly in mind, the organization used its resources to hire a research firm to produce a report reflecting the need and justifying the

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allocation of public funds; engaged a marketing firm to explore and recommend the talking points needed to persuade the legislation to support the proposition; and

enlarged the professional lobbying team to carry the message and orchestrate the membership involvement with influential legislators.

One of the fundamental reasons for our success was the fact that the branding effort was designed to assist students in need—not institutions. While the legislature regularly provided allocations from the state treasury for public higher education institutions and for students who attended the non-profit, private higher education institutions, such as Southern Methodist and Rice University, they had never voted to provide similar support for students in need attending our institutions.

The final outcome: an understanding and appreciation of the brand sufficient to get the Texas Career Opportunity Grant voted into reality during the first session of the legislature that it was offered—a truly remarkable feat! Private career education in Texas had been moved from a level of suspicion about its for-profit structure, to respect, because of the recognition that the graduates of these institutions are essential to the continued prosperity of the state. This

result was due primarily because the brand had been carefully developed and aggressively marketed—the essential keys to branding.

Adding to the significance of this achievement is the fact that there were 5,700 individual bills filed during the year 2000 session of the Texas Legislature. Of that number the Legislature passed only 1,601 or 28 percent. Of those, Governor Perry vetoed 82 of those bills. CCST's branding plan and delivery had beaten the odds.

That having been achieved, the next mission of the group will be to broaden the recognition of the brand to achieve a funding allocation from the legislature. With the success of 2001 at hand, the association has accepted the challenge to take the mission to its next level. Without a clear message—the brand—the legislative achievement would have been missed. Without separating itself from the past by creating a new brand, the achievements would never have been realized. Branding can and does make a difference.

Branding opportunities are available to any institution, any service, and any product. The challenge is to align the resources, create new resources, or modify current resources to create an energy that can be supported (promoted) internally and understood (accepted) externally. This does not happen without an acknowledgment that everything must make sense, a brand consistency for all enterprises, and a dedication to the prevention of dilution.

The thrill of it all comes when the mission is accomplished and operational satisfaction has been achieved. How is your brand? Is it clear and concise? Are all elements consistent with the brand?

The answers are worth the exploration.