

## **HL: ALMA MATTERS**

### **SL: Universities need to create an identity for themselves in a competitive educational environment.**

Universities have long lurked in the foggy fringes of commercial marketing and advertising – shunning overt branding campaigns that commercial enterprises are more likely to waltz with. Universities, after all, are seen as bastions of knowledge, and partaking in these polished branding and marketing activities can often seem incongruous. For many, inviting these business strategies within the school grounds relegate students to mere commercial units, and beneath lofty ivory-tower ideals. So while such outreach may yet make some squirm, the winds of change have been seemingly blowing past the hallowed halls of academia.

Students can often pay an arm and a leg for an investment that promises a mortarboard, a certificate on their walls, and a promise of a better life – it's only natural for them to expect their money's worth. With a burgeoning number of educational institutes offering unique programs, universities now are forced to play suitor and woo these fledglings into their ranks. With increasing options and mobility, rising costs, a decreasing number of local students and the need to attract foreign students, universities have realized there is a need for a catchy tagline, an occasional full-page advertisement in a local daily and a strong identity.

It was Singapore Management University (SMU) that made us realize the importance of having a strong and cohesive identity. When they burst onto the university two-horse race like 'sea-biscuit', they quickly garnered an identity as the sprightly new kid on the block, keen on devouring the business world and changing the face of tertiary education altogether. Their cosmopolitan and entrepreneurial identity was no doubt facilitated by a fresh approach and a niche educational focus. Its closeted school grounds probably aided cohesion as well. In-house initiatives from the youth percussion band Samba Masala and overseas humanitarian missions to Nepal helped foster a sense of identity amongst its students. In a few short years, it has quickly joined the ranks of National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) to become one of the schools of choice of the ambitious Trumps of our little island nation.

Singapore is quickly realizing its ambition to become a regional educational hub, hosting several internationally recognizable academic brand names. With a secure and conducive academic environment for students, it's not surprising then that we have students here from Mauritius or New Guinea or Ghana mugging away at McCafe over a Himalayan latte. Yet a noticeable absence from several schools is a cohesive identity. It's understandable when one considers the complexity and size of such institutions – it would be nothing less herculean. Branding

campaigns are also designed to highlight a cohesive image of the school, accentuate its strengths and to help it stand out and attract prospective students. Not all universities are like Harvard after all, and can go on their name alone.

While the years as an undergrad may largely be about that certificate that one can brandish to prospective employers, it is also about the holistic academic experience. Providing extensive libraries and state of the art research facilities are significant for any university, but establishing so is creating a strong emotional bond amongst its students and alumni. These strenuous years are also exciting coming of age years for any fledgling and something they aren't likely to forget. Through fostering a sense of belonging, students are more likely to become walking and talking marketing fodder for schools. A consistent image may start off attracting cohorts initially but it will be dividends years later before students become benefactors. Attracting top professors can be another reason to embark on a serious marketing and branding blitz.

Schools here can take a leaf out of the books of more established and reputable schools in the USA. Their pro-active approach in differentiating themselves and branding has led to consistently high enrollment numbers and world-wide recognition. UCLA is a reputable public college that hosts annual fund-raising music festivals and also a dance marathon that raised more than US\$1 million for an AIDS foundation. Similarly schools across the country have not only made their marks academically, but also through student-driven initiatives that enhance emotional bonds to the schools, even after graduation.

Athletic programs have been excellent means to foster that very sense of community and loyalty. By shining the spotlight on team sports like soccer, basketball and football, colleges create an excellent environment for the growth of college level sports and a channel for students to actively participate.

While most schools have already recognized the importance of some form of branding, and implemented programs to increase awareness – it's probably important to note that it all begins with the students themselves. Tongue-in-cheek ads and taglines will only go so far, so it really comes down to the student culture, contributions the alumni have made to society, word-of-mouth awareness created by students and their own initiatives. The best thing administrators can really do is create a culture for openness, an environment where ideas can be freely exchanged, and allow students the opportunity, space and security to express them.