



Emotional connections in higher education marketing

Emotional
connections

Mark Durkin

Ulster Business School, University of Ulster, Newtownabbey, UK

Seamas McKenna

Anderson Spratt Group, Belfast, UK, and

Darryl Cummins

Ulster Business School, University of Ulster, Newtownabbey, UK

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Abstract

Purpose – Through examination of a case study this paper aims to describe a brand re-positioning exercise and explore how an emotionally driven approach to branding can help create meaningful connections with potential undergraduate students and can positively influence choice.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper's approach is a case study description with quantitative analysis in support.

Findings – The use of an emotionally driven branding concept has positively impacted business development and brand likeability within a UK university.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is specific to one case study and evaluation of success remains relatively early. Initial implications relate to the potential use of emotion in higher education marketing communications and how the use of emotion acted as an enabler of more rational decision-making processes within the case university context.

Originality/value – An exploration of issues related to the marketing of higher education services is of great importance at this time. The case study described offers value and learning for readers of the journal from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

Keywords Marketing, Branding, Advertising, Higher education, Emotion, Decision making, Students, United Kingdom

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The UK Higher Education sector is an important part of the economy both in terms of its contribution to knowledge through graduate employability, international research and interaction with industry. The sector comprises 166 higher education institutions of which 116 are universities. These institutions accommodate approximately 2.4 million students and employ nearly 375,000 staff (Universities UK, 2010). As part of its austerity programme the UK's new coalition government have taken a new approach to University funding, essentially cutting central government funding for university activities and creating a framework where such funding will largely be a function of market demand.

At a general level, the concept of marketing has grown in importance for universities across the world from the 1980s onwards (Kotler and Fox, 1995) and particularly in the UK since the re-designation of polytechnics to universities in 1992. The resulting increase in sectoral competition highlighted a need to create more distinct brand identities and has compelled universities to more fully consider marketing principles as they improve their efforts to attract and retain students both in the domestic and international markets (Brookes, 2003; Domino *et al.*, 2006; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009).



As a concept, the marketing of education remains relatively new and it is a discipline area that has stimulated much debate within the higher education sector in particular. At an academic level it has been argued that the level of analysis being applied to higher education marketing is inadequate as “the literature lacks theoretical models that reflect on the particular HE context” (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). At a more practical level there is a lack of clarity regarding to what extent, if any, a business-oriented marketing approach which places the “student customer” at the centre of all activity is appropriate within the higher education proposition. This lack of clarity is evidenced through the often polarized views expressed among commentators as to whether students are in fact “customers” in the conventional sense (see Brookes, 2003; Svensson and Wood, 2007; Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Barrett (1996) goes so far as to propose that it is “regrettable and ominous that the marketing focus, explicitly borrowed from business, should be accepted and even welcomed” in a higher education context. That said, political changes have impacted the funding model to such an extent that a more professional market-driven approach will be a necessity within the UK university sector.

Marketing in the higher education context

The elements of globalisation in higher education are widespread and multi-faceted and the HE market is now well established as a global phenomenon especially in major English speaking nations (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003).

In parallel, as a response to these global change dynamics the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world, are gradually now being applied to many universities with a view to gaining a competitive edge (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

Accordingly, UK universities have increased the investment made in their marketing departments and broadened the scope of their marketing activity in recent years (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Almost two-thirds of UK universities have increased their investment in marketing by 10-20 per cent over the past three years (Stamp, 2007). However, research into the new area of education marketing is limited and largely “incoherent” (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) and has its origins in the US and UK in the 1980s. Such thinking and approaches were largely based on models developed for use in the business sector (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) and were implemented without any significant contextual adaptation.

Government funding pressures apart, the greatest change dynamic within the sector currently is that of demographics and the ongoing decline in the number of 18 year olds in the UK. The analysis of demographic data by Universities UK (2010) finds that the percentage change in the Northern Ireland population of 18-20 year olds shows an – 11 per cent decline taken from a base line of 2006, which drops to – 15 per cent if taken from 2009-2020. This is similar across the UK and Ireland.

As this undergraduate segment of the market is the core of most universities business such a decline is of critical strategic importance and has created the impetus for increased marketing efforts by universities as they try to maintain and grow their share of a declining market (Stamp, 2007) and better develop new income streams from other markets and segments.

The confluence of these forces can be regarded as a “perfect storm” for Higher Education players in the UK through the coming decade and points up the need for

universities to develop stronger connections and relationships with potential customers from an early age.

The student “customer” in higher education

There is much debate both in the academic literature and in the sector’s marketing departments regarding the perceived positive and negative aspects of the “student as customer” concept. The advent of deferred fees in UK higher education has led to some commentators taking the position that students must be regarded as customers in the same way as would other purchasers of goods or services (Bejou, 2005).

An alternative school of thought (Emery *et al.*, 2003) proposes that while students contribute to the cost of their education the contract is not one of “purchase”. The risks attached to the “purchase” model are argued to centre on the resulting perception by students that in adopting a consumerist perspective they should expect good grades irrespective of effort or quality of outcome (Clayson and Haley, 2005).

Linked to issues of outcome quality is the possible risk for academic delivery staff who, in maintaining academic standards and not automatically supplying good grades without merit, may themselves be “marked down” by students through university teaching satisfaction questionnaire exercises (Yunker and Yunker, 2003).

Sharrock (2000) and Halbesleben *et al.* (2003) propose that expectations management of students is therefore critical and that “there needs to be a clear understanding that tuition facilitates education but does not ‘cause it’” (Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

Rather than students being considered “customers” of their higher education experience it is argued that it is more useful to consider them consumers of that experience (Conway *et al.*, 1994) given that there appears to be no other service encounter where the quality of outcome depends as much on the efforts of the consumer. Related to this customer concept is the nature of the product being sold and this too has been widely debated. Students are argued not to be “buying degrees” but are instead buying the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status and lifestyle (Naude and Ivy, 1999).

That said, whether classified formally as customers or not, the significant increase of UK tuition fees in 2006 highlighted that students are paying for a service and that universities are therefore regarded to be providing an appropriate value proposition in return for that payment. There is ongoing debate about the nature of the education “product/service” and the responsibility of the student customer in the exchange transaction but despite this students increasingly perceive universities as service providers from which they are making a purchase (Bok, 2003). At a sectoral level this more commercial perspective has also been strengthened by the introduction of various customer-oriented benchmarks, for example the UK’s National Student Survey of student satisfaction which helps facilitate more informed decision-making by potential applicants while at the level of individual universities the perception of a “customer orientation” is strengthened through the issue of in-semester teaching quality/satisfaction surveys to students through which they are asked to evaluate the value of their learning experience. Influential too are the plethora of on-line fora where existing students, as well as potential applicants, share their perspectives about institutions and where more traditional institutional “push” communications have more limited influence. Recent changes to the funding model announced by the UK

coalition government only accentuate the competitive pressures within the sector moving forward and provide a greater sense of customer empowerment to the future student.

While there has been a recognition that marketing, however understood and practised in HE, is generally important the practical outcome of this perceived importance has gravitated towards promotion and recruitment activity (e.g. open days, advertising campaigns, alumni events) rather than on more holistic or strategic aspects of marketing such as orientation, market fit and the currency and relevance of the courses being offered.

The case university

This research describes a marketing context that existed within Ireland's largest university. University of Ulster physically operates across four campuses in Northern Ireland and has over 24,000 students registered and has undergraduate applications approaching 34,000 each year. The university prides itself on its economic, social and cultural engagement across the Northern Ireland region and is widely respected for its highly successful widening access and participation approaches which have provided a breadth of opportunity for aspiring students from across Northern Ireland to engage in HE. Ulster is respected for the delivery of teaching and research excellence that is relevant to the local economy in this context. With an international profile, the university also attracts a significant number of international students.

In recognition of changes in the local and national market the university established a dedicated division responsible for marketing to students in 2007. Atypically, the traditional bureaucratic culture often found in universities was relatively absent and this new division was given a creative mandate to challenge existing "student facing" approaches and was tasked to develop new ideas that would serve to positively differentiate the University in the local and national market. It is from this new Student Marketing Division that the branding exercise described here emanated and was implemented between 2008-2010.

Connecting and engaging potential customers

Within the HE sector, traditional "University – customer" marketing communications have often focused on attempting to influence rational decision-making processes and as such were often targeted to parents and other key influencers (e.g. school teachers, family members) rather than to the potential end-customer (the future university student).

Traditionally, such rational messaging approaches focused on emphasising quality-assured teaching processes (UK's QAA is often cited), research assessment exercise results (RAE), levels of industry engagement and the quality of the student experience (e.g. issues of location, facilities, student community and support structures).

The extent to which such messages and messaging strategies directly reached and influenced the younger potential customer is unclear. By moving away from this what might be termed, rational persuasion model, towards one more focused on creating an emotionally driven decision-making process at the level of the end customer, University of Ulster adopted a new approach within the sector. That is not to say that any attempts to influence rational decision-making were eliminated but rather that a

more emotionally oriented approach would be used in an attempt to act as a bridge between awareness and understanding for younger potential customers with respect to evaluating Ulster's value proposition.

Branding objectives

To better connect with and engage potential undergraduate customers the specific brand repositioning and campaign objectives were to:

- create a branding device through which the university could make an emotional connection with school pupils of all ages in the post-primary market and in so doing to position Ulster as the 'University of Choice' for sixth form students across Northern Ireland;
- increase applications for Ulster in 2009-2010 and beyond; and
- increase choice commitment (level of CF choices in UCAS) by applicants.

Research of concepts

Several branding and advertising concepts were initially explored and tested through both qualitative and quantitative methods. An animated character-driven treatment was shortlisted by the university and agency as having the greatest potential (see Figure 1).

Origins of the animated branding concept

Due to the increasing appeal of animation globally, the marketing team believed there was a real opportunity to both convey a message and connect with an audience through an animated solution for Ulster. This was felt to be particularly the case given that the audience being targeted is exposed and receptive to sophisticated animation daily from many media. Animation is no longer limited to the young but embraced both by teens and adults. The central character concept was informed by the styling of Japanese manga animation and specifically designed to appeal to prospective school-leavers. Efforts were made to make the character as androgynous as possible for the widest appeal, although internally the character was perceived as "male".



Figure 1.
Animated character on outdoor poster

“He” was specifically clad in colours reflecting the palette of the university, potentially becoming an effective “icon” for the university at undergraduate level. Indeed the character and his entire environment is uniquely tailored (as is only possible with animation), to represent the university at a visual and fundamental level.

In so doing the Ulster brand was re-positioned in a more contemporary and innovative way, which was highly differentiated from the brand positions of key competitors.

Additionally, and from a business perspective, the animated branding device of Eddie became an emotionally-connected “carrier” for the consumption of more rational selling messages that would be less likely to reach the target market in other less direct ways.

The “Eddie” TV advertisement

Regarding the scenario the animated character is thrust into, it is a visual allegory for the dilemma posed to most school leavers. “Eddie” tentatively takes his first steps into the post-school environment and is presented with many options and hence decisions to make. This “confusion state” (Drummond, 2004) was represented by a signpost on which all the elements of the sign rotated independently and in a different direction, adding to the perceived confusion. Each directional sign identified a key motivator for studying at the university. By their gradual realignment into a single direction the signpost motivators point the way to Ulster as the university of choice. The character then sets off on the revealed route and discovers another portal through which he steps into his new life as a university of Ulster student. The “door” of this portal then closes to reveal the University of Ulster logo, indicative of the ultimate destination.

All elements of the commercial and broader campaign were carefully designed to speak and appeal to the audience. The TV campaign ran for three weeks from mid-September at the time when sixth formers are preparing to make their initial UCAS choices. Supporting the TV campaign were:

- (1) Outdoor activity.
 - billboard posters (48 sheets) across sites in NI; and
 - ad shell (bus shelters) across NI.
- (2) Radio advertising.
- (3) Dedicated web presence[1] – www.ulster.ac.uk/gofar

Post-campaign research

A quantitative research study was conducted each autumn of the following years (i.e. 2008 and 2009), to explore the extent to which the “Eddie” branding device was recalled by the general public and target market in particular and what influence “he” brought to relevant decision-makers.

The university’s marketing team was keen to know in what ways, if any, the campaign had influenced customer perceptions of the university and in particular choice decision-making processes.

A representative sample of the Northern Ireland population was identified and 1,000 face-to-face interviews conducted across the region each year.

The 2009 results are outlined in the following and compared to the 2008 findings:

- Unprompted recall of Ulster advertising over the previous year increased from 40 per cent in 2008 to 51 per cent in 2009 suggesting repetition of the campaign in

year 2 had consolidated and grown awareness. For 16-34 year olds it increased from 46 to 57 per cent.

- When shown an image from the campaign, recall increased from 46 per cent in 2008 to 60 per cent in 2009. Recall of the advertising being seen on television increased from 66 per cent in 2008 to 81 per cent in 2009.
- Those indicating they liked the character increased from 63 to 69 per cent. For females this was up from 68 to 76 per cent and for 16-34 year olds up from 59 to 70 per cent.
- The campaign was perceived by all respondents to be aimed at 16-19 year olds (86 per cent in 2009 as against 77 per cent in 2008).
- Of those who remembered seeing the ad 87 per cent believed it would be effective in encouraging the target audience to apply to Ulster.

The emotional connection that was strived for by the marketing team was measured through the construct of “likeability”. With respect to “likeability” of the Eddie branding device more than two out of three respondents (69 per cent) stated they “liked” the character. This was further explored at the level of gender and age and it was found that 76 per cent of females liked Eddie as compared to 70 per cent of males. In follow-up qualitative sessions dedicated to this issue females indicated they felt a “caring” instinct in relation to the “confused” Eddie and could relate very directly to his plight. This issue of “caring” and “empathy” which emerged was largely peculiar to females and was unexpected by the marketing team. Respondents were able to identify that the campaign was targeted to 16-19 year olds (86 per cent) and indicated that from their perspective the campaign would be effective in encouraging 16-19 year olds to study at the University (87 per cent – effective/very effective categories).

In terms of core business impact the campaign resulted in a higher than average level of choice commitment being evidenced through UCAS applicants wishing to come to Ulster. Following the campaign applications had risen by 7 per cent and all things being equal the level of firm choice applicants for Ulster had risen by 4 per cent above the UK average.

Conclusion

Dynamic change within the UK higher education sector has many components. At the level of the customer, the fee-paying environment has brought changes in customer expectations and a consequent change to the search-buy behaviour processes employed by customers in terms of how a degree offering and institution is chosen. A new UK funding model and increasingly deregulated fee environment will come into being from 2012 and will impact further both customer behavior and potentially market structure itself.

Accordingly, there has never been a more important time for marketing investment within higher education institutions. In the absence of universities engaging with potential customers and clearly defining and communicating differentiated value propositions, potential customers will begin to identify “value” on their own terms. This approach will likely be driven by a need to better understand not just what their course will do for them in terms of utility/employability but also in terms of the differential advantage conveyed by the institutional brand from which their degree comes. Such customer evaluation processes need to be understood by managers and then positively influenced and managed.

This paper outlined how University of Ulster has responded creatively to this growing marketing challenge early, created a department focused exclusively on student marketing activity and engaged an emotionally-driven marketing approach through which to connect and engage prospective undergraduate customers.

Early research findings over the past two years indicate that aiming to influence a decision in the mind of the potential young customer can be helped through the use of a branding a marketing strategy which uses emotion as a way of bridging the gap between institutional awareness, understanding and desire for affiliation.

Note

1. The TV advertisement can be viewed at this site.

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Corresponding author

Mark Durkin can be contacted at: mg.durkin@ulster.ac.uk