SPECIAL ARTICLES

Branding a College of Pharmacy

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Submitted May 15, 2012; accepted July 31, 2012; published November 12, 2012.

In a possible future of supply-demand imbalance in pharmacy education, a brand that positively differentiates a college or school of pharmacy from its competitors may be the key to its survival. The nominal group technique, a structured group problem-solving and decision-making process, was used during a faculty retreat to identify and agree on the core qualities that define the brand image of Midwestern University's College of Pharmacy in Glendale, AZ. Results from the retreat were provided to the faculty and students, who then proposed 168 mottos that embodied these qualities. Mottos were voted on by faculty members and pharmacy students. The highest ranked 24 choices were submitted to the faculty, who then selected the top 10 finalists. A final vote by students was used to select the winning motto. The methods described here may be useful to other colleges and schools of pharmacy that want to better define their own brand image and strengthen their organizational culture.

Keywords: brand, brand image, brand loyalty, differentiation, competition

INTRODUCTION

Why brand a college or school of pharmacy? In a word, survival. In 1987 there were 72 colleges and schools of pharmacy in the United States and the number had remained essentially unchanged for over 20 years. In July 2012, there were 129 active programs and another 10 or more were in various stages of development. Moreover, most programs have expanded their class size at least once and some have done so several times.

The jury is still out regarding the extent to which the growth in pharmacy education has fueled an inevitable supply-demand imbalance in the pharmacy workforce. However, serious questions have been raised regarding the sustainability of this growth in the face of leveling or decreasing demand.¹

If, as some have suggested, pharmacy education has already passed the tipping point of supply-demand equilibrium, the problem will not be quickly or easily corrected. A college or school whose business model requires 150 students in seats will continue to put them there whether or not there are jobs waiting for them after graduation. Fewer employment opportunities for graduates would likely result in fewer students applying to pharmacy school. That, in turn, would result in increased competition among programs to attract qualified applicants and/or require programs to dig even deeper into the applicant

pool to fill their classes, while possibly lowering standards in the process.

The bursting of the US housing bubble clearly demonstrated the disastrous effects that imprudent overbuilding can have on an industry, even for those who manage to survive the inevitable shakeout that follows. Such industry consolidations are characterized by a cold Darwinian indifference to who survives. Not unlike natural selection, an industry shakeout does not care who you are or how long you've been around. If your organization has a competitive advantage, it will survive. If not, it will perish.

One potential competitive advantage for a college or school is a clear and compelling brand identity in the market. A brand may be defined as a "name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."² Synonymous with trademark, the purpose of a brand is to clearly identify the organization to its consumers and distinguish it and its products from those of other producers.

IMPORTANCE OF BRANDING

Properly cultivated and managed, a well-defined brand can be the difference between success and failure, especially in a competitive market. This is because the brand represents the basis for product differentiation in the minds of consumers. This differentiation translates into *brand loyalty*, the degree to which consumers will consistently seek out a particular brand within a product class.

A brand can find its ultimate expression in many forms. It can be a name, a sign, a symbol or a slogan. A

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more familiar term for slogan in education is *motto*, a word or phrase that expresses an attitude, ideal, or guiding principle(s) associated with the organization. A well-crafted motto is a particularly effective way to communicate an organization's brand to stakeholders because it expresses the organization's qualities in an engaging and memorable way. Beyond the physical representations it may take, however, an organization's brand is really the image it projects to its consumers. This *brand image* affects consumers' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors related to the organization and its products.

In terms of brand development, a brand can be created in 1 of 2 ways; by default or by design. Whether they realize it or not, every college and school of pharmacy has a brand. It may be vague, it may be ill-defined, it may not be entirely positive, but it is out there in the minds of consumers and stakeholders. Call it reputation if you like; but it is really the institution's *brand*. It is how people see the institution and what they think of it and, in the vast majority of cases, the brand was created by default.

CRAFTING A BRAND

In contrast, a brand can be carefully crafted by design. In so doing, the brand is more likely to communicate the best possible version of an organization to its consumers. Nevertheless, a brand cannot be created out of thin air. An organization cannot successfully create and sustain an image in the minds of consumers that contradicts what consumers actually see and experience. Simply stated, you can't convince people you're Tiffany if what they experience is Target, and vice versa.

The key to creating a successful and sustainable brand identity is for an organization to be true to itself and build on its existing strengths and competitive advantages. It is appropriate – even desirable – that a brand also is aspirational, but it must aspire within the bounds of what is reasonably possible to achieve. “Know thyself” and “to thine own self be true.” Translation: know who you are and be who you are – good advice in life and in business.

Although a variety of useful forms of communication and promotion can be used to express an organization's brand image to others, a brand is not merely a memorable motto, slogan, catch phrase, or tag line. Rather, the brand is a core set of valued qualities or attributes that represent the essence of the organization. Although these core qualities can eventually be cast in the form of memorable mottos, slogans, symbols, etc, creating those physical representations is a subsequent step that must be driven by a consensus within the organization on the core qualities that collectively define the organization's brand.

The Multi-Attribute Model

Drawing heavily from economic theory, the multi-attribute model in marketing posits that any product or service can be conceptually represented as a set of qualities or attributes.³ An individual's overall affect (ie, attitude) toward a product results from (1) the individual's beliefs about the importance of each attribute, and (2) the degree to which the individual perceives the product has the attribute.⁴

Similarly, consumers' overall attitude toward an organization results from their net assessment of the qualities the organization and its products and services possess. According to the model, consumers patronize (or do not patronize) an organization based on their perception of the attributes the organization and its products possesses (or does not possess). What matters, therefore, is consumers' perception (ie, image or impression) that the organization and its products possess these qualities, not whether it does in any absolute or objective sense.

Identifying an Organization's Consumers

In creating a brand image for any organization, the first question to ask and answer is “who are the consumers to whom we want to promote our brand?” In the case of a college or school of pharmacy, there are several key groups of consumers.

One important group is potential employers of pharmacy graduates. These are the organizations that “buy” the pharmacists that colleges and schools produce. As workforce supply and demand becomes increasingly unbalanced, pharmacy graduates will likely face more competition for employment, especially for the most desirable positions. Who are the employers of pharmacy graduates and what attributes are important to their hiring and promotion decisions? How can colleges and schools differentiate their graduates from those of other programs in a way that would be important to these employers?

Another important group is potential employees. A college or school of pharmacy is only as good as its faculty and staff members, including talented administrators. What qualities are these people looking for in an employer? What attributes would give an institution a competitive edge in attracting and retaining high-quality employees in an environment with increasing competition from other programs and other professional opportunities?

Yet another relevant consumer group for a college or school of pharmacy is the various entities to which faculty submit proposals for extramural funding. Some might suggest that in an ideal world, a funding entity's decision would be based entirely on the merits of the proposal. In the real world, however, the reputation of the institution often influences these important decisions.

Clearly, there are a variety of consumer or stakeholder groups that a college or school of pharmacy could target for purposes of creating its brand. Moreover, there is predictably a good deal of overlap in the attributes that would resonate with each. However, in an increasingly tuition-driven environment, one group is of mission-critical importance to the future of virtually every institution. That group is the potential applicants to the college or school's doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) degree program.

As the number and size of degree programs continue to grow, colleges and schools of pharmacy will likely face increasingly keener competition from other programs to attract the best and brightest applicants. What attributes are important to their decision? Of these attributes, which are consistent with who they are and what they offer? Which attributes of a brand would differentiate the institution in a positive way from the other programs these high-quality applicants may be considering?

CASE IN POINT: BRANDING MIDWESTERN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF PHARMACY - GLENDALE

The purpose of the project described here was to develop faculty consensus on the core brand qualities of Midwestern University's College of Pharmacy – Glendale and express this consensus in the form of a motto that could be used to communicate the college's brand image to key stakeholders.

The setting for the project was the College of Pharmacy – Glendale, an academic unit within Midwestern University. The college is housed in modern facilities on a scenic 140-acre campus in the northwest Phoenix area. Other degree programs on campus include medicine, dentistry, podiatry, optometry, clinical psychology, and physician assistant. The college enrolled its first class in 1998 and has an accelerated 3-year integrated curriculum that now enrolls 150 students in each class. The college employs 26 full-time and 19 part-time faculty and staff members.

Branding Workshop

The first phase of the project was a branding workshop that was held during a college-wide faculty retreat in January 2012. Prior to the retreat, members of the faculty were asked to review the college's mission and vision statements. The mission of the college is to "prepare pharmacists who will provide exceptional patient care, participate in critical inquiry and scientific research and advance public health and wellness." This mission is supported by 11 goals, among which is to "matriculate a qualified and diverse pool of doctor of pharmacy students."

During the workshop, faculty members were asked to consider this question: "What are the core qualities of the brand we wish to project to potential applicants?" The process that was used to identify and agree on the core qualities of the college's brand image was the *nominal group technique*, a structured, group problem-solving and decision-making process that was originally developed as an aid to program planning. The nominal group technique has been described as "a creative process that presumes either a lack of agreement at the outset or an incomplete state of knowledge concerning the nature of the problem or the components that must be included in generating a successful solution."⁵ The process can be summarized as follows: silent generation of ideas in writing; round-robin feedback from group members to record ideas; discussion of each recorded idea for clarification and consolidation of like ideas; individual voting on priority of ideas with the group decision being mathematically derived through rank-ordering; vote tally, interpretation, and closure.

Among the key advantages of the nominal group technique over the traditional interactive group process are:

- The nominal group process forces equal participation from all group members in generating ideas. This improves the number and quality of ideas and reduces the negative effect that a particularly dominant individual can have on group creativity;
- Silent generation of ideas, followed by further thought and idea development during the round-robin procedure, increases group productivity and creativity. During the round-robin procedure, group members are encouraged to "hitchhike" off the ideas of others by developing similar yet different ideas;
- The highly structured nature of the nominal group process keeps the group task-oriented. This minimizes much of the irrelevant, unproductive, and sometimes counterproductive group interaction that often characterizes conventional interactive groups, and;
- Nominal group sessions tend to conclude with a perceived sense of accomplishment and closure. This tends to increase interest in future phases of planning and implementation.

Soliciting Mottos

Once consensus was reached among faculty members on the core qualities that the college's brand should project to potential applicants, the second phase of the project entailed soliciting proposed mottos that captured

and communicated core brand qualities. This was accomplished by distributing the results of the nominal group technique analysis to faculty and staff members and to second-year pharmacy students as part of a required course in pharmacy practice management. During a series of classes on marketing and branding, students in the course were provided with the results of the faculty's branding workshop and assigned to create proposed mottos for the college that embodied the prioritized qualities identified in the faculty's branding workshop and would resonate with potential applicants to the program.

Outcomes From the Branding Process

Twenty faculty members, 2 student representatives, and 1 administrative staff member attended the branding workshop. All attendees participated in the nominal group technique process and voting except the faculty moderator. The question that was posed to the group was: "What are the core qualities of the brand we wish to project to potential applicants?" Round-robin feedback of ideas generated an initial list of 44 proposed college brand qualities. Subsequent discussion to clarify and consolidate items resulted in a final list of 21 qualities that were retained for voting (Table 1).

Each workshop participant was then asked to select the 5 qualities they believed were most important to the brand image that the college should project to prospective applicants of its professional degree program. Participants were then asked to rank the priority of these 5 qualities from highest (1) to lowest (5).

A median ranking was calculated for each item in Table 1. Four items did not receive any votes. The median rankings for the remaining 17 were summed and a grand mean of 3.4 was calculated. For purposes of interpretation, items with a median ranking less than 3.4 were considered to have relatively high preference among participants, while those with a median ranking greater than 3.4 were considered to have relatively low preference.

Level of agreement was determined by the number of votes each item received. Items that received 11 or more votes were considered to have relatively high agreement, while those receiving less than 11 votes were considered to have low agreement. The results of this analysis are illustrated in the Group Preference Matrix that appears in Appendix 1.⁶

Following the retreat, results and interpretation of the nominal group technique analysis were distributed to the faculty and students. From the initial list of 168 proposed mottos, 24 were determined by the course director and primary investigator to meet all the criteria

Table 1. Faculty Consensus on Core Brand Qualities of Midwestern University College of Pharmacy - Glendale

Item	Description
A	Prepare [students] for [their] professional future
B	Accelerated [degree] program
C	Encouraging and supporting; Passion for student success; Student-centered (open doors)
D	Realistic/real-world, skill-based (early patient-centered training); Contemporary [of current knowledge and practices]
E	Commitment to teaching
F	Train students to provide continuum of care (from institutional to ambulatory)
G	Interdisciplinary medical environment
H	Integrated curriculum; Integrating practice, science & teaching philosophies
I	Climate/location [of the university in southern Arizona]
J	Community outreach and service opportunities
K	Learner-centered with commitment to life-long learning
L	Developing professional and ethical caring pharmacists
M	Striving for excellence
N	Students are more than the sum of their numbers
O	Focus on developing leaders
P	Emphasis on promoting diversity
Q	Collaborative/non-competitive environment
R	Safe campus environment
S	Career development and assistance; [Emphasis on] networking and post-graduate education
T	Recognizing leaders in professional advocacy
U	Prepare students to provide care for diverse populations

for an effective brand, including brevity, memorability, and harmony with the college's mission and the core qualities that had been identified in the branding workshop. These 24 proposed mottos were submitted to faculty members to prioritize using a 5-point rating scale (5=excellent, 4=very good, 3=good, 2=fair, 1=poor). Mean ratings were then calculated to identify a final "Top 10" list of proposed mottos to be voted on by students.

An end-of-course "Motto Smackdown" was held during which 147 students in the management course were asked to rate each of the 10 proposed mottos using the same 5-point scale used by faculty members. Students were instructed to base their rating on 2 factors: (1) how accurately the motto described the college's degree program; and (2) how positively the motto would resonate with potential applicants. Because students were less than 2 years removed from their own decision to apply to the

college, it was felt their perspective would be a reasonable proxy for those of potential applicants.

From the list of 10, the 3 mottos with the highest mean rating after the first round of voting were retained for a final *motto-a-motto* face-off. The final order of rankings for the top 10 proposed Midwestern University College of Pharmacy - Glendale mottos appear in Table 2. The proposed motto that ultimately received the most student votes was “Today’s student-centered learning for tomorrow’s patient-centered care.”

DISCUSSION

When he was asked why the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School launched an initiative to rebrand itself, Dean Thomas Robertson explained:

It was important that we clarify and achieve consistency for the Wharton brand. It was a matter of finding a shared understanding of what the brand is all about. One of the challenges was to look at the Web sites of the top 20 schools, take off the brand names and see if you could tell which school was which. Even putting Wharton in there, they all look very much alike.⁷

If one of the top business schools on the planet feels its brand image is not sufficiently well defined and differentiated in the minds of consumers then it is a pretty safe bet the same could be said for most colleges and schools of pharmacy.

Whether the winning motto or any of the other mottos generated during this process will be formally adopted and used by the college will ultimately depend on a variety of additional considerations including the approval of university administration, who, quite understandably, may have reservations about creating a unique brand for

any particular academic program. Nevertheless, even if the mottos generated during this exercise never appear on the college’s Web site or a single page of stationary, the process of generating them created a shared recognition and reaffirmation within the college of who we are and what we aspire to be. In so doing, it reaffirmed and strengthened our organizational culture, and that was the primary objective of the exercise.

No one knows for certain whether the dramatic growth that pharmacy education has experienced during the past 25 years will create a serious imbalance between long-term supply and demand. Indeed, that unknown is precisely the problem. Because there is great uncertainty regarding this important question and no centralized planning in pharmacy education to ensure long-term supply-demand balance, each institution is left to its own devices to determine how best to proceed. In the absence of coordinated industry-wide planning, there is little that any individual program can do to reduce the overall risk of an eventual supply-demand imbalance. That being the case, colleges and schools must think strategically and creatively about how they can reduce their risk. Marketing suggests that one way to reduce risk in a market characterized by too much supply of an undifferentiated commodity product is to clearly differentiate the organization and its offerings from that of competitors in ways that are recognized and valued by consumers.

It is possible the US economy will soon return to robust growth and we will see resurgence in the rapid expansion of pharmacist employment opportunities that we witnessed in the years leading up to the recession. It is possible that opportunities in emerging non-dispensing roles like medication therapy management may gain traction and begin demanding significant numbers of pharmacists.

However, it is also possible that we are looking at a “new normal” going forward in which growth in the demand for pharmacists will be lower and slower than years past. Unfortunately, the biggest problem with bubbles is that you don’t know you’re on one until it bursts. When it does, it is too late to prepare for the painful consequences that inevitably follow.

CONCLUSIONS

A clear, consistent and compelling brand represents a significant competitive advantage for an organization in any economic climate. In times of increasing supply and leveling or decreasing demand, a distinctive brand is more than just a “nice to have,” it is a “need to have,” and can mean the difference between success and failure; between survival and extinction. Whether a distinctive brand image

Table 2. Pharmacy Students’ Rankings of Proposed Mottos for Midwestern University College of Pharmacy - Glendale

Rank	Top 10 Proposed CPG Mottos
1	“Today’s student-centered learning for tomorrow’s patient-centered care”
2	“Creating patient-centered clinicians through student-centered learning”
3	“Your future, accelerated”
4	“Accelerate your future”
5	“Your future, our passion”
6	“Your success is our passion”
7	“Your future is our passion”
8	“Where innovation meets excellence”
9	“Your success, our passion”
10	“Our experience is your experience. Your success is our success”

would help insulate a college or school of pharmacy from at least some of the risk of an industry shakeout is a question that cannot be answered with certainty. However, in the absence of serious supply-demand planning in pharmacy education, maybe the more relevant question that faculty and administration at individual institutions should ask is, “what are the risks of failing to prepare for such an event?” The process described here may be useful to other colleges and schools of pharmacy who have a similar interest in better defining their brand image, strengthening their organizational culture, and positioning themselves to survive - and even thrive - in an uncertain future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to the faculty and students of Midwestern University College of Pharmacy - Glendale who enthusiastically participated in this project. Special recognition

goes to student Manuel Maksumov who proposed the winning motto.

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Appendix 1. Matrix of the branding qualities identified by Midwestern University College of Pharmacy – Glendale faculty. (The quality associated with each letter in the matrix is described below the graph.)

Group Primary Preferences – included 2 qualities (C, D) that 11 or more participants included in their list of 5 and for which the rankings assigned were relatively high (ie, < 3.4). Ensuring these qualities are represented in CPG’s brand image is therefore considered to be a clear consensus priority.

Group Secondary Preferences – included 1 quality (B) that most participants included in their list of 5 but for which the rankings assigned were relatively low (> 3.4). Qualities in this cell represent a lower priority for representation in CPG’s brand identity than primary preferences. However, given the relative consensus among voters, this item (the program’s accelerated 3-year curriculum) should not be overlooked in CPG’s brand.

Individual Primary Preferences – included 6 qualities (A, E, H, K, N, O) that were considered relatively important according to their median ranking but that a minority of participants (less than 11) included in their ranked list of 5. Qualities in this cell should be interpreted carefully as their relative position in the cell can be important. For example, while item A was ranked by only 3 people, each of them assigned a rank of 1 indicating they considered this item to be central to CPG's brand. Similarly, while item E is technically a member of this cell, it should be noted that a single additional vote would have moved it up to the Group Primary Preferences cell. This item would therefore appear to be something of a priority for branding consideration.

Individual Secondary Preferences – contained the remaining 8 attributes (T, S, J, G, I, U, Q, R) that at least 1 participant included on their ranked list of 5. While clearly of secondary importance, care should once again be taken regarding the relative position of the attribute in the cell. This would seem to be most appropriate for items T and S, both of which could be considered borderline members of their respective adjacent cells.