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A University's Brand in the Contemporary World

A UNIVERSITY'S BRAND IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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A strong brand is synonymous with a company's successful performance. At the same time it bears testimony to the high quality of the service (or product) offered by the company, be it a car maker, a food producer or a higher education institution.

The concept of the brand has a twofold interpretation:

„In the narrow understanding of the term, the brand is reduced to its main elements (the company name, logo, symbols and their combinations) whose purpose is to identify the offer of a given company and distinguish it from the competition.

If a consumer becomes aware of a brand, which means acquiring some knowledge about and forming a positive attitude to the brand, he will respond to a branded product in a different way than to a similar but unbranded product”.¹

Essentially, brands function at subliminal levels of consumer perception. This causes the client to respond to a product or service purchase in an emotional way, often ignoring its price. The client perceives a brand as a synonym of luxury, which symbolizes a certain economic status, a key that opens the door to a given societal sphere.

From the marketing perspective, clients buying branded products become marketing tools. They enhance the advertising of a given product or service. They join the ranks of people who give favourable opinions about the product/service.

Building a strong brand - regardless of the character of business activity - is the result of a long-term process supported by robust marketing. Today, in every sector of the economy, including education, there are companies that have built successful brands. They include Rolls Royce and Jaguar in the automobile industry, McDonald's and Coca Cola in the food sector, or Harvard and Cambridge in higher education, to mention just a few household names.

Brand is a product. Let's look for example at Rolls Royce - the company started in the years 1905-1906 by Charles Rolls and Henry Royce. In 1973 the company was divided into Rolls Royce Limited manufacturing aircraft engines and Rolls Royce Motors Cars dealing with car production. Over the years, Rolls Royce

¹ J. Kall, Zarządzanie marką instytucji badawczej w oparciu o model „Góry lodowej” [in:], Marketing Instytucji Naukowych i Badawczych, praca zbiorowa ed. by W. Łukowski, Wydawnictwa Naukowe Instytutu Lotnictwa, Warszawa, 2010, p. 33.

Motors Cars underwent a number of organizational changes including a merger with the car making company Vickers (1980), that concluded in its acquisition by Volkswagen (1998). In 2003 Volkswagen ceded the trademark rights to BMW.

Nowadays, reaching out to the client is becoming ever more sophisticated. This is why the role of marketing has seriously increased in the recent years. Practically every product, if it is to be launched on the market, requires marketing.

Modern marketing does not only meet client expectations through diagnosing their needs, dreams and desires but also uncovers, stimulates and even creates them. The essence of marketing is the realization that the client is the most important - satisfying the client's needs ensures a profit and, consequently, a future for the company. This is why key elements of marketing include: market research, product development, impact on the market, and pricing strategies.

Interestingly, a rudimentary definition of marketing understood as activity aimed at identifying, stimulating and satisfying the needs of business entities totally ignores the concepts of a brand or product quality. So it is possible to use aggressive marketing to promote a low-quality product.

Marketing activities can be described by the following elements: people, physical evidence, marketing mix, packaging, process, permission, recommendation, positioning, publicity, and distinction.

According to Jay Abraham² - a marketing strategist - there are three ways of raising a company's profitability as a result of marketing activities:

- gaining new clients,
- making clients buy more,
- making clients buy more often.

The above elements represent the main factors determining dynamic growth of a company.

In the context of the higher education market, branding and marketing activities assume a special significance.

Brand - in the case of a university - does not refer to one particular product but to the entire educational process including:

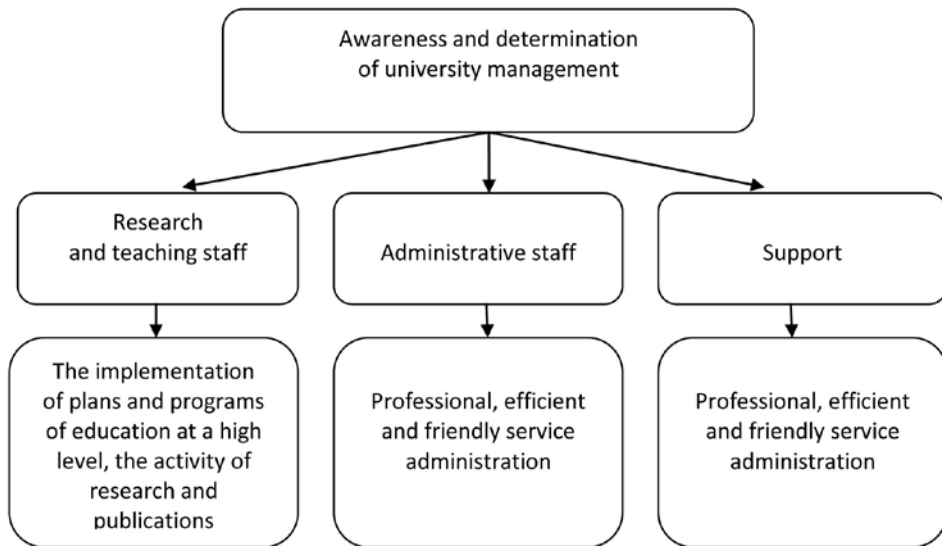
- academic staff,
- plans, curricula and methods of teaching,
- technical support,
- administrative staff,
- learning conditions.

To build a strong brand a university must not focus on one of the above elements only.

It is not sufficient to include in the university promotional materials information about teaching staff or learning facilities. Candidates analyse a university as a whole organism, a synergy of all elements combining to produce a well-functioning entity.

² www.enero.com.pl/strategia-marketingowa-jaya-abrahama/2.12.2012

Picture 1. Elements of a university involved in branding and their roles.



The most important element of the brand building process is client satisfaction. In the context of higher education, we can talk about two levels of client satisfaction:

- a student's satisfaction during studies,
- a graduate's satisfaction after obtaining a job which fulfils his expectations.

The first level of satisfaction is attained by a student while he is still studying. This stage involves all the elements presented in Figure 1. In this respect, awareness and determination of the management are of key significance. Both factors are absolutely crucial because they form the grounds for building competent university staff.

Professionalism generates mutual trust in the relations between:

- management - employee,
- employee - employee,
- university staff - other teams university,
- staff - student.

Both professionalism and mutual trust combine to create a friendly atmosphere at a university.

All the abovementioned elements combine to form a mechanism which serves as a basis for building a brand. A university degree is a resultant of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by the student during studies and later verified by job market requirements.

There is a strong connection between a university's brand and the labour market. The better the knowledge, skills and social competencies acquired by the student, the more competitive he is on the labour market.

For the purchaser of an education service, a university degree is a key to a better future, e.g. finding a job or getting a promotion. It is a means of attaining one's life goals. This is why in creating a brand the second level of a graduate's satisfaction is decisive.

Today, the task of a university is to prepare students for functioning in the labour market. The higher education reform sanctioned on 18 March 2011 by the amendment of the Act on Higher Education of 27 July 2005 (Journal of Laws 2012 art. 572 and 742) encourages universities to adjust programmes of studies to labour market requirements. In the academic year 2011/12, universities focused on adjusting curricula and programmes of studies to the Common Framework for Qualifications (Krajowe Ramy Kwalifikacji), a document drafted by the Polish Ministry of Education to provide a common reference for professional qualifications obtained at various schools. Universities also undertook efforts to enhance cooperation with employers, which resulted in establishing conventions comprising employers' representatives to serve as a platform for regular cooperation between higher education institutions and employers. The reform envisages implementing marketing activities into the designing of the educational process by universities. Universities are obliged by the abovementioned law to monitor alumni careers. The information collected concerns students who graduated three and five years ago. Questionnaires sent to a university's alumni provide information about issues such as the level of satisfaction with graduating from a particular university or the extent to which students have been prepared for work. The survey results are analysed and used to modify the education process by opening new faculties and specializations, and also by verifying plans and programmes of studies.

To a certain extent, the higher education reform prompts universities to build a brand by making them look for traits distinguishing them from other players on the education market.

Literature provides various methods of distancing companies or universities from competition.

Kim and Mauborgne in *Blue Ocean Strategy*³ suggest conducting the following types of analysis:

- analysis and verification of the existing offer,
- analysis aimed at reducing below the level currently offered by the industry, while maintaining the same level of customer satisfaction
- analysis aimed at diagnosing the elements of the current offering with which clients are not satisfied in order to introduce appropriate modifications,
- analysis in order to diagnose deficiencies of the present offer in a given sector so that it could be complemented by adding a distinction.

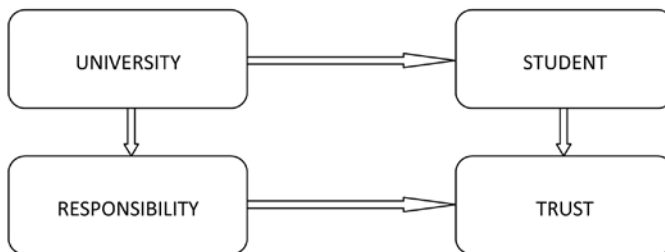
This method may seem simple but is it really about adding one minor element such as offering a laptop as a reward for students who choose a given university? This is merely a marketing gimmick aimed at raising enrolment numbers rather than building a successful brand of a university.

Brand is inseparable from the client's trust in the product. In the case of an educational service where the final result is a university degree, the graduate (client) trusts that this degree will be useful in the years to come. As such, a university degree should be capable of giving lasting satisfaction.

3 J. Kall, *Zarządzanie marką instytucji badawczej w oparciu o model „Góry lodowej”* (in:), *Marketing Instytucji Naukowych i Badawczych*, ed. W. Łukowski, Wydawnictwa Naukowe Instytutu Lotnictwa, Warszawa, 2010, pp. 37-38.

This approach to the method described above complicates the situation, especially if we consider that one permanent feature of today's world is constant change. A university has now very limited possibilities of predicting the future, including what faculties will guarantee students jobs and fulfil their expectations. Of great importance for building a strong brand is a university degree verifiable by the labour market. A degree will serve a graduate for many years after he has finished studies. So when thinking about creating a successful brand, a university must not lose sight of the responsibility for the product it offers to its graduates.

Picture 2. Relationships between the university and the student necessary for building a successful brand.



In view of the above, giving farfetched promises neither serves to create the relationships presented in Fig. 2 nor does it help to build a strong university brand. L.L. Berry and A. Parasuraman underline that „in the client-company relationship, trust is indispensable”⁴

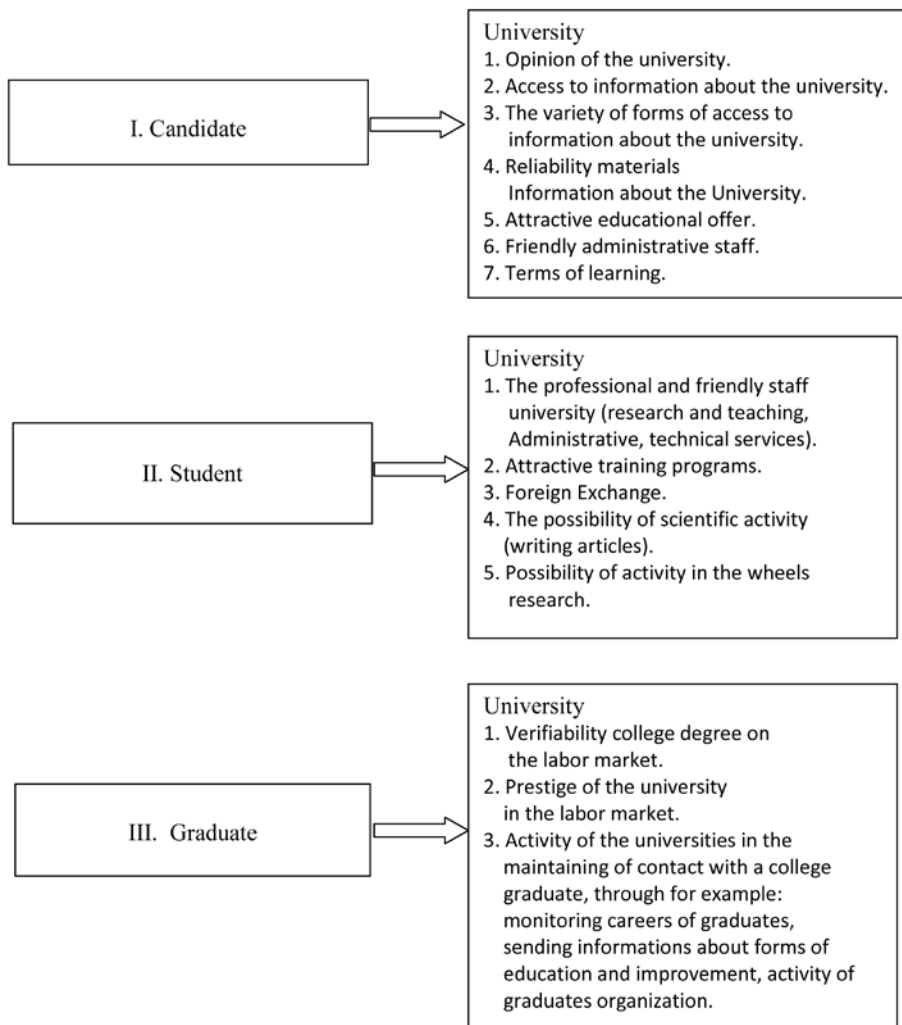
The above figure shows that building a relationship between the service provider and the consumer is a long-term process. Over this period, the consumer may change his opinion on the university. Another fact to consider is that as the educational process progresses consumer expectations may grow while it is also true that knowledge acquired during studies affects the evaluation of the university.

Satisfaction with the educational service provided is inseparable from service quality, i.e. the quality of teaching. Rogozińska contends that students will be satisfied with the service if its provision at least fulfils their expectations⁵. Quality evaluation will thus result from confronting student expectations with service quality. Consequently, the evaluation will be based on criteria such as honesty, flexibility in responding to change, a university's stable position on the education market, competent staff, approachability, and trust.

4 L. L. Berry, A. Parasuraman, *Marketing Services: Completing through Quality*, [in:] Furtak, *Marketing partnerski na rynku usług*, PWE, Warszawa, 2003, p. 164.

5 K. Rogozińska, *Nowy marketing usług*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Ekonomicznej, Poznań, 2000, p. 205.

Picture 3. Selected elements generating trust in a university in the case of a candidate, a student and a graduate.



Trust is a fundamental element in selecting a university by a candidate. As such, the element of trust must be taken into account in developing a university's marketing strategy. Creating the image of a trustworthy university assumes a special importance in today's insecure world. Consequently, there is a need for conscious, consistent and long-term management of trust both in the relationships with the student and with the university staff. A university's mission showcases its intentions. Thus, a mission should situate a university in the context of other higher education institutions active on the market. A mission statement should demonstrate how a university differs from the competition. A mission statement claiming that a university „educates highly-qualified personnel“ will not distinguish it from many

other higher education institutions in the country. At the same time, mission relates to a number of disparate addressees: candidates, students, university management and staff. As these are the people who are going to fulfil the mission, they need to know it, understand it and identify with it. Mission represents a sort of obligation towards the student, to be verified during and after studies. Mission is also an element of building trust and, consequently, a university's brand.

The university prestige denoted in Figure 3 often only comes into play after finishing studies. In choosing a university, candidates often take into consideration factors such as easiness of studying and positive word-of-mouth impressions.

Table 1. Motivation behind continuing studies towards a Master's degree.

Motivation	In total	Rank			Universities (1 st rank)
		I	II	III	public
<i>A natural consequence of undergraduate studies</i>	44	31.8	7.1	5.1	25.8
<i>Prestige</i>	50	26.7	16.4	6.9	34.8
<i>Easiness of studying</i>	34.5	8.1	14.6	11.8	6.3
<i>Position in the rankings</i>	17.5	2.5	5.9	9.1	3
Number of respondents	2 305				

Source: Outcomes of the research carried out by ORSE SGH in 2004.⁶

In the long run, prestige does play an important role in building a university's brand from the point of view of both management and students, alumni in particular.

Prestige is built by the academic staff, programmes of studies, and the learning conditions, to name the most important factors. A programme of studies is a distinctive element that sets a university apart from the competition, and by doing so decides its competitive advantage. In the context of higher education marketing, it is also important to remember about the aforementioned process of adjusting programmes of studies to the labour market requirements.

The above analysis would not be complete without pointing out the complex character of the process of building a brand, a university's brand in particular, including private higher education institutions. The oldest private universities in Poland were established 18 or 19 years ago as compared to the Jagiellonian University, the oldest public university in Poland founded in 1364. As the present paper has aimed

⁶ G. Nowaczyk, P. Lisiecki, *Marketingowe zarządzanie szkołą*, Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Bankowej w Poznaniu, Poznań, 2006, p. 52.

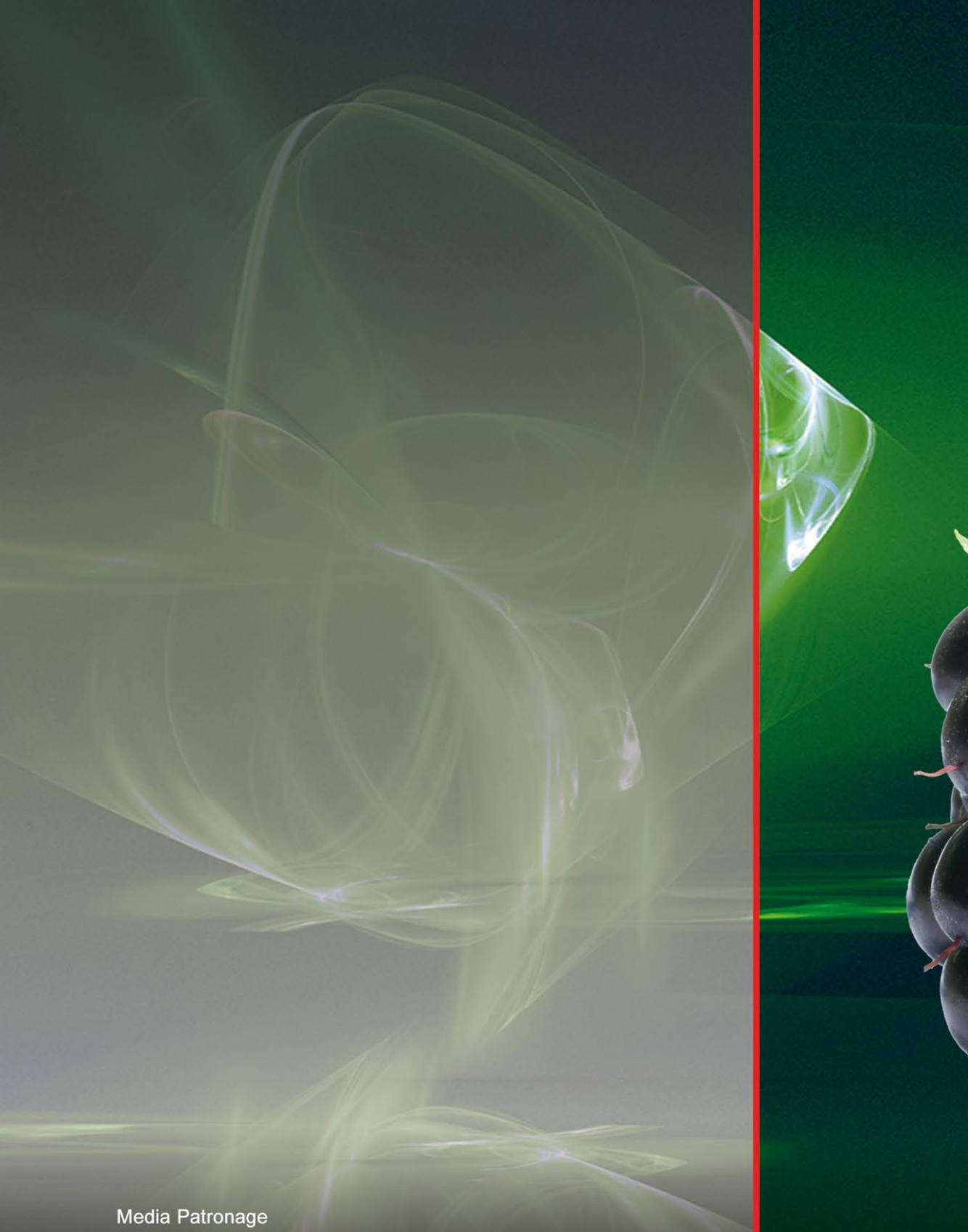
to demonstrate, creating a university's brand takes time needed to verify the university's offer and build trust. Not all legal regulations introduced by the education reform can be regarded as supporting higher education in Poland. This is so despite the fact that private schools have functioned in Poland for a dozen or so years now, which seems long enough for the academic milieu to draw conclusions regarding, among other issues, honest and responsible treatment of students.

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