

Brand Identity: An Overview and a Roadmap for Educational Organizations in Japan

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of brand identity, its implications and a roadmap for educational organizations; namely, post-secondary schools in Japan. Brand identity is concerned with how a brand or organization is perceived in the user's mind. The educational landscape in Japan is quickly changing due to lower numbers of applicants to post-secondary schools, while at the same time the numbers of schools have been increasing. This is causing heightened competition for traditionally aged Japanese students. New trends in applicants from overseas and adult / mature students is also on the rise. With this growing competition and the emergence of new segments, the brand identity, or the perception of a school by all stakeholders, is of primary concern in order to gain a comparative advantage over other institutions and garner interest amongst students to a school's offerings. Failure to do so will place organizations at risk of being substituted by those that actively seek to address present and future needs that are being demanded in the 21st century. This paper has a rudimentary roadmap and recommends tools that an organization can use to start the top-to-bottom process of creating or recreating a brand to align internal and external values and perceptions.

Keywords: *Brand identity, marketing, educational organization, roadmap, Japan*

1 Introduction

It has been said that the identity you think you are does not exist. If that is the case, how can individuals and organizations identify who they are and how they are perceived? Identifying how an organization is perceived can be a daunting, yet revealing task. The identification process may exhibit differing opinions and responses from varying sources that reveal contrasting sentiments and illustrate how internal and external viewpoints can coincide or differ from one person or organization to the

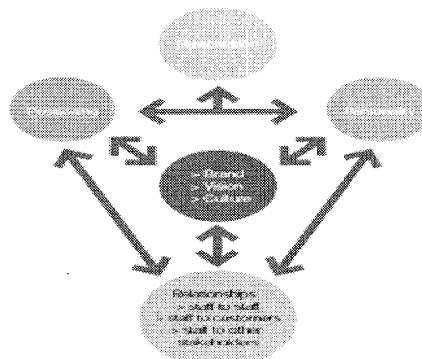
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next. The way we perceive ourselves as opposed to how others perceive us and how we want to be perceived is also constantly in flux. Organizations are increasingly concerned, and rightfully so, with their identities and how they and their products and services are perceived by customers. How the brand is perceived is what brand identity seeks to address. Kotler (2007) defines brand identity as “the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in the associations held in consumer memory”.ⁱ The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) puts it as “what exists in the minds of consumers. It is the total of all the information they have about the brand, whether from experience, word of mouth, packaging, marketing, service and so on.”ⁱⁱ Simply put, successful identifying of a brand should tell us “who” the product is, what it does and why customers should careⁱⁱⁱ. This paper will examine the various components of what defines brand identity, provide an overview of the Japanese education sector, and apply a brand identity roadmap and tools that can assist general educational institutions in Japan with an evaluation of their brand identity.

2 Brand Identity

de Chernatoney (2001) states that brand identity is made up of the elements exhibited in Figure 1 and explained below. From this figure we can see how a brand’s vision and culture is interlinked with positioning, personality and relationships and all these elements result in the overall brand presentation. Comprehension of market forces, trends and how consumers receive the message that an organization wants to be received in the presentation greatly aids in achieving a favorable brand identity.

Figure 1: Elements of Brand Identity



Source: de Chernatoney (2001)

- 2.1 Brand positioning** can be thought of as “not what you do with the product but what you do with the mind”.^{iv} The mind is the proverbial battleground and determining how to mesh organizational and product values with consumer thoughts about the brand is the challenge. This is especially difficult due to the increasing hordes of messages that consumers receive about different brands. These days with internet, radio, television and the ever-increasing saturation of media in our lives, it has been estimated that this figure can reach upwards of 5000 forms of contact on a daily basis^v. Therefore, it is crucial that organizations understand what results in the minds of customers when they think of the brand and how to make a lasting, quality impression. For instance, the Lexus brand position may impart an impression of high quality and luxury or a graduate from Tokyo University may be considered an elite student.
- 2.2 Brand personality** refers to emotional values that are related to the product. The brand personality can “become symbolic devices with personalities that users welcome – comparable to a celebrity. It is thus important to understand the emotional role potential customers expect of the brand in terms of the self consumers believe they are, the self they desire to be, and the self in particular situations.”^{vi} Using the same two examples from above, the brand personality of Lexus may be one of wealth, reliability and safety and the Tokyo graduate may be perceived as being responsible, intelligent and promising.
- 2.3 Brand relationships** and relationships in general are something that all humans crave for in one-way, shape or form. The relationships that we have with brands form and reinforce our identities and how we imagine ourselves. “If brands can be personified, then consumers can have relationships with them. Customers choose brands in part because they seek to understand themselves and to communicate aspects of themselves to others.”^{vii} The brand relationship that Lexus has formed with its customers may be exclusive and limited while the Tokyo University brand relationship could be forever and respected.

There are a number of advantages of having a strong brand, such as improved perceptions of product performance, loyalty, less vulnerability to competition, larger margins, more inelastic

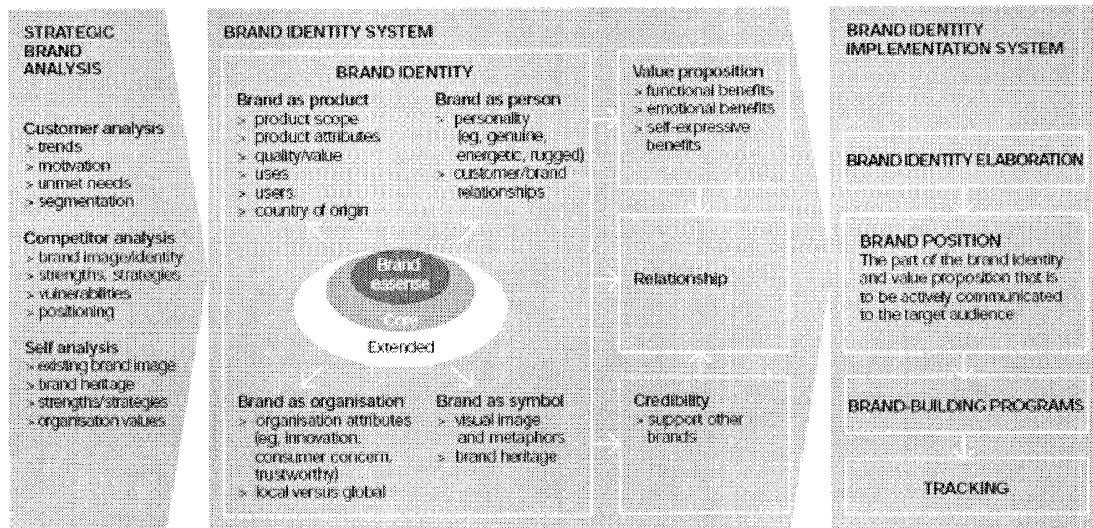
consumer response to price increases and more elastic response to price decreases, greater cooperation and support, marketing communications effectiveness, and brand extension opportunities.^{viii} In order to develop, cultivate and take advantage of all the benefits of a successful brand identity, an organization must firmly grasp whom their customers and stakeholders are as well as identify their competitors. This can be achieved by way of a thorough internal and external market analysis that should reveal met and unmet needs, target markets, trends, segments, niches, motivating factors of customers, strengths and most importantly weaknesses of the organization.

Brand identity is not only the “swoosh” of the Nike symbol or the apple of Macintosh. It is portrayed by all points that customers see and come in contact with such as correspondence, telephone calls, appearance and rapport of staff, web site, labels, logos, articles and word-of-mouth. It is why de Chernatony 1999 argues:

More emphasis needs to be placed on brand identity. Identity is about ethos, aims and values that present a sense of individuality differentiating the brand. A brand's identity, vision and culture drive positioning, personality, and any other subsequent relationships. In this sense, employees and staff members' vision and culture affect the brand building process. More attention should be placed on internal aspects of branding, such as the role staff plays in shaping a brand's values.^{ix}

The full scope and stages of brand identity are shown in figure 2 below. The vital steps are outlined in this model of brand identity planning. From the strategic brand analysis of customers, competitors and self to identifying the brand as a product, person, symbol or organization and all the way to implementing the brand identity system. As the figure shows us, it is quite a comprehensive procedure that requires the participation of all stakeholders.

Figure 2 indicates the overall scope of brand identity and shows us that branding is deeper than the surface. It takes more than a few, slick commercials, a colorful brochure or a fancy logo to attain a successful brand identity. It is an organizational undertaking. Organizations must realize that all their actions affect their identity. As de Chernatoney (1999) states, “more attention should be placed on internal aspects of branding, such as the role staff plays in shaping a brand's values.”^x

Figure 2: Brand Identity Planning Model

Source: Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000)

3 Brand Identity Application – A Roadmap for Educational Organizations

Figure 2 above exemplifies a sample roadmap of what is involved in the brand identity evaluation and construction process. The first step the marketing analysis of brand identity and as outlined above begins with analysing the customer, in particular present trends, motivation, unmet needs and segmentation. For this paper, the educational sector in Japan was chosen as a sample. A quick overview of the Japanese population can reveal some clear shifts in the market. This next section will detail the demography of Japan, growing trends, discuss the implications of brand identity of educational organizations and provide a generic adaptation of Aaker's model that can be applied as a rudimentary road map for the brand identification of a school.

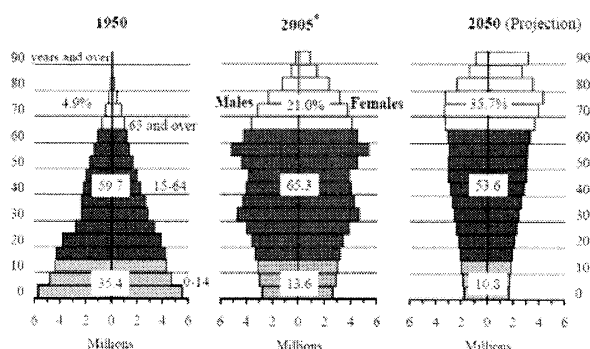
3.1 Market Overview and Analysis - Japan's Educational Landscape

The educational landscape in Japan is quickly changing due to demographic shifts and trends in the population. In particular, population growth has slowed in more recent years with the annual increases averaging about one percent from the 1960s through the 1970s. Since the 1980s, it has declined sharply. The population estimate of 127,433,494^{xi} released in July, 2007 was .088% below the 2006 estimate and this marked the first time since World War II that the population has fallen compared to the previous year, and what is widely considered the beginning of a population decline in

Japan.”^{xii} Figure 3 below exhibits how the population pyramid has been changing and is expected to change in the future. Immigration rates are very low and the United Nations has “assumed no net immigration to Japan through to 2050”^{xiii}, which means that chances of immigrants filling seats or supplementing declines are not likely.

This demographic trend is thought to have a serious impact on many segments of the education sector. In this ever-increasing competitive climate, major change is necessary in how educational institutions attract students. The institutions that have not built brands that students, their parents and future employers recognize as “reputable” are already starting to scrounge for new students. The decreasing numbers of traditionally aged Japanese students and the large amount of schools that have been accustomed to a steady flow of students will force the majority of the schools that do not have the luxury of relying on their brand name to be creative when cultivating an appealing and unique brand.

Figure 3 Changes in Japan’s Population Pyramid



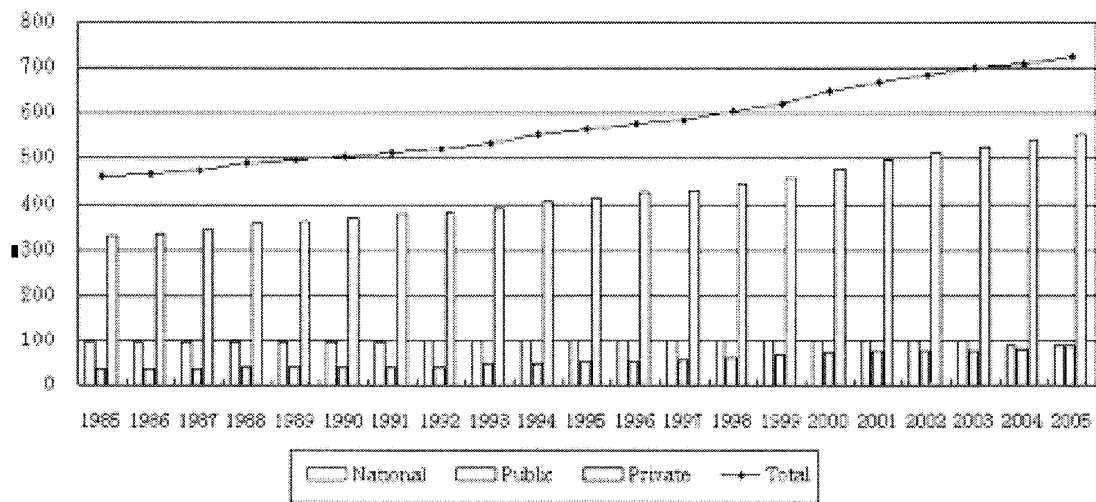
Source: Statistics Bureau, MIC; Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

3.2 Educational Landscape, Competition and Growing Trends Analysis

In spite of this negative demographic trend, it is interesting to note that the number of post-secondary institutions have actually been on the rise (Figure 4). Furthermore, recent statistics report that the number of enrolments in post-secondary institutions is actually increasing (Figure 5) even though the overall population is decreasing. Where are these numbers coming from? Perhaps the saturation of schools throughout the country is making it easier and more accessible for students to attend many types of post-secondary schools. This may be the case but analysis of these figures shows

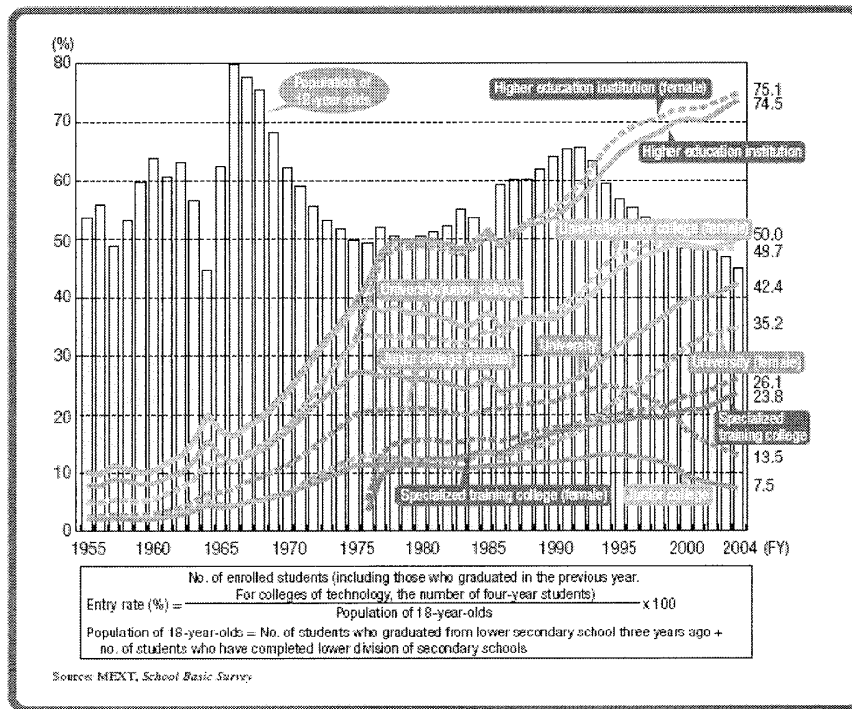
us a new trend emerging. The numbers of adult students (Figure 6) and international students (Figure 7) have been increasing in recent years. Although these figures have yet to reach a level to offset the drop in traditionally aged students (recent high school graduates), they indicate a number of trends about the individuals entering post secondary institutions and illustrate the emergence of new target segments. Traditional students are definitely the main source of enrolment but this relatively new trend of a developing segment in Japan is clearly evolving.

Figure 4: Number of Japanese Universities (1985-2005)



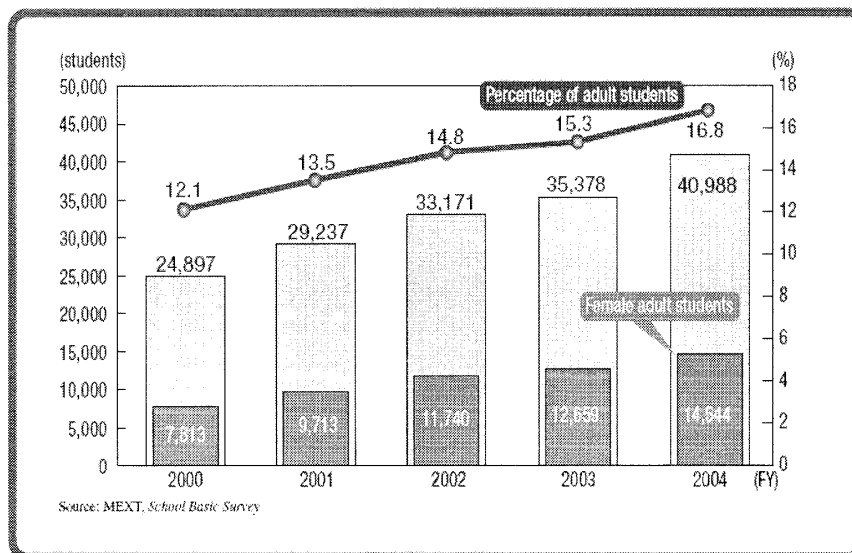
Source: MEXT, School Basic Survey (2005)

Figure 5: Trends in Entry Rates to Higher Education in Japan

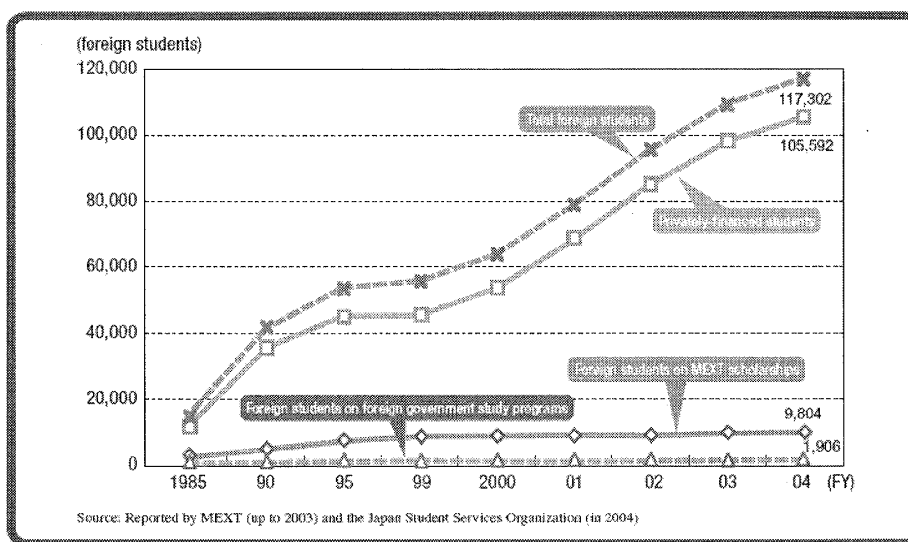


Source: MEXT, School Basic Survey (2005)

Figure 6: Trends in Number of Adult Post Secondary Students



Source: MEXT, School Basic Survey (2005)

Figure 7: Trends in Number of Foreign Post Secondary Students

Source: MEXT, School Basic Survey (2005)

3.3 Organizational Brand Identity

In the educational sector, where the product itself is somewhat intangible, and where the name of the organization is more often than not a major drawing factor for students, the rules of brand identity are slightly different. Building up a brand that has long-lasting favour and is respected is an organization-wide effort. The Chartered Institute of Marketing defines an organization brand as “neither a product/service nor a corporate brand, it is wider than both. It relates to all stakeholders and in many cases is rarely advertised. The organization brand represents the impression people inside and outside the organization have of it.”^{xiv} It is this last sentence that is critical. The impression of an organization by people inside and outside strongly affects its brand identity and consequently whether or not a school is looked upon favorably by stakeholders and potential students. This next section will discuss a roadmap and tools that can be used for revitalizing an educational organization’s brand identity.

3.4 Brand Identity Roadmap and Points of Consideration for Educational Institutions

The rise in post-secondary schools exhibited in figure 4 can lead us to conclude that the increase in schools is a major contributing factor to competition for the decreasing numbers of Japanese

students and rising numbers of adult and foreign students. The lower numbers of applications of traditional students in many Japanese universities is drastically down in many post-secondary schools over the last decade and this leads administration and staff wondering why students aren't enrolling, and more importantly how to attract students to register. Many point fingers to the steady decrease of students but as the above figures show, this is not necessarily the case.

The cause of the lower numbers of applicants in many schools is perhaps elsewhere; namely, an organization's weak reputation and brand identity. For instance, a school may give the impression of not reflecting current and future needs, programs that may be considered weak, not technologically equipped, and campus life or extracurricular activities may not be supported and promoted. In order to rectify this potentially crippling situation, management and administration has to actively tackle this problem from the inside. Weak leadership and the absence of a clear sense of direction are major impediments towards the process of establishing a reputable brand identity. This top to bottom overhaul is something that requires major organizational cultural change and will not start without management's realization and desire of a need for change.

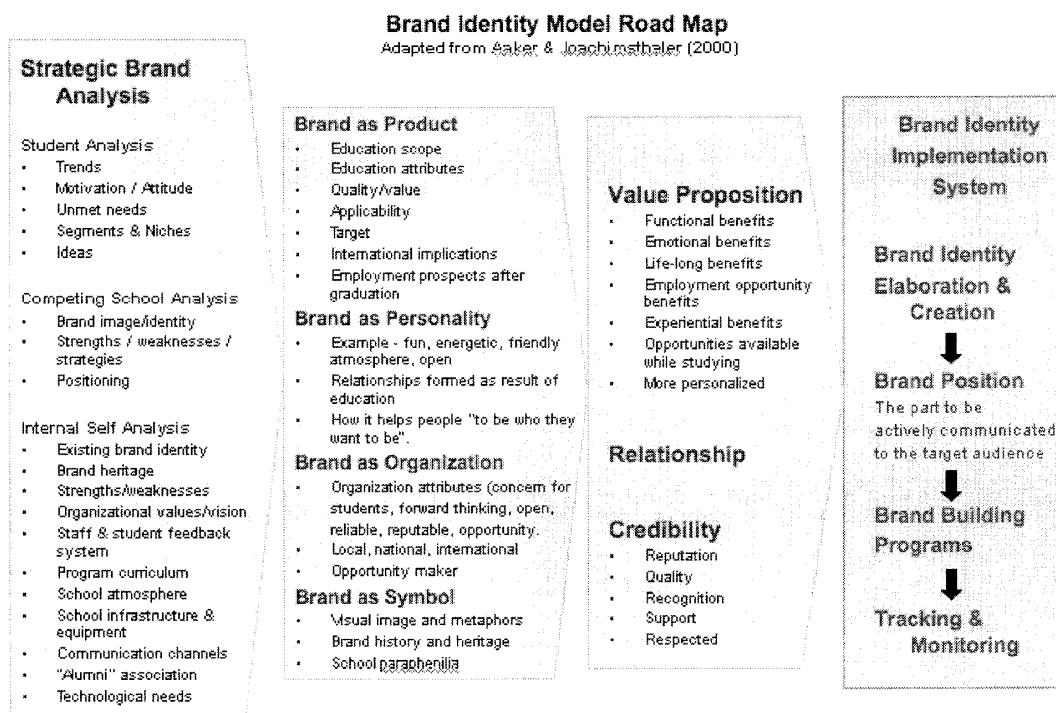
To start this brand revitalization process, the use of internal and external focus groups or conducting market surveys can deliver insight into what an organization's brand position is, what people's needs are, where improvements can be made and what are its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT analysis). Any negative perceptions found must be addressed promptly so as to align internal values with external perceptions. Naturally, it is essential to tackle negative perceptions as soon as possible. Kotler (2007) has acknowledged the need to swiftly address negative impressions of a brand:

If a firm is slow to respond to a marketing crisis, i.e. a tainted identity, consumers may form negative impressions as a result of unfavourable media coverage or word of mouth. Even worse, consumers may find out that they do not really like the brand much and permanently switch to alternative brands or products. The firm's response must also be sincere and be willing to take whatever steps are necessary and feasible to solve the crisis. Otherwise, consumers may form negative attributions.^{xv}

Japan is a country where word of mouth and reputation account for a very large amount of consumer "buy in" or abandonment. As a negative identity domino effect begins to take hold and perceptions become reality in customer minds, there is little that can be done and a brand must start

from scratch and rebuild its suffering reputation. This revitalization process requires management to be proactive when revitalizing the new brand culture. As Aaker and Joachimsthaler's (2000) (Figure 2 above) model indicates, the brand building or revitalization process must start with a thorough market analysis of competitors / other universities in the region, potential students (traditional, foreign, adults and "lifelong learners"), and a complete internal self evaluation of programs, curriculum, equipment, access, "school spirit", attitudes, etc. to identify weaknesses. Figure 8 below is a rudimentary roadmap for an educational organization. Comprehensive assessment of each aspect and clear action plans outlining proactive steps must be constructed or else suffer the possibility of any initial efforts being lost and not implemented. Failure to do this will arguably result in further damage to the brand, internal organizational strife and possible collapse. The Aaker et al. model has been slightly adapted to apply to a school.

Figure 8: Adapted Brand Identity Model



In addition to Figure 8, CIM lists a number of questions that are useful for organizations to ask themselves when evaluating their brand(s). These have been slightly altered to apply to an educational organization. In addition to the above model, these questions are a good place to start an analysis of a school's brand. Including all stakeholders in this evaluation process and implementing the necessary

changes will only better operations and strengthen the brand to one that can be looked up to.

- *Gauge the organization's understanding of its brand.*
- *What makes the brand promise distinct/differentiated? Is this meaningful to students?*
- *Is the brand's promise being consistently delivered and promoted by all members of the school and its partners within the system?*
- *Identify those 'brand encounters' that have impact with users. Do these add to the brand, detract from it, or have no effect?*
- *Identify those people and activities that influence brand encounters. Are these being managed to clarify and strengthen the brand?*
- *Assess the brand from the perspective of each stakeholder. Is it being managed positively for each stakeholder?^{xvi}*

If thoroughly carried out, this ongoing, top-to-bottom process will reveal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, missed chances, partnerships, job market trends for graduates and employer requirements, student desires and all these components should result in an action plan. It will also spell out an organization's comparative advantage and reveal what needs to be done, practices that can be altered, action that must be taken, segments that are unexploited and areas that have yet to be explored. This is a valuable chance to continually improve and consistently deliver a valuable product to students.

3.5 Market Analysis Tools To Aid In The Brand Identity Process

The following is a list of tools that could be used in the brand identification process. A workshop style format that involves all stakeholders in the decision-making is the ideal method when coming up with solutions and problem solving. This will assure a comprehensive view of all standpoints and aid in both gaining insight as to the present position and creating an action plan for the future. These tools will support and can be used in conjunction with the roadmap steps featured in figure 8.

- SWOT analysis
- Conjoint analysis
- Focus groups
- Surveys
- Brand position / brand statement
- Guerrilla marketing
- Public relations, press releases, internet, blogging, website
- Internal marketing
- Benefits/features/needs analysis

4 Conclusion

Carl Jung said, “Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakes”. Identifying and finding the true essence of how to make a brand into a successful beacon requires an organization to first take an honest look at itself from the inside. This is what organizations must do within themselves if they hope to be sensitive to external needs and allow their internal workings to continually adapt to external demands. Understanding the characteristics of the product, what its “personality” portrays, knowing who it is aimed for, why customers should care about it and what makes it different and unique to users compared to what the competition is offering are all crucial things to comprehend on the road to establishing a strong brand identity. The organization as a whole through its points of contact, public relations, appearance, present and past user satisfaction, and the culture that makes it thrive are all factors to formulating a solid brand identity. Anything less is merely superficial and transparent, ultimately producing a product that customers do not value. It is management that must take steps to be proactive so that the internal culture of the brand is personified throughout the whole organization. In the present age of the internet where customers can easily compare and substitute products and services, the demise of organizations with out-of-touch, weak products and brand identities that lack favorability amongst users is inevitable. Brand identity is more than skin deep and it is the organization that actively and continuously strives to constantly improve their total offerings and nurture their unique cultures that will capture long-lasting favor with students/customers. The increasingly competitive education market sector in Japan is not exempt from the rules that other

sectors play by. The opportunity is there in this new era for organizations that wish to create or recreate new educational models that truly align needs, values, impact learners and provide end-to-end learning experiences that benefit all.

ENDNOTES

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