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What it takes to re-brand a university

In the post-Bradley world, tertiary institutions will need to compete more vigorously in regional, national and international markets. This can mean re-thinking the brand. We asked one company what was involved – warts and all.



student intake from metropolitan areas, while growing its presence in regional markets. New models for research funding made it imperative to improve understanding of the university's specialist capabilities among Government and funding bodies.

Of course, universities are evidence-based institutions, places where the subject of branding is often met with a healthy dose of scepticism. For many university staff, branding and marketing is the domain of consumer goods companies. We have a good name, good academic staff and a recognised logo - surely that is enough?

But projecting a coherent idea of a diverse educational institution requires much more than a common name and a logo. It means understanding the common threads that unify the institution's activities, as well as the things that are genuinely different about the way it performs its role.

Initial scepticism started to dissolve during collaborative workshops with senior staff that addressed these issues. A consensus formed that CSU could improve the way it articulated its role, why it was different and the unique national and regional contribution it made.

Given the earlier scepticism, and being conscious that a previous re-brand had struggled, perhaps because of a too-narrow focus on visual identity and internal perspectives, BrandMatters took a careful approach. A successful branding project would have to proceed in bite-sized chunks, that internal and external stakeholders could readily assimilate.

Two things worked in our favour. First, the re-branding had the imprimatur of the CSU's top executive team, with a reporting line directly to the vice-chancellor. Second, CSU aligned the re-brand to the development of a new university strategy. This meant both processes could be shaped by common input from internal and external stakeholders.

The CSU Council took time to fully swing behind the re-branding. Councillors understood there was a strong attachment to the existing identity, and that any change had to be based on robust research and planning. Detailed preparatory work and presentations backed by strong arguments in favour

of re-branding from Councillors with industry and employer links, proved important.

Initial feedback gleaned in interviews with more than a dozen influential figures from industry, employers, TAFE and the Australian higher education sector confirmed the need for a new approach. This feedback was best depicted as a road cycling analogy. Leading the pack was the 'breakaway' group, comprised of the Group of 8 and some other research-focussed universities. Next was the 'peloton', comprising the mid-tier of universities, with an applied learning and research focus. Following this group was smaller universities and the vocational sector. While the peloton group aspired to join the breakaway, natural gravity went the other way. CSU was in the peloton and would need to pedal hard in an evolving market environment.

A comprehensive market research study of the student and employer experiences of CSU, involving more than 500 respondents, followed. Students surveyed included current and international students, and even those who had been offered a place at CSU but went elsewhere. Of the employers, 72 per cent had employed a CSU graduate.

Respondents considered CSU to be flexible, responsive and supportive, and closely integrated with the regional communities it served. Students almost always enjoyed their time at CSU, and employers valued CSU's record for working with them to ensure students were prepared for professional life. But feedback also suggested that CSU had to continue its work to improve the consistency of experience across all campuses and delivery modes.

Stakeholder research insight was critical to shaping a brand essence for CSU that rang true, for carving out those attributes CSU "owned", and those it didn't. CSU was not a "sandstone" institution, but nor was it autocratic, exclusive or arrogant. CSU was not necessarily known for its facilities and physical appearance, a long heritage or extensive research profile. It was, however, highly regarded for offering students a strong sense of community and support, for its flexibility, and for producing 'work-ready' graduates.

In short, what spoke most loudly in the research was CSU's perceived willingness to listen to and work collaboratively with external stakeholder groups, and its genuine respect for partnerships. Respondents felt that, whereas many other institutions applied a directive approach to their partnerships, CSU consistently sought mutual benefits, in an approach characterised by dialogue and respect.

For branding professionals the unveiling of a re-brand to an academic institution can be nerve-racking. The rigour of the process and consultation meant this was not the case at CSU. Our meeting with CSU's Council in late 2010 to present the proposed new identity was successful.

The new brand essence – 'Better Together', backed by a modified Sturt Desert Pea motif – was launched last month. In the words of CSU Vice-Chancellor Ian Goulter: "The strength of the University's brand is best revealed through our individual and collective actions and behaviour. Examples include working collaboratively with employers and industry associations in course design and accreditation; breaking down the isolation that online and distance education students can sometimes feel when studying away from a campus; and working more closely with industry to create more relevant research programs".

Paul Nelson is Managing Director of Brand Matters, a Sydney-based brand and marketing consultancy. ■

When BrandMatters began working with CSU in 2009, it was considered a model regional university in the Dawkins mould writes **Paul Nelson**.

In a little more than 20 years CSU had expanded from three to eight campuses, in Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Ontario (Canada), Orange and Wagga Wagga, with teaching links to higher education institutions in Europe and Asia. It had evolved areas of teaching and research specialisation – agriculture, health, professional ethics and policing, for example – that played well to its geographical advantage, student demand and industry need.

Yet CSU's geographic location sometimes obscured its broader role. It was the largest university in regional Australia, but also played a major role in educating professionals for national and state labour markets. It had a strong reputation for providing distance education to rural and remote students, but it was often overlooked that CSU was also the largest national provider of online courses in Australia. And while 75 per cent of CSU's on-campus students came from a rural or remote location, one of its largest student cohorts was in fact from a metropolitan centre.

Rapid growth also meant perceptions of CSU were confused. Use of unauthorised logos and inconsistent visual styles exacerbated this confusion and eroded the coherency of CSU's brand. CSU's 'One University' model, launched in 2007 to bring consistency to the CSU experience across all campuses, had partly addressed this issue, but problems remained.

There were other portents of change. With the uncapping of the higher education market there was a feeling CSU had to work harder to communicate its unique role. It would have to compete for student places and for research dollars, maintaining its