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A Framework for Using Customer Journey Mapping Alongside Digital Content Marketing to Build the College Brand

Julie M. Pharr

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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how customer journey mapping can be applied in colleges and universities to facilitate content-rich branding. A customer journey map for higher education is created and illustrates how a student's journey may be broken into phases of prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase. Each stage is subdivided to show important touchpoints that occur in that stage. Touchpoints may be firm-initiated or customer-initiated, but research shows that customer-initiated touchpoints are becoming increasingly more numerous. The paper demonstrates how content-rich branding, through reliance on the use of relevant content, can be used to stimulate frequent positive customer-firm interactions. Customer journey analysis is part of the increasingly popular domain of customer experience management (CXM).

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, higher education marketing has been confronted with an array of challenging environmental trends. External forces such as the elevated profile of college rankings, rising tuition costs that focus attention on value and quality, and changing student expectations driven by rapid technological advances have contributed to a growing interest by many institutions in the process of brand building, i.e. leveraging institutional values to create a distinctive university brand (Girard 2016; Bunzel 2007).

A recent headline in the AMA's *Marketing News*¹ announced "College Enrollment Is Stagnating and Only Marketing Can Help" while a white paper² from a leading higher education marketing agency claimed:

"The [higher-ed] industry as a whole is undergoing significant change and university decision-makers have many challenges to address...ranging from unpredictable enrollment to lack of internal cohesion among departments and divisions to the inability to differentiate the brand in a crowded EDU space."

¹ See Conick, H. (2017), "Can Marketing Save University Enrollment Rates?" in *Marketing News*, 51 (10), November/December 2017, pp. 56-63.

² See "The Two Forces Behind Higher Ed Marketing" available at <http://pages.r2integrated.com> from R2i, retrieved November 2, 2017.

The last of these challenges—the inability to differentiate a university’s brand—represents a particular problem in an age where students rely on the internet and social media to engage with university brands. Students, like other consumers, seek out marketing content when and where they want it, making the time when institutions could tightly control and deftly publicize a desired brand image via broadcast communication quickly passing. Gone are the days when marketers, including universities, could convince broad swaths of their target markets of the advantages and benefits of their offerings via paid mass-media advertising (Scott 2015).

Commensurate with the changing environment, a review of the university branding literature reveals at least four strategies by which university brand development has been attempted: (1) internal branding; (2) consumer-based branding; (3) open-source branding, and (4) content-rich branding. This paper focuses on the last of these methods, content-rich branding via digital content marketing. The paper highlights the advantages of content-rich branding and illustrates how it may be optimized using the burgeoning customer experience management (CXM) technique of customer journey mapping.

Traditional Approaches to University Branding

How does a university typically build its brand? It would appear many if not most have taken the traditional route of internal branding (Black 2008). With a strategy of internal branding, the brand message is chosen by university administrators and communicated primarily through mass-media advertising and other forms of broadcast messaging or outbound marketing (e.g. direct mail campaigns).

Research indicates the internal approach to college branding has produced limited success (Black 2008, Bunzel 2007, Jevons 2006). Bunzel (2007), for example, found universities that explicitly focused on brand-building via mass media and central message control produced no significant gains in third-party rankings or brand trust among students. A number of reasons have been offered in explanation for the lackluster results: universities do not understand what drives brand equity in their institutions (Ng & Forbes 2009); branding at complex non-profits such as universities should not take the same approach as that used in commercial organizations (Black 2008); and universities do not understand the brand "ecosystem" and fail to account for interdependencies between brand drivers (Pinar et al 2011).

Given that one of the biggest criticisms of internal branding has been that the brand message is created by administrators rather than organically determined based on the perceptions of students, alumni, and other external constituents, a second approach called consumer-based branding has been applied in higher education institutions (Pinar et. al. 2011). Consumer-based branding gives the consumers (i.e. students and other university stakeholders) a voice in the brand-building process. Its proponents say that it ensures a university’s positioning and messaging are grounded in the current reality rather than based merely on institutional aspirations or a “flavor-of-the-month” approach (Black 2008).

A preference for the consumer-based approach to brand-building has led to research into student perceptions of the importance of various dimensions of university brand equity (Pinar et. al. 2011). A recent study subdivides the most important drivers of university brand equity into core

versus supporting dimensions (Girard et. al. 2016). Included in the core dimensions are perceived quality, learning environment, brand trust, emotional environment, university reputation, brand associations, and brand awareness. The support dimensions include physical facilities, library services, dining services, and residence halls. The research uncovered a network of significant interdependencies among these dimensions (e.g. perceptions of library services affected perceptions of perceived quality which affected perceptions of learning environment, etc.) and they were found to vary in importance according to students' gender, class, and living arrangement (on versus off campus). Under this approach, antecedents of core dimensions also become important. For example, the components of perceived quality and learning environment hinge on such factors as faculty instructional quality, faculty expertise, state-of-the-art technology, faculty availability and empathy, accessible learning support services, and high academic standards (Girard et. al. 2016).

Although the perceptions of students are considered in the consumer-based approach, both it and internal branding emphasize *a priori* endogenous organization traits or dimensions as the key factors in building a brand. The major difference between the two approaches is that administrators' values and perceptions are emphasized in internal branding while student and stakeholder values and perceptions are emphasized in consumer-based branding.

Nontraditional Approaches to University Branding

Two nontraditional approaches to university branding are open-source branding and content-rich branding. Open-source branding hinges on user-generated content (UGC). Krishnamurthy et al. (2008) define user-generated content as information about products, brands, ideas, organizations, and services, usually informed by personal experiences, that exists in consumer-generated postings on social media sites, internet discussion boards, forums, user groups, and blogs, and includes text, images, photos, videos, podcasts, and other forms of media. User-generated content exists because people no longer merely consume marketing content; they produce it themselves by creating, editing, organizing, and sharing information, reshaping the contributions of others, and engaging in peer-to-peer discussion.

Open-source branding is designed to take advantage of brand-related content that is produced by the consumers of a product or service and not by the marketer. Every day, millions of ordinary people unwittingly publish their own brand-related content by posting personal information, photos, videos, opinions, and knowledge that incorporate products or brands to social media sites. As people include brands in their online behavior, one very important side effect is that the brand's message is increasingly shaped and delivered by the individuals and not the marketer. The term that has been coined to describe this phenomenon is "open-source branding" (Fournier & Avery 2011).

Researchers (Berry et. al. 2010) extoll the virtues of open-source branding especially to organizations that target millennials (those born between 1981 and 1999) because millennials prefer social media to more traditional methods of communication, are prolific creators of content (i.e. UGC) (Bolton et. al. 2013), and prefer to engage with organizations and brands that allow them to express themselves by sharing or creating content. Pharr (2016) contends that open-source branding is a natural choice for universities, whose primary target market fits

squarely into the millennial demographic, and offers a model for transitioning from consumer-based branding to open-source branding for universities. Among the caveats mentioned are that universities wanting to take full advantage of the open-source branding approach must change their institutional communications from broadcast-dominated to conversational through heavy reliance on social media platforms that permit and encourage user-generated content (Pharr 2016).

Meanwhile, the pronounced change in buyer behavior away from outbound marketing has fostered the growth of another emergent method of brand building that involves a reliance on digital content marketing. The Content Marketing Institute (<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com>) defines digital content marketing as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing relevant and valuable content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action.” Holliman and Rowley (2014) define digital content marketing as “an inbound marketing technique, effected through web page, social media and value-added content” and go on to explain that digital content marketing requires brands to take a ‘publishing’ approach to marketing, which involves developing a deep understanding of the audience’s information needs.

The implications for brand-building of the content-rich approach are becoming more widely acknowledged (see Chapman 2017, Panda-Ved 2016, Baltes 2015, Holliman & Rowley 2014). Baltes (2015) contends that, when used appropriately and done consistently, content marketing is not overtly intended to support the sales process but rather to “position an [organization] within a space” in an attempt to either create or reinforce the desired brand messaging. Other advocates endorse content marketing as “a useful tool for achieving and sustaining trusted brand status” but warn that it requires a change from ‘selling’ to ‘helping’ in an organization’s marketing orientation (Chapman 2017, Holliman & Rowley 2014).

Content-rich branding is popular because the internet has revolutionized the way consumers search for and process product- and brand-related information. Content marketing is designed to engage consumers who are actively searching for guidance and information before making a complex purchase decision by delivering to them relevant and valuable information. The reliance of digital content marketing on “content” makes the nature of the content central to the branding approach. Forrester digital research company (www.forrester.com) defines branded marketing content as “content that is developed or curated by a brand to provide added consumer value such as education. It is designed to build brand consideration and affinity, not sell a product or service. It is not a paid advertisement, sponsorship, or product placement.”

To effectively use content marketing for branding, the marketer must understand that content and advertising are not the same thing. Customers and prospective customers do not go to the internet looking for advertising; they go looking for information (Scott 2015, Murthy 2011). While many organizations say they are interested in using content marketing, industry practitioners contend many of the same organizations simply re-work their company print advertisements or marketing sales collateral to serve as digital marketing content (Scott 2015).

The focus of content marketing is not on pitching or selling an organization’s offerings. Rather, as an organization provides relevant and useful content to prospects and customers in order to

help them solve their problems or meet their needs, the organization becomes a valuable resource and acknowledged expert in its product or service domain. With the right kind of content and over time, the organization is able to win the trust and admiration of individuals, parlay their interest into a lasting relationship, and build a powerful brand image.

Applying Content-Rich Branding in Higher Education

According to the Content Marketing Institute (CMI), the brand-building impact of delivering consistent, high-quality, relevant content to prospects and buyers has been affirmed by large companies, small businesses, entrepreneurs, and non-profits around the world (<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com>). CMI industry trade statistics for 2017 show sixty-two percent of surveyed content marketers rate their marketing as more successful than one year ago, attributing the increased effectiveness to the development of a content marketing strategy (72%) and the use of better digital content (85%). Half (50%) of surveyed organizations said better, more targeted content distribution has contributed to increased effectiveness. Meanwhile, over eighty percent (84%) of content marketers say the main objective of using a content-marketing approach is “brand lift” (Murthy 2011).

While no systematic empirical research presently exists to determine the effects of branded content on the perceptions of brand image for a college or university (Pharr 2017), experts contend that “universities that deliver personalized, relevant, and compelling digital experiences to their students...are the ones that will command attention, gain market share, and drive results” (from “The Two Forces Behind Higher Ed Marketing” available at <https://pages.r2integrated.com>). Following are the essential steps for the use of content-rich branding by a college or university:

Step 1: Understand your buyer. This is perhaps the most crucial part of the digital content marketing process. Since the crux of content marketing is useful content, it follows that marketers must understand prospective buyers’ needs and wants in order to deliver content that is relevant and useful to them. Content marketing practitioners recommend building “buyer personas” of each target market. A buyer persona is an in-depth description of a type of engager identified as having a specific interest in the organization or its offerings or having a problem that the organization’s product or service solves (Scott 2015). A buyer persona differs from a target market in that a target market may contain groups of customers each having a different buyer persona.

To get some idea of the various buyer personas that an organization serves, the organization should study its website traffic, target markets, and product category or industry. Extensive research into the ways various individuals gather and use product-related information, the kinds of information they look for and engage with, and their needs or problems are all essential in developing effective buyer personas. For example, a college may study visitors to its website and discover several different buyer personas that have some interest in the organization. Table 1 below lists five buyer personas for a typical college website.

The development of buyer personas is to force the marketer’s complete attention onto the buyer rather than on the offering itself. Extensive research may be needed to develop an in-depth

profile of each buyer persona and determine that persona’s information needs. The marketer should be able to answer the following questions (adapted from Scott 2015) with regard to each identified buyer persona:

- What are the problems or needs from this person’s perspective?
- What words and phrases do the buyer personas use when describing or expounding upon their problems or needs?
- What media do the buyer personas rely on for answers to or help with the problems?
- Do they use a search engine for information or help with the problem? What words and phrases do they enter in the search process?
- What things are important in helping to solve the problem or meet the buyer persona’s needs?
- What images and multimedia appeal most to the buyer personas?
- What are the buyer personas’ goals with regard to solving their problems or meeting their needs?

Table 1. Five Buyer Personas for a College Website:
Prospective Students: Traditional—High school students nearing graduation
Prospective Students: Nontraditional—Aged 25 and up with no prior college credit
Existing Buyers: Current students
Younger Alumni: Graduated in last 15 years
Parents of Traditional College Students

Since the intent of content marketing is not to pitch or sell a product, the marketer must step out of its role as one who wants to promote a product and view the decision through the eyes of its various buyer personas. As the institution begins to more deeply understand the questions and problems faced by its prospects as well as their influencers such as parents, guidance counselors, coaches, and peer networks, it can provide valuable and helpful information to them to assist in the decision process.

Step 2—Create Engaging Content Consistently. The heart of the content-rich branding approach is the content itself. Industry trade association research (<http://www.demandmetric.com>) indicates that today’s consumers are becoming increasingly indifferent to paid advertising (e.g. 86% of people skip television advertisements, 44% of people ignore direct mail, and 91% of email users unsubscribe from company emails), making the provision of valuable content that consumers choose to engage with even more important in establishing brand image (Pande-Ved 2016). Content marketing gives consumers virtually complete control over the brand content with which they want to engage.

Content should encompass information that answers the consumer’s questions or meets the consumer’s need for pertinent information concerning the buying decision. The content must center on the buyer (i.e. the customer, prospect, or influencer) and not the seller (i.e. the company or organization). A review of industry guidelines for developing effective marketing

content suggests organizations should resist the tendency even to mention their own companies or brands when providing relevant content (Scott 2015). If prospects suspect that you are trying to sell them something, the marketer's authenticity is compromised and the brand's integrity suffers (although this assumption has not been rigorously empirically tested).

One can find many helpful tips and guidelines at industry and trade association websites for creating or curating content. Practitioners stress that content should be insightful (Scott 2015), genuine or candid—not hyped or phony (Baltes 2015), helpful or assistive (Chapman 2017), and consistent (Panda-Ved 2016). Consistency implies that buyers and prospects can expect content to be regularly published by the organization and that it will be of a uniform high level of quality and relevance. The development of consistent, high-quality, valuable, and compelling content as the primary means for marketing and branding an organization is the central challenge of effective content marketing.

Content may take the form of articles, blogs, infographics, photos, videos, webcasts, podcasts, eBooks, white papers, case studies, newsletters, research reports, and the like. In a study of buyer attitudes toward content marketing, Murthy (2011) found a large majority of prospective buyers (62%) felt audio or video included as part of any written collateral had a more positive impact than written material alone. Baltes (2015) recommends that content be a combination of created (original), curated, and syndicated collateral to allow an organization to better take advantage of all the best information out there.

Table 2 provides an example of different forms of content that may be effective for a college of business wishing to build its brand around having an excellent marketing program. (See Table 2 below.) If prospects are unsure whether to study business or what to select as a business major, they need information about the business fields and assistance with the major selection process. If a college provides this kind of helpful and compelling information, the college may become known as a trusted resource in all matters concerning the study of business and business careers. Students can be encouraged to major in business (in this case, marketing) without the college ever mentioning its faculty, accreditation, co-curricular services, or curriculum.

Table 2. Varying Forms of Content for a College of Business Website

NEWS STORIES:

- Marketing Adds Interns Faster than Any Business Field
- American Marketing Association Offers Students Affordable 'Bridge' Membership to Valuable Marketing Network
- College Marketing Club Provides Student-Organization Website Design Training

BLOG POSTS:

- Why Marketing Majors Need Quantitative Skills
- How to Build a Mentoring Relationship with a Faculty Member

INFORMATIONAL LANDING PAGES:

- Looking for Your First Marketing Job? –Do’s and Don’ts
- Is a Marketing Degree Right for Me? –Sizing up Marketing’s Career Potential

RESEARCH REPORTS/WHITE PAPERS:

- Profit-Impact of Marketing Strategy: Marketing and Customer Orientation Leads to Financial Success
- Guidebook—How to Use Social Media to Build Your Personal Brand

The stock of content depicted above—if regularly updated, expanded with new valuable information, and archived to permit longevity and continual use—may be more effective at building the college’s brand as expert, student-centered, and innovative than if the college simply promoted itself as student-centered and innovative.

Step 3—Identify Appropriate Content Delivery Channels. Content should be published to or made available on platforms where prospective buyer personas are present. While Murthy (2011) found that consumers rate an organization’s own website followed by email as the most effective channels for publishing content, social media are fast becoming the preferred way many organizations choose to distribute content. Industry trade data (www.demandmetric.com) confirms that organizations are increasingly using social media to leverage their content delivery and that social media linkages can effectively generate increased traffic to the content on an organization’s website (Pande-Ved 2016). Published statistics show eighty-seven percent of B2B marketers distribute content via social media, using an average of five social media platforms in their approaches. In addition, Demand Metric (www.demandmetric.com) recommends the use of social media for content distribution since research shows that eighty percent of all U.S. internet users interact with social media and social media account for almost one quarter (23%) of the time spent online by the typical internet user.

Blogs, in particular, may be an effective platform for publishing or sharing content. Blogs have been found to be responsible for four times (434%) more indexed pages and ninety-seven percent more indexed links in search results than other types of online content (www.demandmetric.com). Indexed pages are those that have been deemed by search engines to have quality content tied to relevant search phrases. Indexing is one reason why it is so important for content marketers to know the information needs, words, and phrases used by their

buyer personas when gathering information related to a purchase decision. Indexing also makes it important for organizations to categorize, tag, and archive all digital marketing content. Indexing by search engines suggests an organization can increase the reach of its content by posting links to the content on its Facebook and Twitter pages, by including links in email distributions, and by tagging posts with popular or descriptive hashtags.

Adapting Content Using a Customer Journey Map

Effective content-rich branding by higher-education institutions requires that a university know and understand its various “customers” and their information needs (Pharr 2017). One of the newest paradigms for better understanding customers is that of *customer journey mapping* (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Baxendale et. al 2015). A customer journey map is a diagram that illustrates the steps one’s customers go through in engaging with the organization (Richardson 2010). Distinct points along the journey that represent contact between the firm and the customer are known as touchpoints. A touchpoint occurs any time a customer engages or interfaces with the firm (Baxendale 2015).

In a recent comprehensive review of the customer journey literature (Lemon & Verhoef 2016), marketing researchers divided the customer journey into three distinct phases: prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase. Applying this framework to the higher education journey results in three phases: prospect (prepurchase phase), student (purchase phase), and alumnus (postpurchase phase). Each stage can be studied to ascertain activities that commonly occur in that stage. For example, awareness and consideration of an institution as well as application for admittance to the institution occur during prepurchase before the student is accepted and matriculates. Figure 1 below maps the student journey from prepurchase to postpurchase to illustrate how customer journey mapping may be applied to the higher education purchase decision.

Figure 1. A Sample Student Journey Map



R2i, a digital marketing agency that specializes in higher education branding, says having a detailed customer journey map allows universities to identify “intersection points” that enable them to reach students in their “moment of need” and “deliver useful, targeted content to spur them toward early consideration, application, enrollment, and beyond”

(<https://pages.r2integrated.com>). The sample map illustrates the major intersection points or touchpoints that occur in each stage of the journey.

In discussing the impact of different touchpoints on brand consideration, Baxendale et al. (2015) caution that while there are customer-firm intersections at each stage of the journey, some of these touchpoints are firm-initiated and some customer-initiated. Customer-initiated touchpoints predominate in the prepurchase phase but are becoming increasingly more numerous in the other phases (Baxendale et al. 2015). Because of the tendency for today's prospects as well as their influencers to control the particular marketing content with which they engage, content-rich branding should excel at stimulating customer-initiated touch in all stages of the customer's journey. Under a strategy of content-rich branding, institutions should rely on customer-initiated touchpoints to effect brand image rather than traditional paid advertising content.

Further, a student journey map should enable more strategic design of a university's content. Understanding that prospective, current, and graduated students have different problems, goals, and information needs—and that they are impelled along the journey by myriad influencers—challenges institutions to publish content that drives brand perceptions from several stakeholder perspectives. Facilitating customer-initiated touchpoints throughout the student's journey from search to matriculation to advocacy appears critical to solidifying the desired brand image. The customer journey paradigm should allow colleges and universities to more effectively plan and publish content that contributes to increased interactions between the institution and its engagers. Researchers stress that the frequency and positivity of interactions is the key to affecting brand perceptions (Baxendale et al. 2015). Institutions that give engagers valuable content that meets their needs at each stage of the student journey should achieve more frequent positive interactions with all their constituents.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper illustrates how customer journey mapping can be applied in colleges and universities to facilitate content-rich branding. Customer journey analysis focuses on how customers interact with multiple touchpoints as they move from awareness and consideration to purchase and postpurchase. It is part of the increasingly popular domain of customer experience management (CXM). CXM is a complex, multidimensional process that integrates a number of notable customer-oriented marketing processes including the consumer decision process, customer satisfaction, and customer relationship management, as well as customer journey mapping.

A customer journey map for higher education is created and illustrates how a student's journey may be broken into the phases of prepurchase, purchase, and postpurchase. Each stage is subdivided to show important touchpoints that occur in that particular stage. Touchpoints may be firm-initiated or customer-initiated, but research shows that customer-initiated touchpoints predominate in the prepurchase phase and are becoming increasingly more numerous in the purchase and postpurchase phases. The paper demonstrates how content-rich branding, through reliance on the use of relevant, helpful, and persuasive content to build the desired brand image, can be used to stimulate frequent positive customer-firm interactions. The incorporation of student journey mapping into content-rich branding strategy reflects current and overwhelming

research evidence that shows today's customers interact with organizations through myriad touchpoints in multiple media and that customer experiences are decidedly more social in nature.

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