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BRANDING AND JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

*We don't know how strong our brand equity is.
We need more research.*

By James M. Purcell

My interest in branding and Jesuit Higher Education originated shortly after I began my tenure as vice president of university relations at Santa Clara University in 1997. My communications staff began talking about “integrated marketing” and my reading and research led me to discussions about “positioning” and “branding” as part of strategic marketing.

Planning for Santa Clara University’s 150th anniversary (celebrated during the 2000 – 2001 academic year) intensified my interest as did my conversations with peers at Jesuit Advancement Administrator’s (JAA) meetings. I was asked to serve as chair of the JAA Branding Task Force in November of 2001 to “design and implement a data collection process that will lead to some recommendations related to the “marketing” and “branding” of the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities and present these recommendations to the JAA Executive Board.” I will return to the work of this task force at the end of this article.

A Definition of ‘Brand’

Gene R. Laczniak, Ph.D. a Marquette University Business School professor, suggests the following: “...a name or symbol that acts as a communications short cut to consumers because of the attributes or associations it possesses.”

The JAA Branding Task Force used the following as a working definition: “A brand is a name and/or symbol (e.g. the name “Nike” and the “swoosh” symbol) that acts as a communications short cut to convey to consumers the essential promise (which includes certain attributes and/or associations) an organization makes to its customers.” The cross has been a powerful symbol that Christianity has used to convey its “promise” of salvation for over 2000 years.

Little did I realize, almost 50 years ago, that writing A.M.D.G. at the top of every high school paper and test was an example of using a “Jesuit brand.” Neither my Jesuit high school teachers nor I thought in terms of “brand” when we used or saw those initials. However, we recognized instantly (and still do) the connection between those letters and the mission and identity of the Society of Jesus: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*; “For the Greater Glory of God.”

Why ‘Brand’ is important:

There has been a lot of discussion regarding the distinctive qualities of Jesuit higher education (i.e. “who we are” and “what we do.”) Father Kolvenbach’s talk at Santa Clara University in the year 2000 added much to this discussion.

Most, if not all, of our 28 Jesuit institutions of higher learning continue to discuss how we can best articulate our distinctive Jesuit identity and mission today. In these discussions, we often refer to the 450-year tradition of Jesuit education and to key elements of that tradition that are as distinctive and important today as they were when first articulated by Ignatius and the early Jesuits.

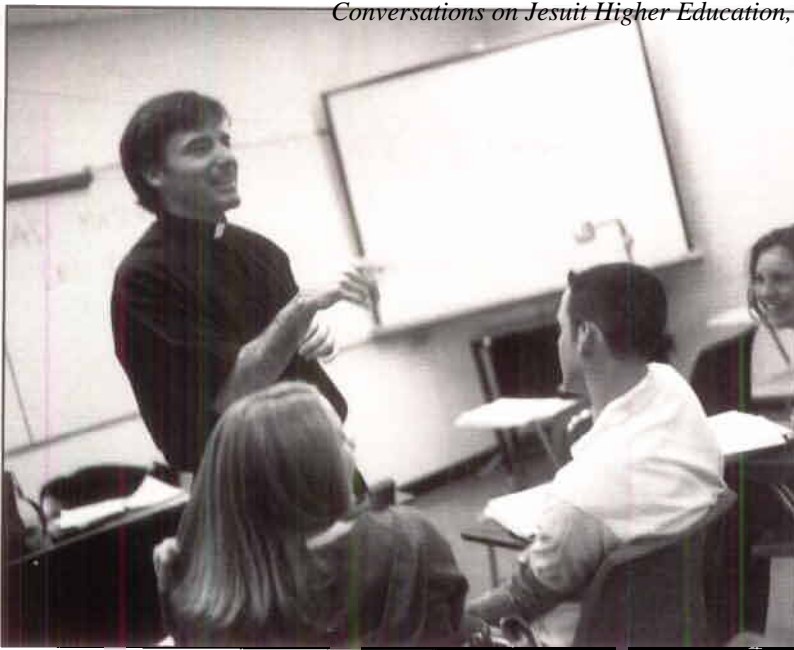
If one accepts the idea that a brand conveys to consumers the essential promise an organization makes to its customers, then its importance lies in that a brand, if it is well communicated and understood, conveys both the identity — we are the people/university who make this promise to you... — and the mission — here is how we deliver on this promise... — of a university.

Anecdotally, we know that some alumni reference key elements of our identity and/or mission when they speak of their Jesuit education. These elements make up the “Jesuit brand” in the minds of these alumni. Sometimes their discussion is couched more in language about image/reputation.

But which elements of the Jesuit brand are most obvious to our 1.5 million alumni and are they the elements we want them to associate with our identity and mission? Are there differences regionally, generationally, by institution, by degree earned, by whether or not they are donors?

What about prospective students and their families? What is the Jesuit brand in their minds? Are there differences in the perceptions of the brand between Catholic and non-Catholic families; between prospective students in Catholic, and public, and independent, but not Catholic, high schools?

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One of Saint Joseph Jesuit professors engaging his class in conversation

These questions remind me of a principle that so impressed me that I committed it to memory in the original Latin as it appeared in my philosophy textbook: *Quidquid recipitur, recipitur secundum modum recipientis*. It is a basic principle of communications: Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver! No matter how clear we in the Jesuit colleges and universities might think we are about our identity and mission, our brand is ultimately determined by the *modus recipientis* of our external constituents. Their filters, which all of us have, shape and interpret — and sometimes distort — our words and symbols.

The skill and art of branding an enterprise includes developing strategies to get through the filters and to compete effectively with the “noise and static and sound” created by everyone else who is trying to reach the same audiences.

To understand how important this is, think of the challenge we will face ten or 15 years from now, when more than a few (currently two) of our Jesuit universities are likely to have Presidents who are not Jesuits. Think of Presidents who will never wear a Roman collar — a “brand” whose symbolism has tragically undergone dramatic change in the last few years. Think of the number of our alumni, especially those from the “older” generations, who still associate “Jesuit” primarily with the physical presence of members of the Society of Jesus on our campuses and who will more frequently ask: “Is such and such a university still Jesuit?”

Those who cannot (or choose not to) imagine this future, should reflect on the following facts.

In 1990 there were 4,582 Jesuits in the ten Provinces of the United States. In 2000 there were 3,499 Jesuits in these Provinces or a decrease of 24

In 2000, 40 percent of Jesuits were 70 years old or older; another 40 percent were between the ages of 50 and 69; only 20 percent were below the age of 50.

During the past decade, 496 men entered the Society of Jesus in the USA at an average age of 29 years. The 30-year trend for “perseverance” is 33 percent. Assuming the average age and the perseverance rate remain the same and also assuming a life span of 80 years, we can expect the USA Assistency to stabilize at about 1,000 Jesuits.

In 2000, about 1/3 of the Jesuits in the USA (i.e. about 1,150) were involved in the higher education apostolate. In ten or 15 years, that number will drop to about 333. Distributed evenly across the 28 Jesuit institutions of higher learning (not a realistic assumption) this would equate to about 12 Jesuits per institution.

Given this reality, it is fair to ask how the 28 Jesuit institutions of higher learning will continue to foster their identity and mission as Catholic and Jesuit and how we will continue to effectively communicate our identity and mission (our brand) to important constituents. To answer that question, we need much better information on how we are communicating our brand to our constituents today.

JAA Task Force Research

Members of the Task Force decided to find out how each of the 28 Jesuit universities in the U.S. was promoting a “Jesuit” brand. Given limits of time and people, the task force focused on whether or not the universities used the concept of “Jesuit” in the following areas:

- In the University’s tag line (e.g. “the Jesuit University of [insert city or State]...”) 10 of the 28 do this...
- In the university’s logo: 5 did this...
- In the university’s mission statement: 27 did this...
- On the front cover of the university’s magazine: 3 did this...
- In the university magazine’s content: all 28 did this...
- On the university’s homepage: 27 did this...
- On the university’s undergraduate admissions page: all but 7 did this...

It is important to note that some of the data reported above may be out of date by the time this article goes to press.

The Task Force also noted that AJCU, both in its name and in its collateral material, promotes the Jesuit brand with regard to itself and its member institutions.

The Task Force discovered that some of the com-

munications materials produced by the various Jesuit Provinces in the U.S. also promote the Jesuit brand of higher education. One of the most impressive examples of this is the spring 2002 edition of *Partners*, the magazine of the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus. The front and back covers of the magazine comprise a bookshelf with 28 books. Each book is written by one or more faculty members from the 28 Jesuit Colleges and Universities. The magazine itself has an article on "A Scholarly Society: The intellectual apostolate of the Society of Jesus Today" and a composite picture of the 28 authors and their schools.

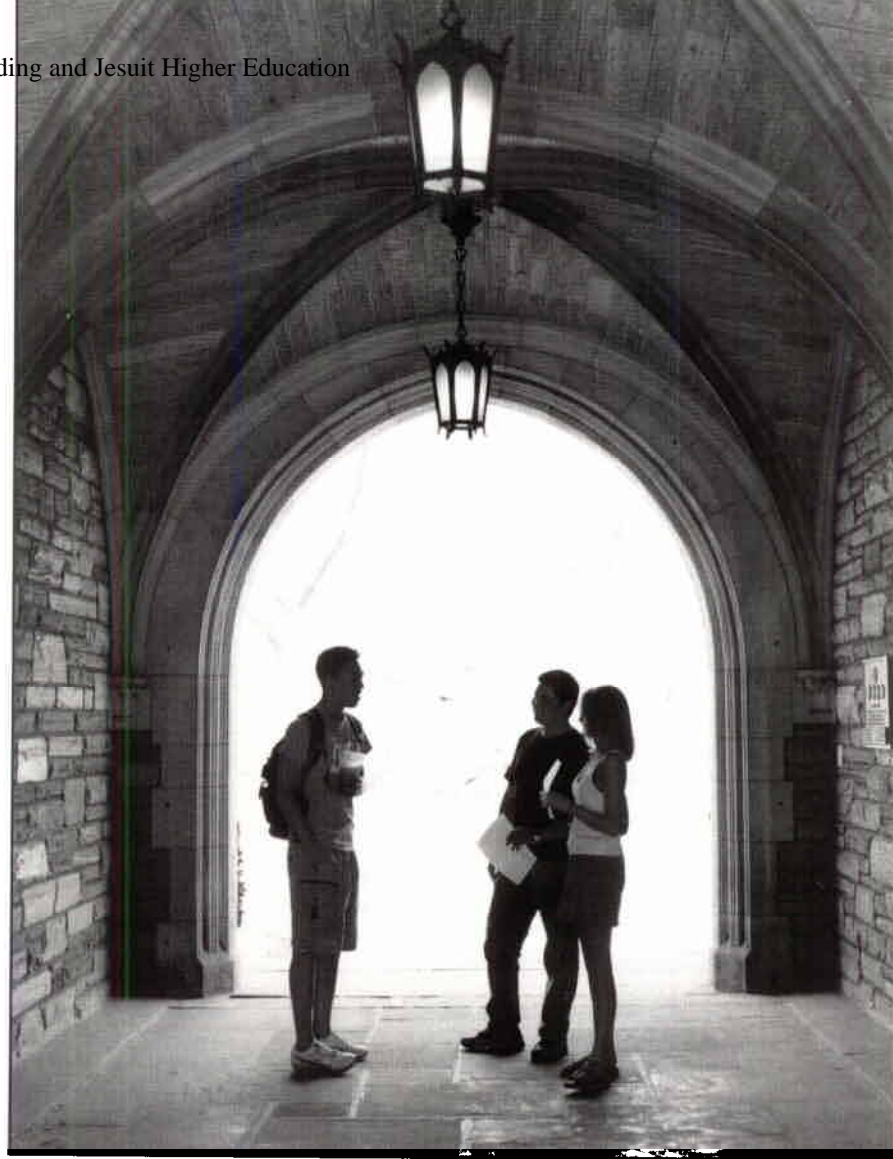
The Task Force also collected data from market research that some of the Jesuit universities had done in the last few years. This research is summarized in Exhibit 1.

In the course of its work, the Task Force also came across, along with the Laczniaik article, a research project for AJCU by Judy Deshotels, "Perspectives on Mission and Identity in Three Jesuit Universities" (2000). Deshotels indicates that "Jesuit" identity carries more positive connotations than "Catholic," and that even the concept "Jesuit" had a wide variety of interpretations among those she interviewed.

Analysis and Conclusions

Is there evidence that a distinctly Jesuit brand exists in the minds of some higher education constituents and potential constituents? The JAA Task Force would argue that the very existence and effectiveness of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities provides an affirmative answer to this question. However, those of us involved in advancement work among the 28 Jesuit colleges and universities don't really know how well (or not so well) we are communicating the Jesuit education brand to our external constituents across the United States. Some of us would argue that, especially in the minds of many or most of our prospective students and their parents, the Jesuit brand is weak at best and non-existent at worst. This is why we believe that it would be very valuable to test the strength and the value of the Jesuit brand with some collaborative research. How many of us hear our alumni describe us as "a well-kept secret?" Is that what we want our brand to be?

The research done by Gonzaga and Santa Clara Universities indicates that alumni do see "Jesuit" as a key element of the university's brand. The research done by Regis indicates that the concept of "Jesuit" is not well known or understood among their target markets for future students. Loyola University New Orleans learned that there is a lack of understanding of the value of a Jesuit education or problems in



articulating these values by the various constituents. Saint Joseph's University learned that, among prospective students, the word "Jesuit" isn't nearly as important as how we highlight those institutional characteristics (in recruitment materials and beyond) which, in fact, make us Jesuit.

Even if we assume there is evidence of a "Jesuit" brand, we do not know how strong our brand equity is. In other words, to what extent is there a) brand awareness, b) brand loyalty, and c) perceived quality? Laczniaik points out that strong brand equity is "the gold standard in marketplace effectiveness."

Our conclusion is that we need more research to determine the extent to which there is a Jesuit brand worth promoting and how best to take advantage of this brand if we choose to do so.

In January of 2003, the AJCU endorsed the need for such research. In my presentation to the presidents, I made it clear that the JAA Task Force was not advocating joint marketing efforts about the 28 colleges and universities. Whether or not the research leads to joint marketing remains to be seen.

Saint Joseph's students meet up between classes in one of the historic archways that grace the campus