Branding is the Problem, Not the Solution

John Hollwitz

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol25/iss1/5
"BRANDING" IS THE PROBLEM, NOT THE SOLUTION

Students are not our customers; neither are their parents. We do not have customers.

By John Hollwitz

The term "branding" is prominent in management books, websites, and consultant promotional brochures. Now it is poised for prominence in Jesuit higher education. I shall argue that branding assaults the mission of Catholic higher education for four reasons. Branding is anti-intellectual; it is morally vacuous and manipulative; it so dignifies materialism as to compromise the Catholic and Jesuit identity of our schools; and it is bad research practice.

1. Branding is anti-intellectual

In her hugely readable (though highly polemical) critique, Naomi Klein, in No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (2000), traced the history of branding to the emergence in the 1800s of grocery product identities. How can you convince consumers that your bucket of oatmeal is better than another's? You can always compete on price, but you can also compete on image, for example through the avuncular iconography of Quaker Oats.

Recently, branding has become a topic for consideration by Jesuit higher education. For example, a group of our administrative colleagues proposes to study branding across the 28 schools. They offer this definition: "A brand is a name and or a 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." This definition suggests some features of branding. First, a brand must be reductive and simplistic. It must remove complexities from a message. Second, the shortcuts are symbolic. They bypass cognition. Yet we are in the business of cognitive development informed by discernment, not in the business of simplistic reductionism. We should then rather define branding like this: "Branding is the process of reducing a complex judgmental process to simplistic terms in order to bypass reflection and to inspire consumer behavior."

John Hollwitz is the academic vice president of Fordham University
2. Besides being anti-intellectual, ‘branding’ is morally vacuous and manipulative.

This revised definition is better but still incomplete. Branding seeks much more. It seeks to establish normative ideals and to guide right behavior. You don’t ‘brand’ just to sell them cars and toothpaste. You brand to save and save their souls or to make them think that you’re doing so, perception being more important than reality.

Branding makes claims to social justice. I recently found a consultant’s web site whose front page links to an essay on “Social Justice Through Branding,” a review of Simon Anholt’s *Brand New Justice: The Upside of Global Branding*. I am not familiar with Anholt’s book. I comment only on the review, which heralds branding as an important tool for developing nations in the new global economy. Areas of the world are in desperate poverty. What alas must we do? We must help the impoverished to ‘out-brand’ their equally impoverished competitors. We must teach them “humanitarian capitalist branding.” Believe me when I say that I am not anti-business, anti-capitalist, or anti-advertising, but I conclude that we could save time by emulating Marie Antoinette’s fabled question about whether the poor couldn’t just eat cake.

Marketing is not necessarily deceptive, but branding is. On the one hand, proponents present it as an implicit contract with consumers, the “essential promise” in the earlier definition. Nothing about branding suggests that any promise is made or kept. Thoughtful consumers can buy different toothpastes if they want to. That’s why companies have quality control processes. The branding folks have a very different stake. They want to diminish cognition, to simplify judgment, to promote unreflective consumerism based on affective reactions to images regardless of product quality. It’s like providing gift wrapping for an empty box.

Companies with strong brands can manipulate the notion of “promise.” Consider major American tobacco companies for whom ‘branding’ inspires domestic advertising campaigns promoting age-appropriate use of tobacco, as though profiting from suicide were a laudable goal. The same companies have become successful marketers of cigarettes and among the largest marketers of anything to children in southeast Asia. Is that surprising? Only if you buy the justice argument.

Consider the “essential promise” in the Nike “swoosh;” the example cited in the recent proposal for a national Jesuit brand. Is the promise that the shoes are high quality and that exercise is healthy? The company certainly wants those messages conveyed, though neither is precisely a promise. Is anything else implicit in the “swoosh?” Perhaps. Suppose you’re shopping for athletic apparel. If my “branding” has been successful, you are attracted to my very expensive products. You’re probably not reviewing issues of third-world industrial development and labor practices. (‘Thinking’ here is a term of convenience; we have seen that “branding” seeks to bypass thought.) Maybe my “branding” encourages you to assume that buying my product will help you get to the NBA or the NFL instead of reflecting that you will pay substantially for sneakers to use in schoolyard pickup games. My “essential promise” does not remind you that virtually none of my customers has a meaningful chance of becoming a professional athlete.

Discernment is at the root of the Ignatian intellectual world. Discernment is a developmental process, we hope a lifelong habit of depth reflection which provides a motivating force and touchstone for our presence to others. “And herein,” writes Dr. Dominic Bulestra, “lies a deep and fundamental source of opposition to any ‘branding’ that might pretend to substitute marketing through a label for honest communication of who and what [Jesuit education should be] to both those within and those outside our communities of study, inquiry, and thinking.”

An accurate definition of branding then should be something like this: “‘Branding’ is the process of reducing a judgmental process to simplified and simplistic terms which use emotional and moral appeals to get people to buy things independently of judgment and critical discernment.”

3. ‘Branding’ compromises the Jesuit and Catholic identity of our schools

The call for ‘branding’ Jesuit higher education with which I began talks about “customers.” Students are not customers; neither are their parents. We do not have customers. We must keep repeating this. That a group of administrators in Jesuit higher education would state otherwise in a document of potential strategic importance should concern us. Do not accept that “customers” is a term of art. It is an assumption inherent in ‘branding’ and it defiles our mission.
In one of its most important expressions, the goal of Catholic higher education is to engage and challenge the premises and values of a secular and materialist culture. Given that so much higher education shares secular and materialist values, an engaging and challenging conversation cannot occur unless institutions like ours provide it. At its very best—and even its best is bad—branding celebrates materialism and seeks strategically to prevent conversation. At its worst, and probably more typically, branding pollutes culture. It would identify us with the very thing to which we are supposed to provide a radical alternative. Look at what the toothpaste, detergent, automobile, tobacco, cosmetic, alcohol, and garment companies seek to support in print, on movie screens, in music, on television.

4. “What are you, anti-research?”

A branding proponent asked this: All we’re talking about is research. We’re academics, aren’t we? What could we possibly have against mere research? My answer: Wrong question, and disingenuous to boot. The correct question is this: As academics, do we think that there is anything wrong with this research? The answer to that question is an emphatic yes for reasons of research criteria, research values, and the profit-driven manipulation of our Jesuit and Catholic identity.

The criterion problem. In my discipline, “Jesuit” (some would also say “Catholic”) would be called a “dynamic criterion” for research. Dynamic criteria change over time. To be a Jesuit university now is different from what it would have been 100 years ago. If we are to do research into the Jesuit brand, then, we must determine at what points such differences reliably emerge. Is Fordham the same institution as it was 50 or 25 years ago? How about 25 years ago? Five years? One? Ronald McDonald lasts for years. How about our image of Ignatius? At what interval do we freeze the institution for the sake of reducing its essential complexity to a brand?

The adjective “Jesuit” (some would also say “Catholic”) also shows differences within and among institutions. Fordham is Jesuit in many of the same ways but not in all the same ways as Santa Clara, Marquette, Spring Hill, Boston College. Imagine the commonalities as overlap areas in Venn diagrams and the differences as non-overlapping areas. The overlap area for branding will shrink as we add comparison institutions. The commonalities will probably never vanish, but they will change with different comparisons and shrink as we enlarge the comparison pool. To keep the commonalities large in such an exercise we must simplify terms, remove complexity, smooth individual differences, discourage innovation, seek shortcuts by which to influence our publics. By eliminating complexity we eliminate refinement, trivialize critical discernment, and sterilize our purpose. That is precisely what branding seeks.

The research values problem. Not all things that can be done should be done. Research is never value-neutral. If ‘branding’ is as simplistic, anti-intellectual, amoral, and manipulative as I believe, then it simply does not deserve strategic operational research, at least by people in Catholic higher education. What we observe shapes how we form our hypotheses or research questions. These in turn influence what we look for and how we look for it, which then shape how we act. To embark on an investigation of how to ‘brand’ ourselves is to dignify a ghastly concept and operationally to entomb ourselves within it.

The Jesuit Catholic identity problem. The proposal that Jesuit universities embark on ‘branding’ suggests that there is a distinction between our mission and our identity. What might this distinction be? In some discussions, people have said that we must distinguish between “Jesuit” and “Catholic” in our public communications. That distinction separates
what we really do from what we say we do, as in: “We’re Catholic whether we say so or not because we are committed to service (or because of our Theology requirement, or our commitment to justice, or our campus ministry, or our ‘values’ orientation, or our commitment to diversity). Therefore let us not upset people by belaboring the point in our promotional brochures.” Such a statement would be wrong for Jesuit education but precisely accurate for branding. The brand simplifies, avoids tough issues, frees us from the details, makes us comfortable and just like everyone else in higher education.

Considering these things, my thoughts turned to the distant vantage of the year 2050. Campuses by then will probably have very few if any Jesuits in academic or administrative ranks. We are the trustees of the tradition for those who will teach and study at our campuses then. What will they conclude about our trusteeship? They will read that in fall 1989 a death squad invaded the University of Central America in San Salvador and murdered six Jesuits and two of their staff for insisting that faith, intellect, and justice actually mean something for lived behavior. Maybe they will read that fifteen years later, American Jesuit schools were seriously considering something as soulless as ‘branding.’ What must they conclude? They must conclude that by 2004 we were historically oblivious, cynical about our founding identity, or just plain out of our minds.

If you teach, study, or work at a Jesuit institution, you must understand that the pop management evangelists (many of them conveniently available as paid consultants) now have a ‘branding’ discipleship on our campuses. We must engage these people in a conversation on what their goals mean for the integrity of our vocations as teachers and scholars. I propose two directions for that challenge.

First, the academic leadership on each of our 28 campuses should sponsor a public conversation about branding. To start such a discussion on my campus, I offer several questions for discussion and a single proposition for debate. The questions would be these: Does branding make sense for Jesuit higher education? More particularly, Given how we understand his intentions about the care of souls (define “soul” how you will), what might Ignatius have to say about ‘branding’? Did those victims of the death squads die for a “brand” identity? The proposition for debate is this: Four centuries old, Diego Ledeñans’s 1589 preface to the Ratio Studiorum remains a compelling definition of Jesuit education. I propose that branding assaults each of Ledesma’s four defining features of Jesuit education.

Second, I suggest that we take direction from how academic institutions already guarantee quality and shape public perception. All of us are subject to periodic self-studies, site visits, and association reviews to ensure the quality and viability of our academic programs. These reviews provide opportunities for reflection about whether we’re doing what we claim. Although the process is arduous, it privileges complexity, supports discernment, and demands accountability. It is explicit about the “essential promise” it makes to our publics. Those who doubt this should ask our students and their parents how eager they would be to study in unaccredited institutions or programs. Let us then establish for ourselves a system of public accountability for calling ourselves Jesuit and Catholic. Isn’t warranting the product more of an “essential promise” than shrinkwrapping it? In 1967, the Land of Lakes document showed our determination to be taken seriously as institutions of American higher learning. It’s now time to take the next step.

Let’s insist that any school which wants to call itself Jesuit and Catholic follow the established secular accreditation model. Let’s put our identity as Jesuit Catholic institutions on the line every ten years in self study, peer review, and public comment.

Such accountability would make a powerful statement about our trusteeship. Have we the integrity to make that statement? If not, then let’s at least be honest. Let’s not pretend that branding is intellectually or morally appropriate for Jesuit Catholic education. Let’s admit that we’re less thoughtful about our calling than we pretend to be, or perhaps that we just don’t care that much.