

AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION OF THE BRANDING STRATEGIES OF THE TOP 50 GLOBAL MBA PROGRAMS

Suresh Gopalan, Winston-Salem State University

gopalans@wssu.edu

Kathy Stitts, Winston-Salem State University

stittsd@wssu.edu

Robert Herring III, Winston-Salem State University

herringr@wssu.edu

ABSTRACT

Ingram, Gopalan, and Loughman (2004) assessed the branding strategies of BusinessWeek's top 50 MBA programs based on information contained in the websites of these programs. They proposed a typology that identified five specific branding strategies. The Ingram et al study included only U.S. based schools and their full-time MBA programs. Given that MBA degrees are offered in many countries, we decided to assess branding strategies of the top 50 Global MBA programs ranked by Financial Times (2006 ranking). 28 MBA programs were based in the U.S. while 22 programs were from other countries. Three researchers performed a content analysis of the brand name, logo, and text information contained in the web-pages of these MBA programs. Our analysis revealed that branding typologies that originate in the U.S. have limited application overseas and that there are several strategic branding differences between U.S. and European programs. We discuss current and emerging branding trends for global MBA programs.

INTRODUCTION

MBA programs have emerged as the one of the key ways by which business schools (hereafter referred to as B-Schools) build their reputation. Starting in the late 1980's, many business newspapers and magazines (*Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek, U.S. News and World Report*) started ranking MBA programs thereby directly or indirectly assigning a rank to the respective B-School as well. Increasingly, potential students, alumni, and members of the corporate community pay careful attention to these rankings (Merritt, 2003). B-School deans have realized that reputation management is a critical component impacting rankings and have responded aggressively by using a variety of marketing measures, one of which is to "brand" their MBA program (Argenti, 2000; Gioia & Corley, 2002).

THE MBA PROGRAM-BRANDING AN INTANGIBLE COMMODITY

Branding has historically been a major concept in strategic marketing and is used to achieve multiple purposes. While consumers associate strong brands with tangible goods, the increased emphasis on a knowledge-based economy has a variety of services attempting to acquire and retain customers through strategic branding. And educational institutions are no exception (Gray, Fam & Lanes, 2003). But branding MBA programs is not an easy task. The MBA degree is not a physical commodity-it has no shape, substance, form, or odor. It is a service provided by universities to their consumers (Nicholls, Harris, Morgan, Clarke, & Sims, 1995). Additionally, there are many types of MBA programs within a university (full-time, part-time, executive). Does branding impact all types of MBA programs? In the United States, many B-Schools are housed within universities.

When branding MBA programs, is it done independent of the University in which the school is housed? Or is the University's brand "imposed" on the B-school? To what extent are dual branding strategies followed?

Ingram, Gopalan, and Loughman (2004) sought to answer some of the branding questions raised earlier by assessing the branding strategies of the *BusinessWeek's* top 50 MBA programs based on information contained in the websites of these respective programs. They concluded that MBA programs have utilized various types of branding strategies with varying degrees of success.

At one end of the spectrum, MBA programs were branded only with the University's name/logo/symbol (**U**). At the opposite end, MBA programs were branded only with the School's name/logo/symbol and verbiage with no reference to the University (**S**). In the middle was a hybrid approach embracing a dual branding whereby both the University and School's identities received equal attention (**D**). Two other strategies included the (**Us**) and (**Su**) branding strategies. Under the "Us" strategy, the University received more emphasis and importance assigning a secondary importance to the School while in the "Su" strategy the School's identity is given more importance than that of the University.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The Ingram et al (2004) study that was discussed in the earlier section was based on *BusinessWeek's* ranking which included only U.S. based schools and their full-time MBA programs. Given that MBA degrees are offered in many countries and international students are a vital part of any MBA program, we felt that an assessment of branding strategies of MBA programs needed a *global* perspective (Adenekan, 2004; Ewing, 2005). To address this issue, we decided to assess branding strategies of the top 50 Global MBA programs identified by *Financial Times* in a special report. (Note: the FT 2006 rankings were for 100 global MBA programs. We limited our analysis to those MBA programs that were ranked in the top 50).

We adopted the Ingram et al branding typology as a framework to conduct our assessment. Each researcher conducted his/her assessment of the branding strategy and separately reached his/her conclusions. Following the separate assessment, all three researchers, examined the degree of similarity/difference between their findings. When two researchers were unable to reach an agreement, the third researcher's conclusion *along* with a meticulous assessment of the web text was used to arrive at a result.

RESULTS

Our analysis revealed that of the 50 MBA programs that were assessed, 10 MBA programs followed a "University only" branding strategy; 10 followed a "School only" approach; 6 adopted a dual/hybrid branding strategy; 5 chose to focus on the University assigning secondary status to the B-School; and 7 chose to emphasize the B-school while relegating the University to play a secondary role. We concluded that two U.S. based MBA programs did not have a discernible branding strategy. A significant result was that we were unable to identify a branding strategy for 10 MBA programs, using the Ingram et al typology.

BRANDING STRATEGIES OF U.S. BASED MBA PROGRAMS

The "University only" branding strategy (**U**) reflected a tremendous amount of consistency in all aspects of communication (brand name, logo, symbol, and text). This type of strategy is similar to the product strategy of family branding, where a single brand (for example Samsung) identifies several related products such as mobile phones, digital cameras, plasma TVs, etc. Harvard,

Stanford and Illinois deploy this strategy because of the strong reputation that these Universities have in the public's minds.

The "School only" (S) strategy was employed by several MBA programs, including Wharton (University of Pennsylvania), Tuck (Dartmouth) and Kellogg (Northwestern). These MBA programs are indicative of the individual branding strategy, whereby the school's brand name is a unique identifier for the product (MBA degree) offered.

The dual/hybrid (D) strategy was only used by 6 MBA programs all based in the USA. Dual branding attempts to create take advantage of customer appeal by having two powerful name brands "clubbed" together. In our analysis, we found that effective dual positioning was done by the "MIT-Sloan" and "UCLA-Anderson" MBA programs. Not only were the font size and logo consistent with the dual branding approach, the text in the web site reinforced this branding strategy.

The "Us" (University-primary, school-secondary) classification of branding strategy is employed by MBA programs offered by UNC (Kenan-Flagler) and Duke (Fuqua). This strategy tends to accentuate well known University strengths and wide spread name recognition with the MBA program. The University name tends to hold a great deal of prominence with the external community, while the school brand tends to have a drawing among its internal constituents (students, alumni, faculty).

The "Su" (School primary, university secondary) branding strategy is being practiced by Smeal (Penn State) and Marriott (BYU). This type of strategy allows a lesser known brand to establish itself over time by being associated with a more well-known brand. It is possible to theorize, that in the future, some of these types of MBA Programs may completely remove the University name, as the school name becomes more acceptable by its consumers.

BRANDING STRATEGIES OF EUROPEAN, ASIAN, CANADIAN, AND U.K. MBA PROGRAMS

A key finding was that the Ingram et al branding typology, which was derived from an assessment of U.S. MBA programs did not lend itself well when analyzing European MBA programs. From a structural perspective, European MBA programs are quite different from U.S. B-schools that are housed in universities and do not operate as independent entities. Therefore we concluded that we were unable to categorize them with the Ingram et al branding typology. However, B-Schools located in Canada and the U.K. follow an organizational structure similar to the U.S. Therefore, it was easier to diagnose their branding strategies using the Ingram et al typology.

We noticed that the European MBA programs sought and achieved accreditations from many agencies as they were geared towards attracting a wider audience from a number of countries besides the host country. Multiple accreditations help in enhancing a "global" brand image, and increased admission and graduation requirements reinforce the global branding associated with the MBA program.

Several European MBA programs emphasized their location as part of their overall branding strategy (as an example, London). Two U.K. based MBA programs, specifically include London next to their name (Imperial College in London and the CITY of London while France based HEC has "Paris" in its logo. The location of the program is based on the idea that the "destination" impacts branding. (Yan, 2003; Gray, Fam & Llanes, 2003; Lin and Kan, 2004).

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Our assessment yielded several interesting insights of current and emerging trends. Competition amongst educational institutions and programs is becoming increasingly global and is not confined within national borders—in this context branding one's institution or program is a key

to gaining a competitive advantage in the global marketplace (Black, 2002). The vast majority of U.S. based MBA programs that made the top 50 ranking do not emphasize either multiple accreditation or rich multicultural experiences as part of their branding strategy. Perhaps this an area they need to reconsider as there are more global competitors on the horizon (who are offering MBA degrees) and it has become increasingly difficult for many international students to obtain a student visa to enter the U.S. after September, 11 2001.

We also observed different organizational structures with respect to graduate business programs. While U.S., U.K., and Canada appear to follow a university-based structure that houses a B-School-- Spain, Switzerland, France, and other countries offer a MBA program from a stand-alone entity solely created for graduate business education. Is it easier for these latter institutions to create a brand name given that they do not have to work under a university structure or framework? Or is it more difficult to engage in a branding strategy as these institutions have to operate without a University structure and with fewer resources? These questions also leave the door open for future studies to develop a newer, broader global branding typology. Clearly, additional research is needed to answer these questions. The European structure appears to be prevalent in India where there are many B-Schools like the prestigious IIMs (Indian Institute of Management) that have a strong Asian reputation and now are now seeking to establish a global presence. As Asian MBA programs continue to acquire prominence, they will create increased competition for U.S., European, and Australian MBA programs (Elliot, 2005).

Branding is part of a larger strategy—to create and maintain a unique corporate identity. Therefore, it is imperative that all parts must fit well. We urge that all information contained in the website including color, brand, logo, symbol, verbiage are consistent with one another to support the overall corporate identity (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000).

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