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**STRATEGIC BRAND POSITIONING IN A MODERN ACADEMIA**

Yulia Stukalina (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a)Transport and Telecommunication Institute, 1 Lomonosova Street, Riga, Latvia, Stukalina.J@tsi.lv

*Abstract*

As global higher education market is evolving, universities are seeking a competitive advantage in the contemporary turbulent environment. This paper addresses some topical issues associated with strategic brand positioning in a contemporary academia. The analysis aims at discussing and evaluating some best practices that are used by modern universities for enhancing reputation and increasing brand awareness in the highly competitive international higher education market. Even though not a full list, these practices offer new insights into how brand positioning decisions are made in the frame of developing an efficient marketing strategy of an academia, as well as how information necessary for further brand promotion can be collected and processed. This is important with intense competition in higher education for best students and staff. The paper also describes two popular models employed for strategic brand positioning in the higher education sector, which are useful in evaluating positioning effectiveness – Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model and Black's branding model.

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**Keywords:** Higher education, strategy, institutional brand.



## 1. Introduction

Today, due to man increasingly more competitive environment, higher education institutions are becoming more “marketized and promotionalized” (Williams & Omar, 2014). As stated by Kapferer (2008), universities are now engaged in brand competition, as globalization poses new challenges on them and requires revision of their traditional approaches and methods. Modern higher education market is expanding and becoming more international (OECD, 2009; OECD, 2012; OECD, 2017), so international recognition and reputation are vital for universities.

An academia’s brand is directly associated with how it would be perceived by its stakeholders, including potential students, general public, legislators, etc. (Finch et al., 2013). The findings of an empirical research performed by Mourad, Ennew, and Kortam, (2011) suggest that the brand is a powerful factor that has a noteworthy impact on the selection of a university. Thus, brand management in higher education is becoming increasingly important (Hanover Research, 2015).

Modern universities are concerned with how their brand promise is perceived in the global education market; academic offerings, student experience, an academia’s reputation, etc. are the factors that embrace a higher education brand promise (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007). Brand promise is related to brand positioning. For universities, development of an efficient positioning strategy is very important for competing in the international education market (Harrison-Walker, 2009). A university brand must have a clear position intended for potential students (as well as other stakeholders); consequently, its marketing efforts should be focused on reaching this desired position (Lowry & Owens, 2001).

This paper addresses a few topical issues associated with strategic brand positioning in a contemporary academia. The paper discusses some best practices used by universities for improving reputation and enhancing brand awareness in the highly competitive international higher education market. Even though not a full list, these practices offer new insights into how brand positioning decisions are made in the agenda of creating an efficient marketing strategy of a university, as well as how information necessary for further brand promotion can be collected and processed. This is important with intense competition in higher education for best students and staff. The paper also describes two popular models employed for strategic brand positioning in the higher education sector, which are useful in evaluating positioning effectiveness – Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model and Black’s branding model.

### 1.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The literature review includes the sources that are analysed in the context of their contribution to understanding the research problem being studied. The literature used is related to some basic issues of higher education marketing in today’s modern very competitive global environment. It should be noted that there may be dispersed opinions on the same topic, so the paper only covers certain attitudes and approaches.

Today, the scale of branding adoption is wide; it ranges from industrial sectors to public sector, the asset value of brands being recognized by modern organizations (Kapferer, 2008; Blacket, 2009). Branding is associated with uniqueness, distinctiveness and differentiation (Murhy, 1992; Brown, 2016). Branding is now becoming more challenging and more important, as the number of competitors in every

area is increasing; besides, the quality of offers is quite adequate (Brown, 2016). The branding process is aimed at assisting a company to define the company's position in its market, as well as a direction and vision (Davis, 2009). Creating, maintaining and improving strong brands can be viewed as a necessity (Keller, 2013). A brand being a "long-term vision", a strategic approach to branding is important (Kapferer, 2008). Strategic brand management is defined as the development and implementation of marketing programs and activities, which are aimed at creating, evaluating and managing brand equity (Keller, 2013).

According to Kapferer (2008), modern strategic brand management is based on the following principles:

- Managers have to make the most of those strategic brands that "carry a big idea and vision"; they all should include a strong intangible component.
- Managers should also support and cultivate sub-brands under the mega-brands.
- Managers should act as leaders focused on enhancing the "standards of the category".
- Direct links with customers must be established.
- Personalised services should be created and delivered.
- Customers' involvement must be increased, so that customers would become active "promoters" of the brand (word-of-mouth being an evidence of success).
- A community should be encouraged that share brand values.
- It is important to rapidly "globalise" the brand.
- It is critical to be ethical
- It is vital to take into account both individual and collective benefits.
- Constant innovations are essential that go in line with brand positioning.

Brand positioning is related to the so-called "super-communication effect"; it informs a potential customer what the brand is about (Percy, 2003). Strategic brand positioning is associated with providing a consumer with the answer to the question *why he/she should buy the product*; strategic brand positioning is vital for accomplishing the company's competitive advantage, and it is done by performing "analysis and synthesis of consumer, company, and competitive factors" (Avery and Gupta, 2014).

As stated by Mourad et al. (2011), there are different dimensions of brand equity, brand awareness and brand image being its essential determinants:

- Brand image attributes, including a) representative attributes (e.g. social image, etc.); b) service attributes (e.g. perceived quality, etc.); c) provider attributes (e.g. staff, location, etc.).
- Brand awareness attributes, including both promotional activities used to communicate the brand to users, and word-of-mouth advertising as a natural way of spreading information.

According to Kapferer (2008), recent marketing research demonstrates that brand awareness is a collective phenomenon typically associated with reliability and trust, extraordinary quality, quality/price proportion, availability, etc. It should be noted that appropriate brand positioning creates positive brand attitude (Percy, 2003). Through appropriate marketing communication, strong brand awareness must be created and sustained; marketing communication is aimed at building brand reputation (Percy, 2003). It should be noted that in the agenda of globalization, the implementation of the above principles in the

course of building brand models requires adaptation to new markets and customers, new media and technologies (Kapferer, 2008). The peculiarities of an area should also be taken into consideration.

## 2. Research Method

This paper is based on the analysis of theoretical literature in the field of strategic brand management strengthened by the analysis of

- peer-reviewed scholarly articles published in academic journals;
- research summaries reported in books;
- OECD documents on tertiary education;
- Marketing Plans and Brand Positioning Statements of fourteen US and UK universities.

The analysis aims at assessing the approaches and procedures employed by contemporary higher education institutions for promoting their academic reputation, enhancing brand awareness and building a competitive brand-awareness strategy. These approaches and procedures are considered through the prism of strategic brand positioning models adopted in the higher education sector.

As stated by Williams and Omar (2014), with brand building becoming a strategic goal, comprehensible brand management models are in short supply. Different brand positioning models are used by managers in a variety of contexts and situations, including higher education settings. In turn, no universal approach can be used in higher education institutions, since they differ a lot depending on their location, size, scope, ownership (public and private), etc.

Thus, in the paper, the author focuses on the two models that, according to recent research (Hanover Research, 2015), are quite popular in the higher education sector:

- Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model.
- Black's branding model.

## 3. Findings

Marketing managers employ positioning models as decision-making tools for creating strategic plans (Ghosh & Chakraborty, 2004). Modern universities may apply different models and strategies for brand development (Hanover Research, 2015); these models are aimed at helping the institutional brands to be easily understood by the target audience, and they include various elements.

Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model and Black's branding model can be used in the frame of developing a "sophisticated strategy of university branding" that according to Javani (2016), is regarded as a tool for conveying the "focal value" of the institution. The choice of a model is determined by the external and internal environment, in which a university is operating. Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model (2009) is based on the six-step process introduced by Aaker and Shansby (1982); it is more business-oriented (Hanover Research, 2015). Black's branding model (2008) emphasizes that the concept of branding in higher education differs significantly from branding in the commercial area. So it offers a more inclusive view on branding in the higher education sector (Hanover Research, 2015). It should be mentioned that there is an overlay between the above models such as using an internal assessment of stakeholder needs, identifying target market segments, and positioning an institution

against potential rivals (Hanover Research, 2015). Below, these models are discussed in more detailed, and examples are given. The models consider brand positioning from different perspectives, giving marketing managers an opportunity to look at the issue at different angles.

### 3.1. Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model.

As the positioning decision for a brand can be the most important factor influencing customers' choice, a clear positioning strategy is very important (Aaker & Shansby, 1982). According to Harrison-Walker, strategic brand positioning model, brand positioning can be viewed from the following perspectives (Harrison-Walker, 2009):

- Position by attribute.
- Position by product category.
- Position by use.
- Position by price (quality).
- Competitive positioning.

As said by Harrison-Walker (2009), universities have to develop a clear and exclusive brand position that must be well-communicated to the target audience. Positioning statements should reflect inherent strengths and distinctions. Positioning statements are defined as internal documents that turn brand vision into tactical and operational activities (Janiszewska & Insch, 2012). In Table 1, a few brand positioning statements are presented. They are analysed through the prism of Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model.

**Table 01.** Brand positioning statements of some U.S. universities (source: the universities' websites)

University	Key elements of brand positioning statement	Focus
University at Buffalo	"Amplifies ambition for students, faculty, staff and the community, offering vast possibilities for achievement in a diverse, supportive and creative environment"	Position by attribute (the environment conducive to learning, teaching and research)
Bentley University	"Preparing the next generation of smart, nimble leaders"	Competitive positioning (unique career opportunities)
Northern Arizona University	"Offers exceptional opportunity"	Competitive positioning (unique opportunities)
The University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business	"For hard-working, driven, problem-solving students fosters opportunities for experiential learning and rigorous academics that launch extraordinary careers"	- Competitive positioning (unique career opportunities) - Position by product category (experiential learning)
Montclair State University	"Provides the ideal combination of a suburban campus environment with the advantages of New York City – giving talented and ambitious students access to excellent academic programs and professional and cultural opportunities in one of the world's most dynamic metropolitan areas"	- Position by product category (excellent programs and professional/cultural opportunities) - Position by attribute (combination of a suburban campus environment with the advantages of a big city)

Clarion University	“Consistently provides relevant programs and practice-based learning experiences to fulfil the ever-changing needs of its students, its community and the 21st-century workforce”	Position by product category (relevant programs and practice-based learning experiences)
University of Denver	“Is a catalyst for purposeful lives”	Competitive positioning (unique career opportunities)
New Jersey City University	“The <i>what</i> is important. But it’s the <i>why</i> that guides what we do. Here’s our <i>why</i> ”	Position by attribute (emphasis on expertise)
University of Michigan	“Prestige for the public good: academic excellence, global engagement, strong school spirit, focus on diversity and social equity”	Position by quality/price (emphasis on prestige)
University of Memphis	“Driven by Doing”	Position by attribute (emphasis on expertise)
University of Wisconsin–Madison	“We are Boundless Together”	Position by attribute (emphasis on expertise)
University of Glasgow	“World Changing Glasgow”	- Position by attribute (emphasis on expertise) - Position by quality/price (emphasis on prestige)

As seen from the table above, brand positioning statements can be designed in two different ways: a) they may be quite laconic, with one position specified; b) they may be more detailed (comprehensive), with multiple positions specified. However, one way or another, they all have in common the following features:

- Brand positioning statements are target-audience-oriented.
- Brand positioning statements are inspiring, stimulating and motivating.
- Brand positioning statements are grounded in the unique experience of an academia.
- Brand positioning statements have a long-term focus.

### 3.2. Black’s branding model.

According to Black (2008), for promoting the brand, managers go through following phases 1) they carry out research in order to gather relevant information by means of surveys, focus groups, observations, a review of historical data, etc.; 2) they categorize particular market segments; 3) they define related brand attributes; and employ these attributes to effectively positioning their institution against potential competitors, based on the brand positioning statement.

The Black’s model includes five steps to be performed for brand promotion (Black, 2008):

- Conducting research to collect information about constituent needs using surveys, focus groups, observations, a review of historical data, etc.
- Identifying market segments, which are highly valued by the institution and defining their characteristics.
- Determining relevant brand attributes and motivators.
- Using applicable brand attributes to effectively positioning the university against potential rivals (following the brand positioning statement).

Creating a brand positioning statement requires universities to assess their strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for their improvement (Hanover Research, 2015). Information necessary for further brand promotion can be collected from a variety of sources. For establishing and maintaining a strong brand universities may use a SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is regarded as a powerful tool for evaluating an organization’s resource capabilities and resource deficiencies, as well as market opportunities, external threats (Thompson et al., 2007).

It is also considered to be one of the methods used for developing new strategic initiatives, modern SWOT analysis being a resource-based and competency-based planning approach (Dyson, 2004). In the educational sector, SWOT analysis is used for the determination of marketing strategies to be applied for promoting educational products and services (Wahyuningtias, Sudarmiain, & Indrawati, 2016). Table 2 shows some excerpts from the SWOT analysis performed by Missouri State University for developing a new marketing strategy. A thorough research study was conducted by the University’s marketing managers to gather insight from various constituencies: administrators of different levels, faculty and staff, current graduate and undergraduate students, alumni, prospective students (including non-traditional, secondary school and transfer students), parents, general public (Missouri State University Marketing Plan, 2013).

**Table 02.** SWOT analysis of Missouri State University as reflected in its Marketing Plan (2013)

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good location</li> <li>- University offerings and good facilities</li> <li>- Affordability and value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brand identity and national identity</li> <li>- University traditions and atmosphere</li> <li>- Sports</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A big assortment of educational programs                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Online-available programs</li> <li>- Internship program</li> <li>- Advisement centres</li> </ul> </li> <li>- High percentage of research conducted by undergraduate students</li> <li>- Devoted corporate relationship specialists</li> <li>- Exclusive extra-curriculum opportunities</li> <li>- High percent of staff with a d doctoral degree</li> <li>- High percent of students getting financial support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of Ph.D. programs</li> <li>- Lack of research opportunities in some programs                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Campus diversity</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Decentralized communication strategy</li> <li>- There are several alternative taglines for colleges and specific programs</li> <li>- Students of some programs do not have internship opportunities</li> <li>- A saturated market for graduate programs market</li> </ul>

Table 3 shows some excerpts from the SWOT analysis carried out by the School of Clinical Medicine of the University of Cambridge.

**Table 03.** SWOT analysis of the University of Cambridge School of Clinical Medicine (source: <https://www.medschl.cam.ac.uk/about/5-year-plan/9-swot-analysis/>)

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognized to be among the top Clinical Schools internationally                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Academic rewards</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Recent excellent administrative and staff appointments</li> <li>- Strong partnerships with main Hospital Trusts</li> <li>- Provides an very strong local research base</li> <li>- Big recent investments into capital building and equipment infrastructure</li> <li>- The School Office building will be renovated for supporting modern flexible teaching and learning environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dependent on external funding for senior academic positions</li> <li>- Lack of funded partnerships with industry                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extremely limited research space (laboratories/bioinformatics), which negatively influences recruitment</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Some research areas are under-resourced and the conditions for research are poor</li> <li>- Current campus transport links are not good enough, which weakens communications among the university's stakeholders</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fast data links to different professional databases                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advancing the University's reputation trough implementing a new sustainable operational plan</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Leading quantitative medicine approaches across a variety of specialities                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaboration with other Cambridge University Schools</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Developing new important professional partnerships</li> <li>- Working with other UK universities on a coherent regional health network</li> <li>- Developing new strategic approaches and the ability to respond innovatively to new national priorities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The local recruitment market is very competitive                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Regional mobility-problems may cause a negative impact on attracting excellent early-career professionals for completing their professional training in the University</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Tightening immigration rules may have a negative impact on recruiting an internationally excellent workforce (academic staff)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of quality clinical training opportunities, including hospital placements available to clinical students</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Delays to the building program due to the budget restrictions</li> </ul>

As seen from the above table, SWOT analysis provides a nice reference point for re-examining, designing and implementing a branding strategy aimed at strengthening an institutional brand. An academia will focus on the relevant branding strategy to reinforce its position in the long run, re-developing the brand being a big challenge (Hanover Research, 2015).

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussions

The analysis conducted in this paper has enabled the author to draw the following conclusions. Branding in higher education is now becoming a routine, which is determined by the fact that constant competition for attracting best students and staff has created a strong need for modern universities to differentiate themselves. Strategic brand management is crucial for aiding a modern academia to define its position in the marketplace; developing and strengthening an institution's brand is more important than ever before. Strategic brand positioning is imperative for achieving the university's competitive advantage, as proper brand positioning generates positive brand attitudes.

There are different approaches, in the frame of which various marketing strategies are developed depending on the industry involved and the aspect in focus. At the same time, there is a lack of universal



brand management models, so the scope of approaches used for brand positioning is wide, and brand positioning can be viewed from different standpoints.

Contemporary higher education institutions may employ various models in the course of brand management and brand development: a more business-oriented Harrison-Walker strategic brand positioning model (2009), and Black's branding model (2008) stressing that the notion of branding in higher education differs considerably from branding in the business sector. However, both models are based on evaluating all stakeholders' needs, determining target market segments, and positioning an academia against possible competitors. So they are supposed to be popular among marketing managers of higher education institutions because of their convenience and simplicity.

The limitations of the research are mainly related to the research base. Besides, there no clear classification of branding positioning models used in higher education. Based on the statement of limitations of the study, further research should address the following issues: 1) a larger sample size including leading universities from different parts of the globe; 2) more thorough analysis of theoretical literature previous research on the topic for developing a classification of the existing branding positioning models, which can be relevant in university settings.

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