

In a market where every advantage counts, business schools are seeking ways to rise above the fray and raise their profiles among their peers.

by **Tricia Bisoux**

illustration by Dave Cutler

In an age defined by competition, anything that doesn't give you a competitive advantage in the market for management education puts you at a disadvantage. It's no longer enough to be a good business school or even a great one, asserts Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management. To win in the marketplace, a business school must also be a resource of information and have a conspicuous presence in its community.

"The great business schools of the world are considered invaluable in their communities," says Martin. "They're invaluable not only because they produce great students, but also because they produce great ideas for public debate and information about business practices in general."

There is a growing consensus among business schools that public perception of their offerings is as important, or even more important, than the offerings themselves. As a result, business schools the world over are working to rebrand, reposition, or "re-image" themselves, often on a grand scale. Such continual reinvention will be the hallmark of developing a competitive edge, many believe, in a market where rankings are so influential and a business school's reputation is only as good as its *next* great idea.

"In today's business environment, constant change is a necessity," says Roger Jenkins, dean of the Richard T. Farmer School of Business Administration at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. "Business schools are finally mirroring that reality. We have to constantly reinvent ourselves and our curriculum, because other schools are doing it. If you do nothing, you wind up falling behind."

Getting to the Media

Schools that find the most success in boosting their visibility will turn first to the media, advises John McGualey, president of Gehrung Associates in Keene, New Hampshire. Gehrung is a public relations firm that specializes in the promotion of higher education institutions. "Editorial visibility is so valuable, and it has instant credibility," he notes. "Editorial visibility isn't what you say about yourself, it's what someone else says about you. So, it has three times the value of a paid advertisement."

Michael Percy, dean of the University of Alberta School of Business in Edmonton, agrees that wooing the media is among a business school's best promotional strategies. "The best way of raising our visibility is to become part of the stories in the newspaper, being a source of comment and information in columns and articles," says Percy. "It's a low-cost way of raising our profile without buying advertising space."

Other business schools are also taking that message to heart. A few years ago, the Rotman School of Management in Toronto, Ontario, for instance, began a significant push to garner more media attention. "I thought our business school was a bit too standoffish. We didn't write enough articles, and those we did write appeared in refereed journals that had a circulation of about zero," he says with a laugh. "I felt our

A Matter of

faculty had great ideas that should be appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* or other more widely read publications."

The business school started with its own school magazine, transforming it from an alumni news source to a content-rich magazine that covered important business issues, such as ethics, corporate organization, and employment trends. Then, it moved on to capture the general media's attention. Ambivalent at first, faculty members are now wholly enthusiastic about pursuing non-academic publication, says Martin.

"We've gone from a point of relative obscurity to a point where newspapers and magazines come to us," says Martin. In fact, the school's public relations office, which tracks the number of times its students or faculty are mentioned in the media, has found that Rotman now appears in approximately 40 percent of the business coverage among Canada's media outlets. That means that the other 32 MBA programs in Canada are sharing the other 60 percent, says Martin.

"Our success has been the result of a conscious effort to encourage our faculty to write articles and editorials for media consumption," he adds. "This really has become a content-driven business. Business schools must have great ideas and then disseminate them to the public."

The Magic of Marketing

At one time, a solid student recruiting program and a few well-placed branding advertisements would be enough to keep a business school on the map, but no longer. Instead, business schools are turning to media exposure, consumer-oriented marketing, and branding campaigns to get their messages out. After all, it has become clear that, in today's competitive arena, the spoils will go to those schools that capture—and keep—the public's attention, says McGualey of Gehrung Associates.

REPUTATION



“You must consider three things: First, look at your local market, the one that pays your bills. Second, look at your media visibility—how often do your professors, programs, and research appear in the media? And third, look at resource allocation and take a realistic look at how much you’re spending on marketing,” says McGualey.

Many universities make the mistake of spending too little on marketing, he adds. “A moderately sized corporation spends more on marketing than any college or university spends. It’s endemic to higher education institutions to spend very little on marketing,” he says. In other words, if your marketing is undercapitalized, your school may be overlooked.

Jenkins of the Farmer School of Business Administration at Miami University knows this all too well. He calls his business school “the well-kept secret” in business education—the last thing a business school wants to be. “Miami University is the prize institution to attend if you’re a resident of Ohio, Illinois, or Indiana,” he says. “But outside the Midwestern U.S., our name and quality have never been as recognized. The university never spent the time and money to advertise outside the Midwest. That’s something that we’ve begun to change over the last several years.”

Miami University’s name, which stems from its location in the Miami Valley in Ohio, is especially problematic, says Jenkins. “People automatically link us to Miami, Florida, rather than Ohio.” An intensified marketing effort, one that targets markets across the United States, is part of Jenkins’ plan to allay any confusion and ensure that an education at Miami University’s business school is no longer a secret to potential business students.

Last year, the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, also realized that its marketing efforts needed to be strengthened so that it could increase its prominence in the Dallas market, says Wynn Hartley, the school’s director of communications. “We are a business, and we realized that we needed to structure our spending on marketing like a business,” she points out. “The market is becoming more consumer-oriented. Therefore, we need to make a stronger appeal to consumers through retail or product advertising, rather than try to reach them through brand advertising alone.”

In response to several competitors who had established or launched executive MBA programs in the Dallas market, Cox came up with a novel idea. This summer, the school publicized a “sweepstakes,” in which people entered a drawing to win a full-tuition scholarship worth \$60,000. The scholarship could be used toward enrollment in any of the school’s MBA programs for working professionals. The contest, which gar-

nered more than 2,000 entries over a one-month period, fulfilled its purpose, says Hartley. It generated goodwill toward Cox School of Business in the community, created name recognition for the school, and, most important, set the school apart from its competitors.

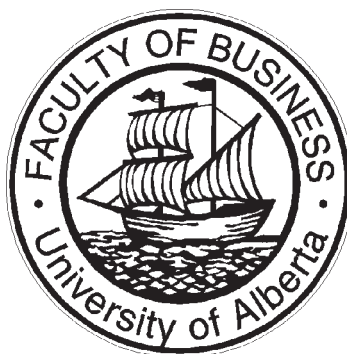
“Not only were we able to give back to the business community in a meaningful way, but we now also have more than 2,000 new prospects we can target in a permission-based e-mail campaign,” Hartley says. “If we enroll only three of the registrants as a result of the program and e-mail campaign, we have covered our costs. We believe we’ll enroll many more than that.”

The Importance of Packaging

Something as simple as a logo could be sending the wrong message, believes Percy of the University of Alberta. For that very reason, he started a campaign two years ago to change the name and logo of his business school as one step toward repositioning it in the market.

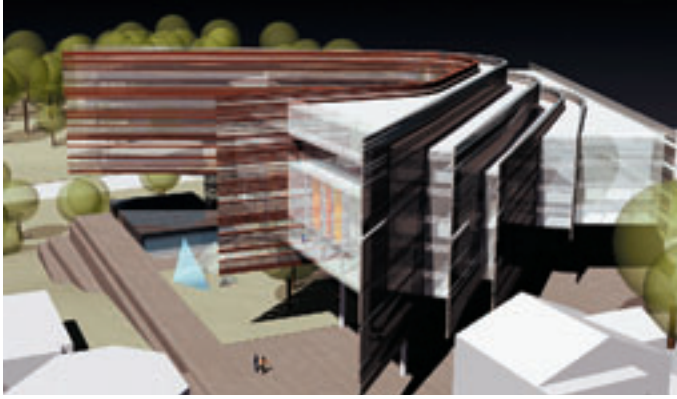
The school was originally called the University of Alberta Faculty of Business and boasted a logo that depicted an ancient Phoenician sailing ship of commerce. Both name and logo seemed to project an old-fashioned image that no longer represented the school’s character, says Percy.

“‘Faculty’ is a nice term, but when people head to a search engine on the Internet or think of a business education, they think of a ‘school of business,’” says Percy. The logo, too, seemed off the mark, he added. “It struck me that for a university that’s located in the Canadian prairies in the age of e-commerce, a Phoenician sailing ship wasn’t the most appropriate symbol,” Percy says.



LOGOS, OLD AND NEW:

The University of Alberta’s new logo better suits its role in today’s management education market, says its dean Michael Percy. Its old logo, shown at left, depicted an ancient Phoenician sailing ship, while its new logo, shown at right, communicates a more modern message and suggests the Canadian mountains and prairies.



AUCKLAND'S NEW B-SCHOOL:

As one part of a comprehensive initiative to raise its profile in New Zealand, the University of Auckland plans to build a state-of-the-art facility, designed by New Zealand firm Archimedia and Australian firm MGT. The new building will include 24-hour computer labs that provide access to a variety of electronic databases, new lecture theaters, collaborative working spaces, cafes and gathering spaces, and an expanded graduate school of business. Construction will begin this year.

After the long process of winning university officials, board members, and alumni to the idea, the school now has a new name, the University of Alberta School of Business, and a new logo. A stylized brush-stroked letter “A” that evokes a picture of a mountain with the prairie beneath it, the logo is a much more appropriate symbol to represent the school’s mission, believes Percy. “The ‘A’ in the new logo stands for ‘achievement’ and for the mountains in this region. It’s a break with tradition, and it’s much less generic,” he says.

“Choosing a new name and logo was only part of a broader range of initiatives,” Percy adds. Those initiatives include a plan to develop a niche MBA program in the natural energy industry, as well as to bolster the university’s image in Canada and abroad. “We were repositioning ourselves in the market,” he adds. “The new logo and change of name were all related to that effort.”

A Source for Change

All schools want to contribute to their countries’ economies, but for the University of Auckland in Auckland, New Zealand, this goal has become paramount. It plans to become a premier provider of business education for New Zealand, raising not only its profile, but also the standing of New Zealand’s small business sector.

“The first Global Entrepreneurship Monitor found that New Zealand has one of the highest levels of business startups in the world. The problem is, we also have one of the worst rates of growing these startups into significant businesses,” says Barry Spicer, dean of the business school at the University of Auckland. “Our challenge is to develop programs that will produce management talent able to provide stable and mature corporate leadership. This will enhance New Zealand’s capacity to win and retain global investor confidence, as well as to expand its offerings for a new generation of small business owners.”

To accomplish this, says Spicer, regional officials realized that they needed a well-recognized business school to lead the charge, and they turned to the University of Auckland for the task. The private sector is contributing to the school’s facelift, and the government is matching those con-

tributions up to \$25 million. With these funds, the university has launched the development of its International Centre for Entrepreneurship (The “Icehouse”), which will link the university to eight leading international firms, including Microsoft, Compaq, and the Bank of New Zealand.

“The objective of the Icehouse is to use the combined talents of the partners to promote research and research-informed business innovation,” says Spicer. “It will also involve identifying potential innovators and entrepreneurs and supporting them to take their ideas to market.”

In addition, the funding will also go toward new academic programs, as well as a new state-of-the-art facility that incorporates teamwork-oriented learning spaces, computer laboratories, gathering areas, and an expanded graduate school of business.

“There has been a groundswell of business support in New Zealand for a top-flight business school. It has reinforced our early view that it is important to have an ambitious vision that can excite the imagination of the people and ignite action,” notes Spicer. “This is the first time that any such deal, of this scale, has been arranged in New Zealand. We hope it will set a new pattern of binding together business and government with the university, so that together we can create a foundation for the knowledge economy in New Zealand.”

A Mission and a Method

Only a few elite business schools enjoy the star power of being big fish in a big pond. But that doesn’t mean that smaller business schools must necessarily be overshadowed. Instead, through efforts to raise their profiles, schools are becoming “big fish” in their local arenas and building from there.

The fact that so many schools are finding success indicates that there is room in the market for any school willing to pursue excellence in ways that are unique to its particular culture and mission. In the end, which schools succeed and which fail will depend on what niche they can fill in the marketplace, and what unique story they can tell to the public, says Jenkins of Miami University.

“State budgets have been cut significantly in the last two or three years because of the economy, so it has become necessary for business schools to generate more revenue from private dollars,” Jenkins stresses. “The ability to generate private funding is partially based on the kind of story a business school can tell. If a school cannot tell a compelling story of excellence, one that shows how it is developing and contributing to business, it will be at a competitive disadvantage.” 