

# The Zen of B-School Branding

Zen practitioners often ask the enigmatic question, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear, does it make a sound?” The elusive answer may be best left for Buddhist mystics and acoustical scientists to ponder. A more straightforward question to ask might be, “If a business school offers educational programs and no one identifies with its offerings, does it matter how good they are?” Here, the answer is unequivocal: No.

Yet, business school marketing programs often confuse the quality of their programs with their identities in the marketplace. That can be a mistake, says Tim Westerbeck, executive vice president of Lipman Hearne, a marketing consulting firm with offices in Chicago, Illinois, and Washington, D.C. Creating a recognizable name that resonates meaningfully in the public mind—that is, a powerful brand—is not about a school’s characteristics, he says. A brand is less about a school’s rankings and test scores, and more about its culture and mindset.

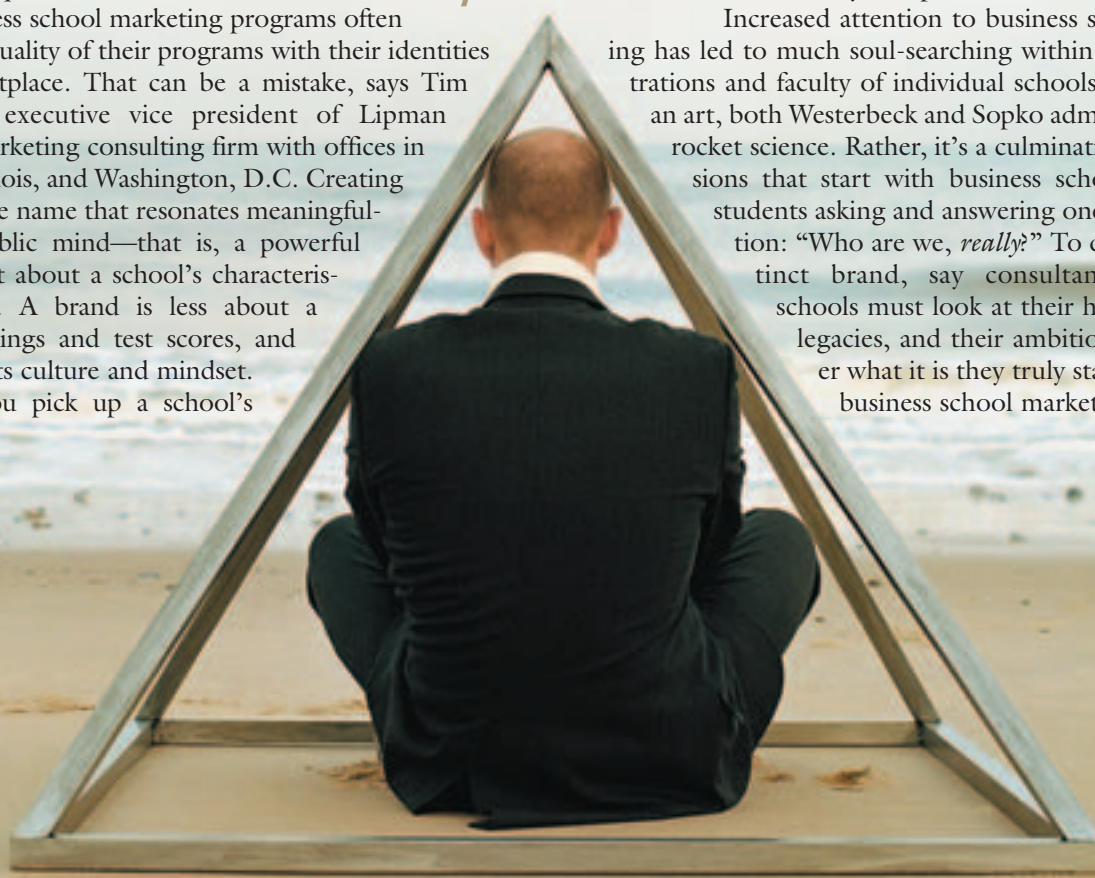
“When you pick up a school’s

view book or look at its Web site, it’s almost always focused on product characteristics. That’s sales,” says Westerbeck. “Branding is based on who you are, not what you do.”

A business school brand should also take into account its hopes for the future, adds George Sopko, vice president of New York City’s Stanton Crenshaw Communications, “As we put it, branding should capture both the ‘is’ and the ‘ought.’ It should describe not only who you are, but also what you aspire to be.”

By Tricia Bisoux

Increased attention to business school branding has led to much soul-searching within the administrations and faculty of individual schools. Branding is an art, both Westerbeck and Sopko admit, but it isn’t rocket science. Rather, it’s a culmination of discussions that start with business school staff and students asking and answering one single question: “Who are we, *really?*” To develop a distinct brand, say consultants, business schools must look at their histories, their legacies, and their ambitions to uncover what it is they truly stand for in the business school market.



## Establishing a brand identity for a business school is not about what its students, faculty, and staff can *do*, say branding experts. It's about how they *think*.

### “Your Brand Is Not ‘Excellence’”

For decades, business schools have banded together to explain the value of the business degree to the public. Now that the MBA and other business degrees are better understood, the drive to differentiate has come once again to the forefront.

“Branding will become one of the most prominent drivers of value across the increasing number of business schools in the next decade,” says Martin Roll of VentureRepublic, a Singapore-based strategy consulting firm specializing in branding. “The branding strategy and program need to go far beyond the product portfolio and embrace the whole offering from the business school, including products, people, price/value, and place.”

Even so, when asked what makes their schools special, many deans will point to their “commitment to academic excellence,” says Westerbeck. By touting excellence as their main distinguishing characteristic, many business schools have unintentionally mired themselves in a sea of sameness.

“There has been a shocking degree of similarity across the board in the way business schools position and market themselves. I do brand presentations for business schools and say, ‘Your brand is not “excellence”—that brand is already taken,’” says Westerbeck. “Nor is it ‘global education,’ nor is it ‘teamwork.’ Those buzzwords have already been used.”

The problem, submits Sopko, is that being classed as “different” has not always paid off for business schools in public venues of evaluation, such as the rankings. On the one hand, business schools want to differentiate themselves. On the other, they all want to be part of the same club.

“For the most part, business schools want to produce students who have all the qualifications and expertise that companies hiring MBAs want,” says Sopko. “Employers aren’t looking for ‘radical’ or ‘unique’ institutions. Those words scare businesses, at least when they’re hiring MBAs.”

That mindset seems to be changing though, says Sopko, as businesses seek more innovative ways to master their individual markets, while addressing prominent issues such as ethics, entrepreneurship, and competitive strategy. As a result, they’re looking for business schools with distinct and identifiable cultures and brands that best coincide with their own.

### A Reality Check

Because a brand refers to a school’s identity, however, it cannot be forced. A brand should be based on the reality of a school’s present situation and culture. And above all, says Westerbeck, it must be believable.

“Schools are notorious for ‘deciding’ what the school’s brand is. The deans, administrators, and faculty sit around the

table and follow a basic ‘we make it, you take it’ psychology. They’ll decide what their brand will be, then they’ll go out into the marketplace and figure out how to make everyone believe it. That simply doesn’t work,” says Westerbeck.

What a school’s culture and brand truly are can come as a surprise, even to those most closely involved with a school’s inner workings. “I’ve done many focus groups to ask people what they thought of a business school. I can’t think of a time when school administrators weren’t shocked to hear what alumni and corporate leaders think of them,” says Westerbeck. “Sometimes they’re angry, sometimes they’re pleased. Almost always, what people think is very different from what the administrators expected.”

While it may be nearly impossible to change perceptions that are based on what the school actually is and on the product it offers, this doesn’t mean that a school is limited by the public’s current perception of its culture. Rather, it should base its brand on what it already does well, or alternatively, what it has the resources to change.

“Sometimes people believe they can achieve their aspirations through marketing alone, by going out and telling people that we’re no longer regional, we’re a national player,” says

### Sure Paths to Bad Branding

When developing a brand, business schools often fall into some common psychological traps, experts say. It’s important that a b-school brand be focused enough to represent its true value to the market but flexible enough to grow with the school as the market changes. “Big picture” thinking will help schools avoid creating a brand with a focus that’s too narrow.

**The “one great department” trap.** Schools fall into this trap when they try to limit their brand to only one part of the faculty, says George Sopko of Stanton Crenshaw Communications. “Many schools fixate on only one department to the exclusion of others. But all of a school’s departments should support the larger brand.”

To avoid this mistake, Martin Roll of VentureRepublic advises schools to look closely first at what each individual department has accomplished to discover the common thread that holds them all together. “A business school needs to pick one or two of its strongest selling points and build a consistent and unique ‘brand package’ around them,” says Roll.

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# The common mistake among brand marketers is to try to embrace too many messages in brand-

Westerbeck. “It makes much more sense for a regional school to build a brand on the aspiration to be the best regional provider and to build the scope of its product in its region than to decide it’s going to be in the oranges business after it’s been in the apples business for years. You have to decide that it’s OK to be what you are and become better at that. Or you have to be willing to change your product offering.”

Sowing the seeds of branding where a school already is makes eminent sense, agrees Sopko of Stanton Crenshaw. “Many business schools fall into the trap of thinking they have to have a national or international reputation, when they should really start at home, looking at the impact of their brands locally and regionally,” he says. “Business schools often aren’t as defined as they should be in their local markets, especially those that are part of a larger institution.”

AACSB International’s recent mission-based accreditation standards have gone a long way toward allowing schools to be true to their own strengths and aspirations, Westerbeck adds. Mission-based standards allow schools to create a brand that truly illustrates where they fit in the marketplace.

## A Single Message

Branding, say these consultants, is only effective when it infiltrates the mindset of an entire organization, from the person

who answers the phone, to the marketing departments, to the librarians, to the upper management. It’s not enough to get everyone on board with a business school’s brand message. It’s also imperative that they communicate it through almost everything they do internally and externally.

Likewise, it is also important to target a brand to each audience a business school reaches. “Imagine how different your school looks to a 24-year-old MBA student, versus a 50-year-old professor applying for a job, versus a 68-year-old potential donor. These are radically different market segments, all of whom are surrounding the same product offering. If your message doesn’t speak to these different markets, your branding won’t be successful,” says Westerbeck.

He adds that many business school departments remain segregated when it comes to marketing and branding efforts, which can sink a brand before it is even launched. “For the vast majority of schools, what goes on in admissions and recruiting is considered their marketing, yet they are only small segments that mark the impact of that institution,” he says. “In business schools, rarely are all of their departments integrated, rarely do all work from the same strategic plan, rarely do all communicate the same message.”

Instead, Westerbeck advises schools to examine every avenue that they use to communicate their messages to

» The “we do it all” trap. The flip side of the first trap occurs when schools try to do too much, Roll adds. “Less is more in this context. The common mistake among brand marketers is to try to embrace too many messages in brand-building efforts. Target audiences get confused as the communication does not come through clearly and with the desired impact. The messages are diluted because the audience finds it difficult to get an idea of what the business school’s brand is all about.”

The “it’s all about the logo” trap. Just as a single department should not carry a school’s brand, neither should a logo or graphic design motif, no matter how visually appealing that motif may be. “I’ve seen many schools mistake their logos for their brands,” says Sopko. “The school wants to build a brand, but ends up focusing only on design. That’s a huge mistake. The design and the logo are the easy stuff. The brand is a position, a way of thinking.”

The “singing to the choir” trap. To create an effective brand, business schools should ask people at the school, in business, and in the general public what they think of when they think of the school. However, limiting these conversa-

tions to people who already identify with the school in some way is only getting half the picture, emphasizes Tim Westerbeck of Lipman Hearne.

“To do this the right way, you don’t just go out and sing to the choir,” he says. “While it’s helpful to speak to alumni and donors who already love the school, canvass those who haven’t developed an affinity with the school. You also should approach as many people as possible about their perceptions of the school—especially those who *didn’t* choose to apply or attend, who *didn’t* donate money, or who *don’t* recruit students. Why did they never develop an affinity with the institution?”

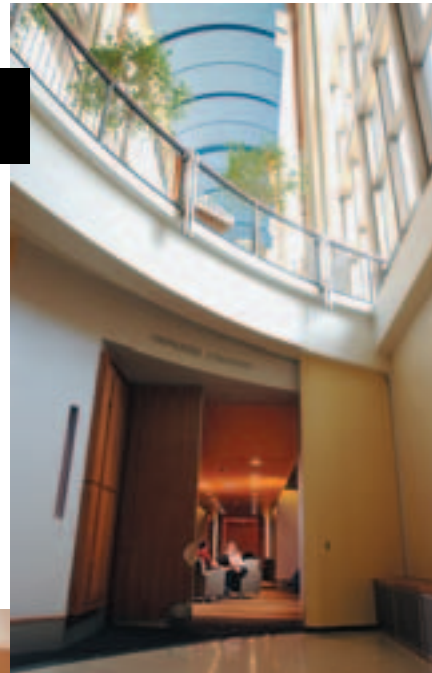
The “we’re done” trap. Branding, say these experts, is not a terminal project. It’s important to recognize that branding efforts must be ongoing and perpetual. “Sometimes, higher education institutions go through this whole branding exercise, and then say, ‘Whew, we did it! We’re done.’ Then, they put that work into a drawer and forget about it,” says Sopko. “The key is to communicate it. Start internally, because your best brand ambassadors are your faculty, staff, and students.”

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— Martin Roll, VentureRepublic

## 'Worthy' Efforts at Mendoza College of Business

A strong branding message has the power to change the way a school's faculty, staff, and students think about themselves and their school. For example, the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana recently released its annual dean's report—this year titled "Worthy." It asks the question, "What makes a business college worthy?" The report, which plays on the words "worth" and "worthy" throughout, struck a chord with readers and even won a gold award in the League of American Communications Professionals' 2002 Vision Awards Annual Report Competition.



"Impact," carried a theme of responsibility. The report's gold award isn't as important as the fact that the brochure's message—and with it Mendoza's brand—was effectively conveyed. Not only that, it resonated with the staff as a reinforcement of their collec-

tive accomplishments and aspirations.

In addition, the school's brand is expressed through everything the school does, says Woo. For instance, Mendoza's new classroom wing, the Giovanini Commons for Collaborative Learning, has an aesthetic and atmosphere that reinforce a feeling of communal interaction and responsibility. She also weaves the school's brand throughout her own speeches and articles, and encourages her faculty to do the same. "I don't give speeches called 'Worthy,'" she says, "but, for example, I've given a speech titled 'Grace in a Competitive World.' I've written an article for *BizEd* called 'Personally Responsible.' That particular theme is repeated in everything we do."

A brand is both an identity and an outcome, Woo believes. In fact, Woo has found that once a faculty and staff understand a school's brand they develop a sense of pride in that identity. More important, they bring the brand's spirit into their work and research. In this way, they perpetuate and enhance what the brand signifies.

"Of course, it's wonderful if people like the work and understand the message," says Woo. "Even so, my greatest moment of satisfaction came not when I received the notification that the Worthy brochure won the gold award, but when a faculty member said, 'I received the magazine and I felt so proud that I was a part of this.'"



Giovanini Commons for Collaborative Learning, Mendoza's new 8,500 classroom wing.

"Everything we do has a branding implication," says Carolyn Woo, dean of the Mendoza College. "Because we are a Catholic institution, our entire mission is about achieving academic excellence in the context of a faith-based institution. It's not just about success, but about achieving success with an understanding of the responsibility that comes with success."

Past reports have also followed the lead of the school's overall brand. Mendoza's last report, titled "Bursting," pictured a seedling unfolding and followed a theme of finding expression, explains Woo. The report before that, titled

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internal and external audiences. Business school administrators often forget that their staff, faculty, and students have a great impact on how a brand identity reaches the public, whether through a conversation, an article, or a television interview. When everyone doesn't just understand the brand, but believes in it and communicates it as "brand ambassadors"—that's b-school branding at its best.

### A Brand of One's Own

Even if a school's academic offerings are excellent, a student may still look elsewhere if the school does not communicate

its product in a way that connects to his or her aspirations and individual beliefs. Therefore, when a school focuses too much on product characteristics, class offerings, or academic specialties, it risks missing the point of branding.

"I don't mean to diminish in any way the huge amount of work that schools put into defining their curricula," says Westerbeck. "But it's amusing to me that most prospective MBA students don't really care much about the details. They just want to know that they're going to an institution that will be well-matched with their aspirations and that will help them achieve something in their careers."

## 'No Dominant Culture' at INSEAD

*Diversity. Ideas. Independence. Community. Entrepreneurial spirit.* These terms represent the core principles behind the brand of INSEAD, with campuses in Fontainebleau, France, and Singapore. "It is a combination of these elements that fuels our ambition, which is to be the most innovative and influential global business school," says its dean Gabriel Hawawini. "That's what we see our brand as being all about."

They are grand aspirations for a relatively young school, Hawawini admits. INSEAD graduated its first class of MBA students in 1960. But without clearly defined, stated, and communicated goals, emphasizes Hawawini, the school's students, faculty, and staff would have no consistent voice with which to communicate what INSEAD stands for.

Like most business schools, INSEAD comprises multiple departments including its MBA, executive education, and development and fund-raising departments. "They all are looking after their own programs. So, we get together to

discuss how we can keep sight of the bigger picture," says Hawawini. In addition, the school works regularly with a marketing consultant and asks everyone to adhere to strict corporate identity guidelines. In this way, everyone knows what they can and cannot do with colors and the INSEAD name and logo.

The values that make up INSEAD's brand have been slowly woven into the school's identity since its inception. The school has not done so deliberately, stresses Hawawini, but rather it has looked back at its history and based its current identity and ambitions on its evolution. And that strategy has worked. The school's international reputation is now backed by its "no dominant culture" mantra, which ensures that no one nationality—not even the French—make up more than 10 percent of the student body. The notion of 'minority' is a very positive one at INSEAD, Hawawini points out. "We say, 'Everyone is a minority at INSEAD.' There is no dominant culture. It's truly multicultural."

To further establish the multicultural aspect of its brand, the school also cut ties with the origin of the INSEAD name, which used to be a French acronym standing for the "European Institute of Business Administration." The school dropped the acronym 13 years ago in favor of the simpler "INSEAD" moniker. "The 'E' stood for European, so we made the decision to drop the acronym and forget its origin," says Hawawini. "We are first an international and global institution," he added, so limiting its association to Europe was no longer appropriate to the school's identity.

Branding, says Hawawini, is important for any business school that strives to be known for its unique qualities, rather than for its general offerings. "In the larger business school market, people go to 'get an MBA.' We want to position ourselves this way: It's not an MBA. It's the INSEAD experience," he says. "If the term 'MBA' is banned, that's fine with us. That's the point of branding."



INSEAD's campus in Fontainebleau, France

## \$60 pair of shoes or a \$1,000 computer. The selection of a business school becomes a part of a student's personal branding process.

– George Sopko, Stanton Crenshaw Communications

Branding goes beyond a product or school, says Sopko, to an individual's view of the world. "At a cost of \$60,000 to \$100,000, an MBA is a very carefully considered purchase. It's not a \$60 pair of shoes or a \$1,000 computer," says Sopko. "The selection of a business school becomes a part of a student's personal branding process."

Over the long term, the degrees students eventually earn will comprise a much larger portion of their identity than the shoes they wear, the cola they drink, or the cars they drive. Students will identify with the business schools they choose, and so they will choose those schools carefully. It only follows that business schools, as well, must very carefully create their brands. **Z**

### A Bold New Brand at Weatherhead

*"Bold ideas. Lasting impact."* Those four words, which are the foundation of the new brand for Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management, have 18 months of work and soul-searching behind them. The school, based in Cleveland, Ohio, worked in part with Stanton Crenshaw Communications to develop its new brand, which was recently launched in a schoolwide celebration.

Michael Devlin, Weatherhead's executive director of relationship management, notes that it took some time for school staff to come to an agreement about what the larger business school represented, to itself and to the public. "Every two weeks, everyone who communicated with various audiences met, and I asked, 'What is unique about Weatherhead? What makes it different from Duke or Emory?'"

However, because they all came from different departments within the business school, they all had their own stories to tell, says Devlin. "The exec ed department said, 'We teach leadership better than anyone else.' Our admissions staff said, 'We treat our applicants with more consideration.' Our health systems management department said, 'We teach health systems management better than any other school, and we've been doing it for 35 years.'"

While those claims may or may not be true, Devlin adds with a laugh, the theme that ran through all of those stories became evident. "Finally, we came to the conclusion that our history is punctuated with some really radical ideas, and that those ideas that peppered our history were really what makes Weatherhead unique. So, that's where 'Bold ideas. Lasting impact' came from."

Those four words are taken from the following, longer brand statement: "Among the world's best business schools, Weatherhead is a leading catalyst for advancing bold ideas that have a lasting impact on business and society." What's important about that statement, says Devlin, is not just that people hear those words, but that they internalize the brand's message, which will become a part of every form



of internal and external communication in the school. The goal, he says, is that the school's faculty, students, and staff all begin to tell the same story.

"Beyond that, I hope that it becomes so much a part of our culture that it becomes second nature to people," says Devlin. "I hope that when you meet someone from Weatherhead, that person will be talking to you in terms of the school's ongoing legacy of bold ideas."

Such an internalization of the message is already clear in some of the world's biggest companies, Devlin points out. "Look at Ford, which proclaimed that 'Quality is job one.' That was a statement not just to customers, dealers, and suppliers, but also to its employees. No matter whether an employee works on the production line, in the marketing department, or in the finance department, Ford is going to stand for quality, so you'd better come to work with that in mind."

Weatherhead's brand is only a few months old, says Devlin, but it already has taken hold of the imaginations of its staff. "I was at a marketing meeting, and someone offered an idea that we host a major annual conference on a particular area of expertise. Immediately, all the barriers went up and everyone started saying, 'Yeah, but...'"

"The person simply responded, 'Hey, this is a bold idea and it would have a lasting impact on the school.' That stopped everyone. The idea won instant respect," Devlin says. "The brand is already at work. I think that's wonderful."