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With the advent of the "experience culture," academic libraries are forced to reassess their traditional service models and client relations. This paper explores and discusses the concept of organizational branding and its implications for libraries. Furthermore, this paper highlights the research aims, objectives, methodological considerations and significance of the ongoing library branding research in Kansas. Preliminary findings appear to indicate that customers' library experiences are not solely dependent merely on library products and services, but on many other experiential factors that help shape the totality of library experience. This research will shed light on how libraries are currently perceived and will provide thoughts on how brand strategy could be used for retaining and attracting library customers on campus as the primary source of information, and for re-establishing its relevance to student development and campus life.

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Re-Branding Academic Libraries in an Experience Culture

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Abstract

With the advent of the "experience culture," academic libraries are forced to reassess their traditional service models and client relations. This paper explores and discusses the concept of organizational branding and its implications for libraries. Furthermore, this paper highlights the research aims, objectives, methodological considerations and significance of the ongoing library branding research in Kansas. Preliminary findings appear to indicate that customers' library experiences are not solely dependent merely on library products and services, but on many other experiential factors that help shape the totality of library experience. This research will shed light on how libraries are currently perceived and will provide thoughts on how brand strategy could be used for retaining and attracting library customers on campus as the primary source of information, and for re-establishing its relevance to student development and campus life.

Introduction

Academic libraries have long enjoyed their status as the sole learning commons with little to no serious competition as primary information providers to universities, students and communities. However, physical visits to academic libraries have dropped significantly over the last ten years (Cronin & O'Brien, 2009). With the advent of the experience culture, academic libraries are also forced to reassess their traditional service models and client relations. Relying on built-in client bases at academic libraries can no longer be assumed to be adequate. Rethinking collection and service strategies has become a top priority for most library and information professionals, regardless of the professional stream in which they are currently swimming. In this climate of the 'extreme library make-over,' branding is increasingly becoming a hot topic for creating a new library image. Consequently, academic libraries need to begin finding better ways of attracting and retaining library customers, and re-establish themselves as the primary information providers on campus. However, many libraries seemingly find it difficult to incorporate brand strategies in their service operations, particularly due to the invisible, intangible and inconsistent nature of their service offerings**.** The aforementioned statement illustrates the frustration that many libraries are facing in today's frenetic service marketplace characterized by intense competition. It is in these critical areas of intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity that the traditional approach to brand development falls short**.** The goal of this paper, then, is to gain a better understanding of organizational branding and its implications for library and information service providing institutions. To this end, an exploration of library branding literature vis-à-vis organizational branding will be included, with a focus on ongoing library branding research in Kansas.

What is Organizational Branding?

The concept of 'corporate branding' is still a relatively new phenomenon for scientific investigation and research. There is a growing awareness in the business literature that organizational brands can increase the organization's visibility, recognition and reputation in ways not fully appreciated by product-brand thinking. The importance of employees to organizational branding and the need to better understand their behavior and thus the organizational culture of the corporation have received particular emphasis in recent work (Carsten, 2010). It is argued that employees are key to building relationships with all the organisation's stakeholders as well as contributing to the meaning of the brand (i.e. expressing to others who we think we are as an organisation (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

In spite of the complexities of corporate branding, Hatch and Schultz have developed a simple analytical framework, the "Corporate Branding ToolKit". The kit is based in a relational perception of branding. The ToolKit suggests how corporate brands are constituted by the alignment of different elements defined by different stakeholder. It further offers a way to analyze the relations between these elements (Hatch & Schultz 2001). Shultz (2005, p. 48) defines corporate branding as follows:

"*Corporate branding can best be described as the process of creating, nurturing, and sustaining a mutually rewarding relationship between an organization, its employees, and external stakeholders.*"

As shown in Figure 1, the four elements of a corporate brand could be summarized as follows (Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Schultz, 2005):

Strategic vision- the central idea behind the organization that embodies and expresses *top management's aspirations* for what the organization will achieve in future

Organizational culture- the internal values, beliefs, and basic assumptions that embody the heritage of the organization and how these are manifested in the ways *employees* feel about the organization they work for

Stakeholder images- views of the organization developed by its *external stakeholders*; the outside world's overall impression of the organization including the views of customers, the media, the general public, and so on

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Corporate brand identity- occurs at the juncture between vision, culture, and mage and *defines how we perceive ourselves as an organization. Identity* underpins the corporate brand- partly by the feed-back from stakeholders and partly by 'the organization's self-insight. Claims about identity are often stated as core values, beliefs and central ideas

Figure 1: Corporate Branding Toolkit and the Corresponding Gaps
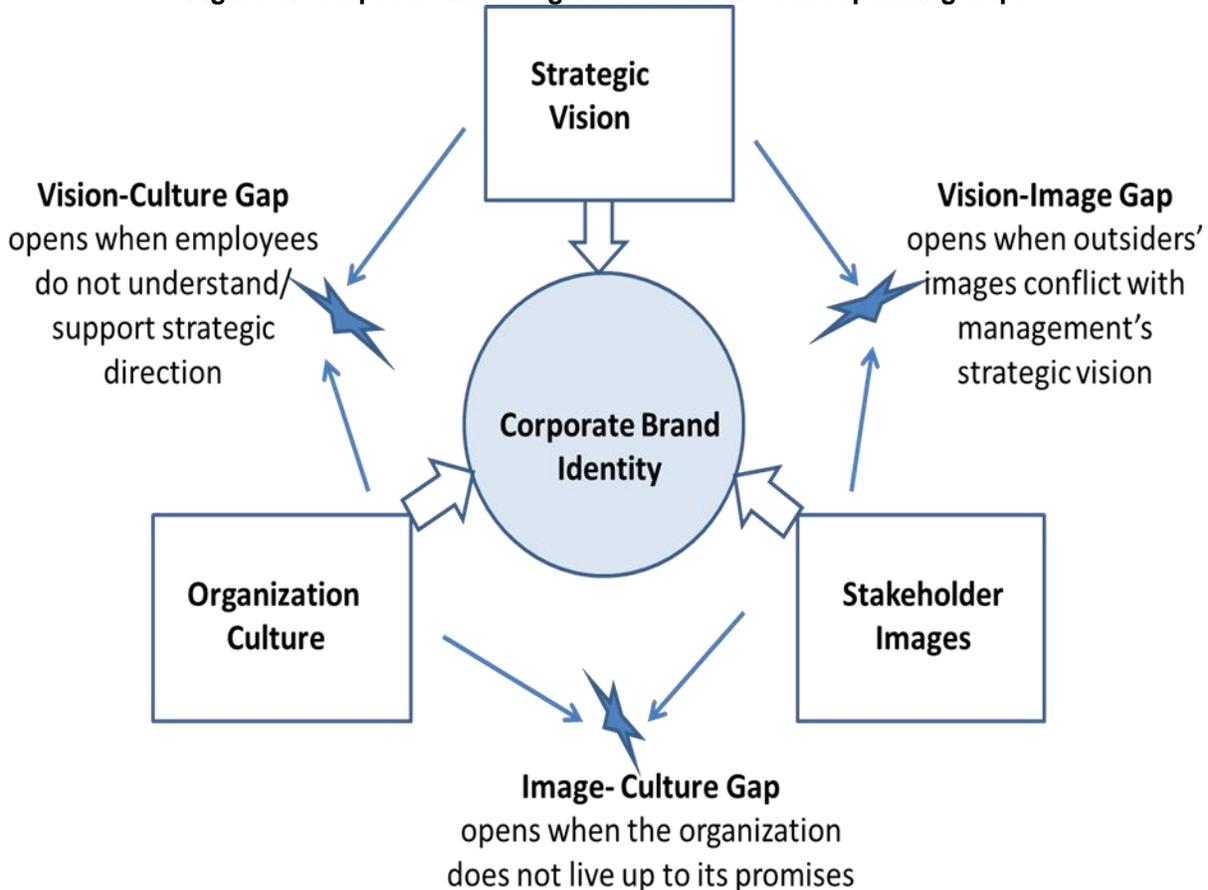
Together these key elements of corporate branding underpin the Corporate Branding Toolkit. Given the negative connotation library and information professionals still have towards business sector terminology and jargon, we prefer using the term 'organizational branding' rather than 'corporate branding' throughout the remainder of the paper. The conceptual branding toolkit by Hatch (2003) and Schultz (2005) also invites the analysis and tracking of "gaps" or "disconnects" between the different elements of the organizational brand. Such organizational branding gaps may cause both loss of credibility and severe damage to reputation if organizations don't take the necessary steps to address those gaps in a timely manner. To enhance or maintain organizational brand alignment, it could be argued that libraries and information service providing institutions must attend to all these elements of organizational branding simultaneously. It is important to remember for them that organizational branding is not only about differentiation in the marketplace; it is also about belonging.

Organizational Branding and Libraries

There have been only a few studies concerning branding of library and information services (Hood and Henderson, 2005; Rowley, 1997, 2004). Moreover, these studies do not directly address the research questions that are being posed in the on-research. The earliest study is primarily theoretical (Rowley, 1997), another is related to online branding (Rowley, 2004), and the third is a case study of public

libraries in the UK (Hood and Henderson, 2005). The findings of these studies indicate that library branding has been left behind as libraries have rapidly evolved and embraced a much broader role. Increasing competition with Google, Amazon and other Internet service providers, the changing information landscape and the challenge of digital visibility all appear to be viable threats to the perceived value of the library and its staff. However, the complexity of the information environment means that the role of librarian and the 'institution of the library' is needed more now than ever before (Kenneway, 2006).

Lately, some libraries have moved towards the adoption of "bookstore model" for providing better accessibility to their community. For instance, "Anythink" libraries in different locations of Colorado (http://www.anythinklibraries.org/) have recently changed their name from "Rangeview Public Libraries" to the Anythink Libraries by adopting an unconventional "bookstore model" approach. They reorganized their library collections and resources so that they could improve the library experience for members of their communities. This appears to be one of the methods to create a new brand identity. However, the long-term impact of this novel approach remains to be seen.

Thus far, the library literature has not adequately addressed the concept of organizational branding and important related issues. These concepts can be helpful in developing a viable and deeper relationship with the library's consumers by providing them overall superior library experiences. There is a dearth of literature concerning branding in the library world. As a consequence, the LIS profession lacks a deeper understanding of the process of developing a deliberate branding culture.

Current Library Branding Research

Given the pressing need to develop a better understanding of the concept of "organizational branding" in libraries, I initiated a research project in 2010 in order to fill these knowledge gaps. This study aims to examine the branding culture of selected academic and public libraries in Kansas with the goal of identifying opportunities for improving the overall library experience for their communities. In particular, this research intends to investigate the libraries' current branding philosophy, library management's efforts to incorporate brand centrality in the workplace, customer's perception of library's brand values and image and branding vision, ideas and strategies for enhancing the visibility of libraries and information services institutions to their communities, stakeholders and funders.

An online survey was launched in October 2010 to collect data from academic and public libraries in Kansas. The collection of the research data is ongoing, and will last until December 2010. We intend to analyze the data by adopting an approach integrating qualitative and quantitative methods. The preliminary findings reveal that there is some resistance to the use of branding terminology and jargon. The results also appear to indicate a variety of factors that shape library customers' experiences. Such experiences are not necessarily based on library products and services, but on many other factors. For instance, factors such as parking, ambience, comfort, and the availability of food and beverage services seemed to affect library customer's perceptions of the totality of their library experience. While it is not possible to make a conclusive generalization based on data from a limited number of libraries, there appear to be implications that suggest libraries should change their existing service models to include attention to appreciating and enhancing their customers' experience.

The Road Ahead

The results of this research will provide a good opportunity for library administrators and other library professionals to engage in a dialogue for developing effective branding strategies to serve their communities better by providing clear value for their tax dollars. We hope that the research will shed light on how libraries are currently perceived. In addition, this study will provide thoughts on how brand strategy could be used for retaining and attracting library customers on campus as the primary source of information, and for re-establishing its relevance to student development and campus life. This study will also attempt to determine if the research findings could offer beneficial insights towards the development of a community oriented service branding model for attracting and engaging library customers.

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