

Brand management is one of the most complex management challenges for leaders of business schools and business universities. **Thomas Bieger** and **Patrik Sonderegger** chronicle how University of St.Gallen in Switzerland approached the issue

# Getting university brand management right

The globalisation of the education sector and increasing competition in higher education means that brands have increasingly become a strategic asset to be carefully developed and managed. This is especially the case for business schools and business universities – and even more their executive education arms, which operate in a globally competitive market.

However, to develop a brand that not only transmits an image but also reflects the identity of an organisation and its members (and thereby allows truthful claims for the quality delivered by faculty and staff members) requires a carefully designed process. This article described the process used by the University of St.Gallen, one of the most prestigious business universities in Europe.

In a traditional company producing tangible products, brands can be developed in a more or less top-down strategic planning process. Quality is reflected by the products and their price level, which are the result of careful quality assurance. And customer contacts are mainly via the products themselves.

A service company is a more difficult case since customer contact and customer promises are fulfilled by the employees of the company. In a service company brands never can be successfully developed without employee support. It is part of the key insights of behavioural branding that a successful brand has to be based on a strong fit between the outside image and the inside identity of the organisation and its members.

Brand management for a public institution, region or a city is even more challenging. A successful brand not only has to fit to the market positioning and customer expectations, employee identity and values, and also has to reflect the identity and value system of the broader constituency, both directly, for example politicians, or indirectly, for example inhabitants who contribute to the customer experience and are sources of strategic assets.

A city brand, therefore, has to be developed together with market research specialists for the respective target markets plus representatives of customer-facing industries such as the tourism sector and representatives of the broader local constituency.

But compared to this type of location branding, brand management for universities is even more complex (see Figure 1). This is mainly for two reasons.

First, universities' most important constituency is their former customers – alumni – which has to be involved.

Second, universities active in the executive education sector as well as pre-experience student markets have to cover very different needs and to provide an extremely heterogeneous service experience. A participant on an open enrolment programme is a precision shopper who wants a solution in a few days whereas a bachelor student might be interested in a more general life experience for a rather undefined time.



**Developing a claim in a multi stakeholder process – the example of the University of St.Gallen**

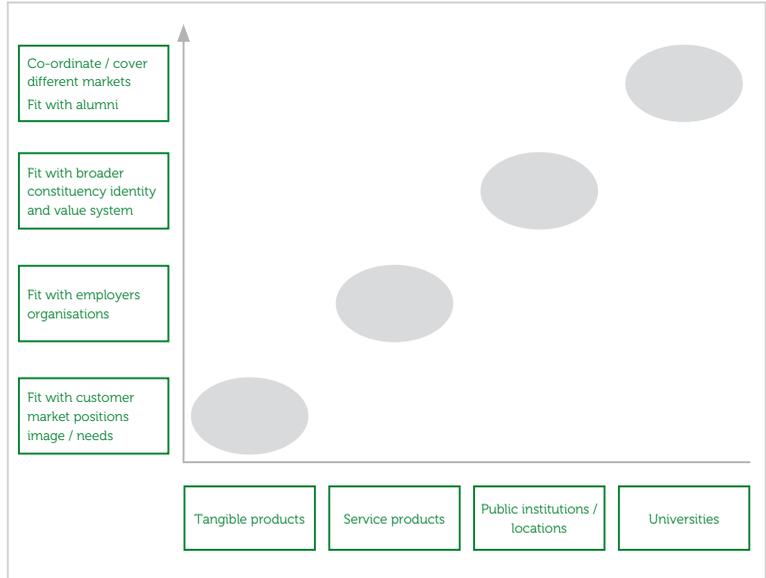
St.Gallen, like any quality organisation, follows a long-term brand strategy. Its current logo dates back more than 15 years and was designed by an international brand consultant. To capture the spirit and value of the place a photography-based participation process was used. Members of the university took photos they believed reflect best the spirit of the university. The logo that resulted consists of fragments of a human being in a Leonardo da Vinci style. It captures values that then and still are at the core of the university such as “students and people first”, “create, innovate and undertake study are life”. The colour chosen is the official colour of the state of St. Gallen, the owner of the university (see Figure 2).

At the time a deliberate choice was made to avoid developing and using any branding material that made specific claims about St.Gallen since the university was in the middle of the Bologna process and on its way to becoming an internationally recognised business university. At the start of this process, expectations and perceptions internally were still too heterogeneous to work out a really powerful claim relevant for different target markets and covering the identity of the different stakeholders (see Figure 3).

It was decided that developing such a branding claim would come after St.Gallen had established itself as a leading business university in Europe as the identity became clearer and more homogeneous. Two other key decisions were made.

The first was to work with the conceptual framework of Aaker, which differentiates brand associations (what), brand values (how) and brand core (why). Then also a so-called brand foundation describing the “must-haves” of a leading business university was added.

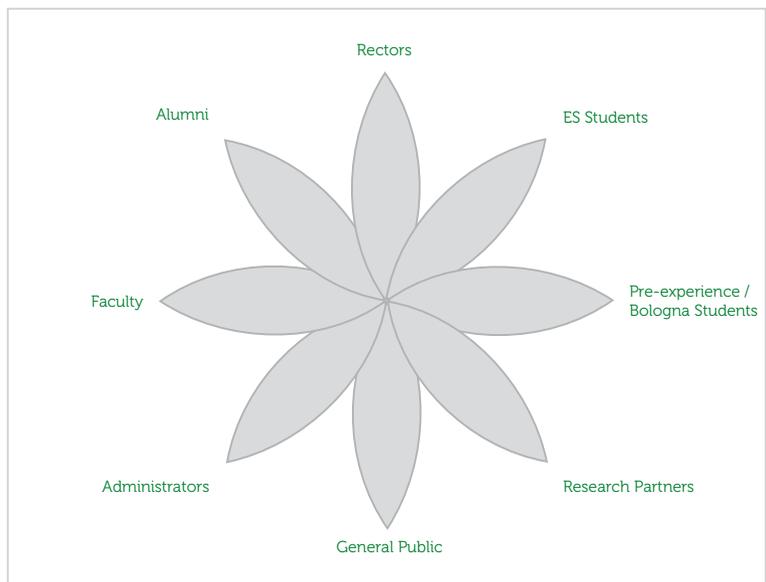
The second decision was to work with a series of interviews involving stakeholders such as alumni, students, faculty, administrators, executive education and the leadership team.



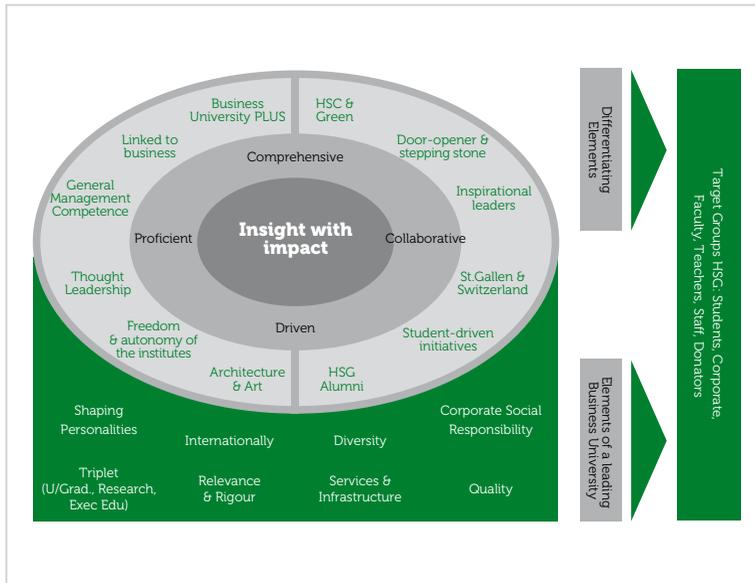
**Figure 1:** Complexity of Brand Management / Source: Own representation, Bieger, T., 2015



**Figure 2:** Brand logo of the University of St Gallen / Source: University of St.Gallen, 2001



**Figure 3:** Stakeholders involved in brand process / Source: Own representation, Bieger, T., 2015



**Figure 4:** Brand identity and positioning of the University of St.Gallen / Source: Own representation, Sonderegger, P., Tomczak, T., Krutthof, K., 2014, based on Aaker, D.

## “From insight to impact”

**Figure 5:** Claim icon and communicative execution in print ads and brochures / Source: Own representation, University of St.Gallen, 2014



**Above and right:** Source: Own representation, University of St.Gallen, 2015

The goal was to identify a brand essence and positioning and transform that into a claim fitting the external image and internal identity, having a strong positioning value, communicating customer value relevant for the most important target markets and rooted in the values of St.Gallen (see Figure 4).

Single interviews were chosen because of their ability to deliver a good balance between inspirational and valid results..

### Implementation

The implementation process also had to take into account the special conditions of the organisation. In the case of a decentralised public university and given the insights of behavioural branding it seems clear that a purely hierarchical implementation process is not sufficient.

The brand as a promise for customer quality and a representation of image and identity has to be accepted by the organisation’s members as well as its stakeholders. It was therefore decided that the use of the new claim should be voluntary and at the discretion of the independent units such as departments, schools and institutes (see Figure 5). To facilitate this process several measures have been taken:

- An internal information campaign in both academic and administration spheres was launched, and was legitimised by the fact that eminent marketing and branding professors had been involved and that the claim was the result of a participative development process involving the different stakeholders.
- That important lead users such as big research institutes and, most importantly, the executive education school, quickly accepted and implemented the new claim in their communication.

Following this successful introductory phase, touch points derived from a service blueprint analysis will be evaluated in a further phase in the form of journeys for all relevant customers. The goal is that the relevant agents in the different steps of the service process not only know the claim but live the brand and also get inspired in their daily work in a form that can be felt positively by customers.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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