

Robbie Ewen Fellowship 2011

Study tour: strategic and operational
reputation building at the University of British
Columbia, Vancouver, Canada



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Introduction

Background

As the international higher education sector becomes increasingly competitive and ever more dependent on new income streams, a university's strong reputation is critical to its success and sustainability.

A strong and positive reputation is an intangible asset formed within the context of its environment. Reputation is formed of internal and external stakeholder understanding of an organisation, their perception of its activities, their support for its mission and vision and their trust in its unique strengths. Such trust, understanding and support is vital for any organisation wishing to develop and grow.

A university with a strong reputation will be best placed to attract and retain high quality students and staff, build and maximise beneficial external networks, and provide the most positive platform from which to secure funding, partnerships, donations and support from the range of sources that will enable it to deliver fully upon its potential for its students and society and deliver upon future strategic goals.

For ambitious universities, the challenge is to continue to grow and enhance reputation, profile and engagement in an authentic manner which is representative of the institution's past, present and future.

Over a period of 20 years, the University of British Columbia (UBC) has been working to enhance its international and local reputation by refocusing its corporate strategy and developing an inspiring, yet relevant narrative that has made university achievements, goals and ambitions understandable and exciting to a range of different stakeholders.

With a growing reputation for innovation, UBC has successfully repositioned itself from a well regarded provincial university to a highly ranked world elite institution.

The University stands out in particular for the compelling way it shares stories of its commitments, goals, actions and achievements to engage internal and

external stakeholders and secure their support for current activities and future progress.

This fellowship report is based on interviews with key people in the Department of Public Affairs and the President's Office at UBC during a visit in July 2011.

It studies UBC as an example of best practice international reputation growth in higher education and looks at lessons which can be applied for the Scottish higher education sector.

Objectives

This fellowship report studies the University of British Columbia as an example of best practice international reputation growth in higher education.

Specifically, it sets out to:

- Understand UBC's strategic and operational reputation building activities
- Understand the elements involved in developing a narrative that makes goals understandable and inspiring to stakeholders
- Gain a fresh insight into new and evolving challenges and opportunities to develop reputational strategy
- Use the experience gained at UBC to help refresh GCU's own strategy to build reputation, profile and stakeholder engagement

Choice of case study

A leading world university ranked 31st in the THE world reputational rankings, the University of British Columbia is an international exemplar of best practice in reputation building.

It particularly stands out for the compelling way it shares stories of its commitments, goals, actions and achievements to engage stakeholders and secure their support.

The UBC mission to ‘create an exceptional learning environment that fosters global citizenship, advance a civil and sustainable society, and support outstanding research to serve the people of British Columbia, Canada and the world’ is widely understood by key stakeholders - and the accomplishment of a succession of high profile leaders in effectively driving and communicating this mission is believed to be a key factor in the University’s journey from “a decent provincial university of 20 years ago” to among the world’s greatest universities.

The current communications strategy for the University mission ‘Place and Promise: the UBC plan’ and the branding strategy ‘A Place of Mind’ makes UBC a particularly relevant case study for best practice communications within the higher education sector.

Findings

Strategic and operational reputation building activities

UBC embarks on a wide range of reputation and profile building activities and corporate strategy and leadership are key driving forces of all communication, marketing and public affairs activity.

External rankings, awards and endorsements are seen to be important and the University has a legacy of strong leaders who are seen to set a clear agenda and tirelessly champion that, while also encouraging ownership at a local level and collaboration in goal achievement.

Effective, carefully planned and authentic communication is helping the University share its vision and its success to move ever forward.

Most of the University's current visioning and strategic communications (The Place and the Promise) are led by the President's Office together with the Department of Public Affairs, while wider communication activities to boost current reputation, brand and profile (A Place of Mind) are led by the Department of Public Affairs.

While they have different purposes, the strategies are intertwined – Place and Promise setting out a bold and ambitious future, with Place of Mind enabling movement and buy-in toward this progress by reminding people what the University is now and the journey on which it has come.

Patricia Stevens, Executive Director in the President's Office believes that effective leadership, good strategic choices and an ability to show results have been fundamental to the university's reputation over the long term. In addition, she says providing a forum for consultation and 'sense checking' the message has substantially maximised results. She explains that in terms of reputation, the University has been on a long journey, and in some areas still has opportunity to grow:

"UBC is seen in BC as the university to send your kids to. Elsewhere in Canada we have a way to go, but actually we have been building a very strong international reputation for over 20 years. We have a tradition of visionary Presidents and we believed that if UBC would make a real mark reputationally, it would be internationally first and that was our initial strategic focus.

“We are a Pacific Rim gateway, quick to Asia. We’ve established international networks with a range of MOUs. Our current focus is on making these sustainable and successful over the long term and also now to put a fresh focus on Canada.

“Our experience is that activity builds reputation. The more you do in key areas, the more your reputation grows. So we set out to build research infrastructure, build research, attract top flight staff, compete, deliver. That’s so important.

“It was right to prioritise as we did but our strength is in the classroom as much as elsewhere and we also need to remember our undergraduate level or we lose something unique. We need to understand what works for our students as they are our reputation in the future. We’re making good headway and the building blocks are in place so we are on the slight up and up.

“Our students understand our mission and that is important. There are students on the steering committee and a student voice at the executive table. We involve students everywhere we can. We have a lot to learn from reverse mentoring.

“Everyone has ownership of our plans, we consult extensively and honestly with staff. With their feedback, the plans should change, they should grow.

“For our external partners the university is a living lab. Creating partnerships at all levels, collaborating to advance research. We get it. We have an advisory council of BC CEOs. Our president speaks at the Vancouver Board of Trade. Our economic impact is £10 billion dollars direct and indirect.

“We have looked at the Government’s ten year goals, particularly for education and made sure we were in touch and they were aware of this. We report on what they want through our lens. Our stories are engaging, up there and down there.

“We are solid on the facts and our messages come from truth and experience.

“It’s all about vision, leadership... engaging staff... giving clarity of direction and sign-posting results.”

It becomes clear that UBC has built its reputation as much on what it has chosen to do and how it has chosen to do this - yet huge effort has gone into earning understanding, consulting upon the issues and making efforts to move colleagues in the University along the journey together. UBC's success has been built upon a planned and sustained effort to live its vision and communicate direction and success.

An organisation cannot change its reputation without changing its behaviour, but how does the organisation bring this behaviour change to life? As Stevens puts it:

“Our success is based on our behaviours and our delivery of our strategy. But over that, how do you deepen the brand? How do you tell the UBC story?”

Developing a compelling yet authentic narrative

UBC has a distinct strategy for its visioning and strategic communications (The Place and the Promise) which sits beside its overall brand communications strategy for reputation, engagement and profile (A Place of Mind).

The Place and the Promise is a consultative document which sets out a clear and compelling direction for stakeholders to buy into, while the Place of Mind branding communications strategy takes the story to a deeper level.

Both are closely linked and work together to provide an engaging and clear vision which is woven through all of the University's communications.

The web is crucial as a symbol of the brand, as is the range of University literature and marketing materials and huge effort has been made to ensure the profile of key messages is visible throughout UBC life.

Says Stevens:

“Everywhere I go on campus, someone mentions Place and Promise. People don't need to know every detail of the strategy but they need to know the direction and what it means for them. Some talk about it in detail and how they are implementing it. This has come because of the executive team's active development and implementation. They are sticking with it and with the commitment they have made.

“We would be disappointed internally if people didn’t know. I encounter it very occasionally and it usually points to a bigger issue. Place and Promise is linked to budget and to personal development goals so people should be aware of the link.”

Randy Schmitt, Associate Director and Acting Director of Communications says:

“Place and Promise is a consultation document which states clearly the University’s intended destination and its strategy for getting there. Budget and initiatives are linked and the University reports progress online. It’s a living document, so it should change, should grow. It has a specific purpose and while it is successful in creating good discussion it is not as deep in telling the whole UBC story.

“Place of Mind is the brand. It has a long life, that’s the core identity, it maps back to University’s mission but it tells the stories about who we are, where we are going and who we have been as well.

“Aspirations are driven by academics and our communication has a sense of momentum, energy and validity. We talk about our current strengths and the pride in our history as we evolve toward the new, innovative and bold.

“Stories are proof points in our communication and branding activity and we are consistent in our messaging. We run internal campaigns and media campaigns for external audiences and also marketing campaigns. They are all lined up with the brand guidelines and with the messaging and they champion the institution.

“We apply the same concepts to different campaigns. The common identifier is important and while there may be breathing room where it is needed, overall we work very hard to develop a strong, consistent identity that is recognisably UBC.”

It becomes clear that messaging and tone of voice is very carefully managed at UBC and maximised where possible. Bonnie Vockeroth, Marketing and Communications Co-ordinator says:

“400 people on campus have an element of communication in their roles – to get the story out the way we want to, we have to co-ordinate, we need to build

collaboration. It's a huge amount of work and while we want people to have ownership it's important that they understand the messaging and the guidelines and they reflect the story values and apply the values. Sometimes that's about dangling the carrot – it takes money to make a dent, and there is money there to help departments align to the brand. Consultation, audit and feedback is really important.”

Schmitt continues:

“There is a focus on opinion leaders, influencers as well as the general population. Our brand is about creating an emotional response. Understanding what our people really feel pride about and building on that pride. Some words are hot buttons.

“It takes time to do it well, two to three years at least and of course there is a lifecycle as the organisation continues to evolve but buy in always comes back to the marriage of the stories people want to hear and what you want to tell them.

“We run workshops to roll out, tell stories and proof point, sense check. We have faculty champions whom we use to acknowledge and legitimise and to recognise different of points of view.”

New and evolving challenges and opportunities

Focusing on communication as a strategic rather than operational function at UBC has had huge positive impact. But as potential is realised, it's also highlighted the work still to be done and the changing communications infrastructure needed to deliver this most effectively. Says Stevens:

“It's incredibly hard to manage. There's stuff coming out everywhere and it's a huge amount of work. We absolutely need to focus on beefing up the communications infrastructure, separating marketing and enabling specialists to deliver operational communications, public affairs, and issues management. It's vital that the most senior communications person works in tandem with the President's office to develop an agreed infrastructure, message and story.”

Consultation is increasingly important at UBC, but it's used as a reality check rather than a directive.

There is also the challenge of enabling people to deliver corporate messages effectively without blurring the distinction between the professional communications function and the people sharing the message:

“The challenge is to enable people within guidelines and we know that if we want people to carry and endorse our message we need to consult on principals, direction, strengths, weaknesses, vision. We all need to be on the same place on the core message, it is for the University to share the direction, for the function to shape the message and for the communicators to communicate – there is a trap that it all becomes about word-smithing and design rather than about message sharing and message impact.”

“We ask people – here’s where we should be. Are we close? We listen to what they have to say and why, and we use that to develop strategically. We focus always on the stories but we are beginning to use metrics more to show hard, honest success.”

Recommendations

UBC is an organisation which has been successful in the challenge to grow reputation, profile and engagement in an authentic manner which is representative of the institution's past, present and future.

Spending time at the University and meeting its people, it becomes clear that strong, compelling leaders and a clear strategy have driven success. The University is where it is because of the corporate strategy that has been evolving for the past 20 years.

Yet there is an additional shine to UBC's reputation that others struggle to achieve, and that has been delivered by a communications strategy that has achieved a blend of aspiration and authenticity which highlight the university's strengths and makes negative perceptions difficult.

While a communications function cannot ensure the delivery of effective leadership or a genuinely transformational corporate strategy, it can influence the delivery of these and maximise the benefits.

GCU can therefore learn from UBC's own strategy to build reputation, profile and stakeholder support in a number of ways, and there are many things the communications and public affairs function can do to support this. These include, but are not limited to:

Supporting leadership

- Promote effective leadership internally and externally, maximising and looking after key networks and relationships

Aiming for clarity and consistency

- Help to identify consistent themes and a strong mission statement to encourage distinctiveness
- Ensure consistency of messaging, look and feel across internal campaigns, media campaigns for external audiences and marketing campaigns to develop a strong, recognisable identity
- Focus on strength and aspiration without ignoring core activities

Listening and learning

- Consult as to how closely the projected image matches reality and aspiration, tweaking as needed to achieve a balance required
- Proof point and sense check stories and facts
- Involve, consult and communicate constantly
- Recognise and understand different points of view
- Use consultation as a reality check rather than a directive

Being authentic

- Develop an inspiring, yet relevant narrative that makes university achievements, goals and ambitions understandable and exciting to a range of different stakeholders
- Ensure facts are solid and messages are grounded in reality
- Signpost results

Involving everyone

- Ensure leaders champion themes but encourage ownership at a local level
- Use champions from all areas to legitimise messages
- Tell the stories of who we are, where we are going and who we have been

Harnessing pride

- Create an emotional response – understand and build on pride
- Encourage a sense of momentum, energy and validity. Talk about current strengths and the pride in the history as we evolve toward the new, innovative and bold

Investing in the message

- Focus on communication as a strategic rather than operational function and support this with an effective internal network and infrastructure
- Understand that investment is required

Conclusion

A university's strong reputation is critical to its success and sustainability and there is a huge amount to be learned from the activity that has taken place at UBC over the past 20 years.

UBC has built its reputation as much on what it has chosen to do and how it has chosen to focus as it has on what it says about these things - yet a great deal of work has gone into earning understanding, consulting upon the issues and making efforts to move colleagues in the University along the journey together. UBC's success has been built upon a planned and sustained drive to live its vision and communicate direction and success.

It becomes clear that the success of UBC's communications strategy is that it has achieved a blend of aspiration and authenticity which highlight its strengths and make negative perceptions difficult.

The university uses themes and a strong mission statement to identify itself distinctly in a crowded market and it tests and consults upon the views of its stakeholders as to how closely the projected image matches reality and aspiration, tweaking as needed to achieve an authentic balance.

GCU's can learn from UBC's own strategy to build reputation, profile and stakeholder support in a number of ways, and there are many things the communications and public affairs function can do to support. These include, but are not limited to: supporting leadership; aiming for clarity and consistency; listening and learning; being authentic; involving everyone; harnessing pride; and investing in the message

Challenges have been mainly around the need to have so many different stakeholders sharing the same message, and that is why the internal hearts and minds element of the strategy has been so important.