

## THE BRAND: ONE OF THE UNIVERSITY'S MOST VALUABLE ASSET

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*ABSTRACT: In today's higher education landscape, college and university leaders may well consider principles of brand management to assure their positions vis-à-vis their competitors. Although considerable differences between higher education and product brands exist, there are sufficient similarities to warrant a foray into issues of brand management. Higher education leaders may derive guidance to manage effectively what may be the most important intangible asset a college or university owns—its long-term image and bundle of core meaning.*

*In this paper we discuss issues related to brand management and strategies for re-branding in higher education, with a case study at "1 Decembrie 1918" University of Alba Iulia.*

*Key Words: brand, brand management, higher education, re-branding*

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### Introduction

In actual conditions, universities compete for students and support in a marketplace that is more and more complex. Their target audience is bombarded by an assortment of marketing messages and consumer information. Romanian universities have learned that they must become more accountable to their constituents. They realize that, just like for-profit entities within the corporate world, they must develop sustainability strategies. Many have turned to branding as a solution. It is the case of "Universitatea Tehnică Cluj Napoca", "Universitatea de Medicină și Farmacie Iuliu Hațieganu", "Universitatea Alexandru Ioan Cuza din Iași".

In the last years, branding became part of the higher education lexicon, and today, most romanian universities have embraced a brand strategy Like corporations, universities need to think about their sustainability, they need to please a demanding public, they face stiff competition.

### Literature review

Branding began sometime around 1500 B.C., when the ancient Greeks marked their cattle, a practice that still exists in the livestock industry. However, branding initiatives relevant to an institutional enterprise began in 1931, when Procter & Gamble started placing labels on its products to help consumers differentiate one product from another. Shortly after World War II, Ford and General Motors engaged in heated advertising battles, which continue today, as a means of educating their audiences about the distinctive qualities of their respective products.

Simple principles of cognitive psychology provide the theoretical base for brand management strategy. Cognitive psychology addresses the areas of human memory, and the processes by which information is internalized and used by individuals to make sense of their surroundings. Individuals

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store information in their memories in a form that can be retrieved, manipulated, and otherwise used, and that is organized in meaningful patterns. Pieces of information are connected to other pieces by links that vary in their associative strengths, ranging from very weak to very strong links that will always be activated by certain triggers—for example, when one thinks of a mini-van, one might also always think of families and children.

Prior to the purchase of a product, links are generally based on secondary sources, such as advertisements, word-of-mouth, and consumer information. On the other hand, post-purchase links are largely experience based. Over time, strong summary links are often formed, reflecting the attitude one has about the product in question. Summary links are extremely accessible; their singular importance lies in the fact that they often persist long after the specific links on which they are based have weakened or dissipated. Once an attitude is formed, it often prevents new information from being accepted at face value. Accessible, summary attitudes, therefore, are quite predictive of subsequent behavior concerning a particular product. When an effortless flow from attitude to behavior exists, changing a person's attitude or judgment is extremely difficult, if not impossible, even though the object may change considerably. The specific attributes linked to a brand and the strength of the respective links represent the overall positioning of the brand relative to its competitors.

Likewise, a cognitive representation of colleges can reveal their overall competitive positioning. An important distinction arises, however, between brands and higher education at this point. With respect to brands, the question of *whose* cognitive map should be identified is fairly easily answered. Colleges and universities, though, have multiple constituencies that may have conflicting cognitive representations and values. Attempting to position a college optimally with respect to all these constituencies is a daunting task; adding or deleting specific links may please one group while alienating another. One of the larger problems facing higher education in the face of rapid change is optimally balancing positioning among various constituents. The real value of measuring cognitive representations lies in the ability to chart the progress of this effort.

In the last years, some Romanian universities have undertaken efforts to help prospective and current students, as well as faculties, staff, alumni and friends, distinguish among competitive institutions offering higher education opportunities.

In a marketplace crowded with options, these approaches often fail to resonate with stakeholder groups. That's especially true of traditional paid advertising. Advertising as an outside-in approach to brand-building has met with limited success on most campuses, in part because universities tend to be sceptical about branding. The universities typically associates branding with marketing, which in turn is associated with advertising, often bad advertising. When universities limit their identity to solutions like advertising, they reinforce concerns about branding. All too often, universities think that branding is just another marketing exercise. As such, they fail to see its relevance and fail to support it. By contrast, when faculties are engaged in the brand-building process they take ownership.

Marketing departments of the universities have an obligation to demonstrate how the brand-building process affects—and reflects—the professoriate. Because professors are often the pillar of a school's brand, this exchange is essential. The author can testify to the value of this exchange thanks to firsthand experience gained upon introducing a school's brandbuilding strategy to the university senate. Many thought that the communications office was suggesting an expensive advertising campaign, while others assumed they would be left out of the process. After the communications team reassured them that advertising was not being recommended as the brand solution, and after reiterating that the institution valued their input, the initiative started to gain their confidence and trust. These key messages continue to be delivered throughout the internal branding process, as well as an explanation about the difference between product and corporate brand development.

Universities can learn from advertising failures among their peers. They can also learn from other experiments—taglines, for example—that fall short of expectations.

In fact, these constituents agreed that the university should not adopt a tagline, as they felt that it would diminish the brand-development process and dilute the brand. Like their corporate counterparts, universities must recognize that one of their most valuable intangible asset is their brand. Those universities that succeed in their branding efforts are willing to borrow strategies from the corporate world and get buy-in by engaging all interested constituents in the process. A sound solution is based on a long-term strategy: building a sustainable brand. That means engaging audiences in a dialogue, which leads to additional discussions about the identity of the organization.

According to a study, in Romania, there are only two cases where we can talk about systematic and elaborated pursuits to build a powerful university brand and a specific identity: the Technical University of Cluj Napoca and the “Alexandru Ioan Cuza University” of Iași. According to the same study, the cultural elements used by most Romanian universities are just a few:

- The emblem and the main building seem to be the most illustrative symbols for the Romanian university;
- Showing the historical landmarks is another practice used in general;
- Designing web sites in Romanian and in English is widely spread;
- Capitalizing the image of the spiritual patron or of various important personalities is especially done by medical universities;
- Creating a complex page for each faculty, department or research centre is the last praxis that can be presented as being characteristic to the whole university system.

There are universities that understood that communication must be focused on other values, and, as a result, they took on all the risks in order to obtain a long term result. For example, the Academy for Economic Sciences from Bucharest (ASE) has brought the exactingness in the forefront of communication, with the declared purpose to become an elite university, listed and acknowledged in Top 500. The drastic cut of the available positions for students is part of the campaign to reach these objectives.

### **Case Study**

The “1 Decembrie 1918” University is an accredited university, with a history of almost 20 years within the Romanian higher education system, which exists in the conscience of the public and of its employees as a state university.

The “1 Decembrie 1918” University is among the universities that identified certain gaps regarding the visibility within the landscape of similar Romanian and foreign institutions. Therefore, the need to elaborate a brand strategy was highlighted. This need is given by:

- The strong competition at local and national levels;
- The constant growing and expansion rhythm of the university requires building an unitary and well-rounded image, that would lead to a high level of differentiation on the educational market;
- The present development level of the university, the set objectives for expansion and development require building a visual and verbal identity that will express its new vision.

Defining and communicating the values that identify the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia to the internal and external public represent the key elements of the brand strategy.

The initial positioning was anchored in the historical tradition of the provenance town, the town of the union from December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918, where the name of the university comes from. Due to this reason, the transmitted values (through its name, logo and approach) are related to tradition – stability, ongoing culture, patrimony, collective conscience.

The first step in elaborating a brand strategy is to create a new logo that will transmit the values of the institution.

The present logo of the University is shown in figure 1.



**Fig.no. 1. “1 Decembrie 1918” University – the current logo**

Its component elements are:

- The name of the university
- The name of the university in Latin
- Romania’s flag
- The styling of the university’s initials (UAB)
- The ‘key’ numbers (1, 1918)
- The Capitoline Wolf with Remus and Romulus
- The predominant colour is blue

The meanings of the elements are:

- The name of the university – identity
- The name of the university in Latin – the identity anchored in the past

(increases value)

- Romania’s flag – nationality
- The styling of the university’s initials – styled identity
- The ‘key’ numbers (1, 1918) – highlighting the identity
- The Capitoline Wolf with Remus and Romulus – the Latin origins of the town
- The colour blue – calm, harmonious colour that instates gravity and

predisposes to attention.

From the graphical point of view, the current logo has a high loading level from the perception point of view and it doesn’t express the declared vision, mission and values (competition, dynamism, performance). The constituent symbols are anchored in tradition; they confer gravity and the feeling of affiliation, suggesting the continuous transmission of values and knowledge. Therefore, the “1 Decembrie 1918” University is promoted as a university with tradition and value.

From the practical point of view, the logo is difficult to apply on various promotional materials and doesn’t benefit from the advantage of an identity handbook that would name the placing rules.

A new logo of the university could have the following component elements: the name of the university, the shape of the Vauban Fortress, the styling of the third gate of the fortress and the predominant colour of blue. The meanings of these elements are:

- The name of the university – identity
- The shape of the Vauban Fortress – geographical identity
- the styling of the third gate of the fortress – geographical and historical identity
- The colour blue – calm, harmonious colour that instates gravity and predisposes to attention.

The component symbols are anchored in tradition; they bestow identity and affiliation, shaping the geographic and historic background. The “1 Decembrie 1918” University is promoted as a university with tradition within the Transylvanian higher-education environment. This university declares its historic status within the national background, but, at the same time, is in line with the current trends of Romanian education by adopting and promoting values like quality, excellence, innovation, leadership, stability and social responsibility.

### Conclusions

The mentioned values are the ones that the entire activity of the University is related to. The teaching staff and the employees have the obligation to assimilate these values and to promote them in their activity, in shaping students and in their relationships with other people when they are representing the University, thus contributing to the consolidation of the organizational culture and to the promotion of the “1 Decembrie 1918” University’s *brand*. In order to implement the values of the organizational culture, a series of extra-curricular activities for the students will be run and *Alumni* organizations and clubs will be organized.

A communication strategy adequate for the new brand will have the following objectives:

- Strengthening the distinctive identity of the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia;
- Improving the image and the reputation of the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia;
- Improving the relationships between “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia and the stakeholders at local level;
- Increasing the number of students;
- Improving internal communication;
- Recruiting and keeping a high quality teaching staff.

The communication strategy will be elaborated around the following key messages:

- For students / future students
  - state university that provides quality services, which they should choose for their professional training and accomplishments;
  - university that wants to become integrated within the national and European higher-education circuit
- For the local mass – media
  - university open for dialog, which wishes to promote its values
- For the stakeholders
  - university concerned with the problems of the community
- For the university’s employees
  - university interested in the satisfaction of its employees at the work place
  - university involved in supporting its personnel in the teaching and research activities
- For the experts in this field
  - promoter of innovation and excellence in education and in the study fields it provides
  - organiser of scientific communication sessions, round tables, symposiums, workshops.

Every university considers itself top-notch. But too many schools dilute their blue-ribbon stature by focusing their brand-development efforts on bad advertising or other reactionary approaches. Those universities that succeed in their branding efforts are willing to borrow strategies from the corporate world and get buy-in by engaging all interested constituents in the process.

When universities understand that their most valuable tangible asset is their employees, and when universities engage them in the institution's brand-development process, the most valuable intangible asset becomes branding.

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