The Business of Branding 2010
An international report on branding, marketing and business school perceptions, drawing on the views of current students, alumni, faculty and administrative staff.

July 2010 :: Andrew Crisp, Sarah Hardcastle
Introduction

The Business of Branding study was first run in 2004 and provides participating business schools with data to support their marketing activities and to better understand their positioning in key markets. Since that time almost 100 business schools have taken part in the study from more than 20 countries with nearly 60,000 respondents to the study.

Research for this year's study was conducted during March/April 2010 using an online questionnaire. A total of 4829 responses were received from 118 nationalities; 30 nations had more than 10 respondents each, but the largest responses were drawn from Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, British, Chinese and French nationals. Across the sample, respondents were split almost 50:50 male to female. The largest responses were drawn from first degree students (1615), alumni (1269) and other business Masters programmes (739).
Skills not salaries

Learning new skills continues to grow as a motivation for studying business, at the expense of improving earning potential. Although career progression remains the prime motivator, students appear to be reacting to the global economic crisis by seeking a range of skills to increase their prospects of getting a job on graduation.

Among all audience groups, with the exception of those studying for a Research degree, 80% said their key motivation was ‘To improve my career prospects’. For all groups, bar part-time/Executive MBAs and Research degree students, the second choice was ‘To improve my earning potential’. For part-time/executive MBAs, the second most popular choice was ‘I was seeking new skills’. For full-time MBAs ‘I was seeking new skills’ was only just behind ‘To improve my earning potential’.

Value doesn’t mean cost

All postgraduates are least likely to agree that ‘I chose my course because it was the least expensive option available’. Both full-time and part-time MBAs are most likely to agree that ‘The cost of my course had a significant impact on where I chose to study’, with as many as 50% of full-time MBAs agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

Rather than simple cost, students are likely to be focused on value, which in turn is likely to be measured on outcomes and consequently information on career services and alumni become an important part of the marketing message.

More than 50% of full-time MBAs and other business Masters agreed or strongly agreed they would pay more than they had budgeted if it meant ‘I could attend a school which would give me a better chance to get a more highly paid job on graduation’, if ‘the school had better links with business and industry’ and ‘if the school provided better support in finding employment’.

I know someone who says...

Peer recommendation is the most important initial source of information about a business school and what it has to offer for a prospective student. Whether it’s working with alumni from a school or simply having friends who have attended a school, the first step is often an informal conversation, which then leads to a search on Google. Similarly, such a conversation might be used to help confirm in the mind of a prospective student the decision they are planning to take. More than anything else, the peer recommendation has the ring of authenticity that marketing materials don’t always project.
The internet dominates media usage among students, but there is still space for print. In print, most used by all groups was a university publication/brochure. In the newspaper and magazine sector, The Financial Times and The Economist are most widely used across all audiences, with Business Week also important for full-time MBAs.

Among websites the most used by all groups was the university/business school website followed by Google. Among full-time MBAs, FT.com and MBA.com (the GMAT site) were also used by large numbers.

While many business schools are currently developing their presence on social networking sites, looking at how to use Twitter and posting information on iTunesU, there were mixed results about their usage and effectiveness for marketing.

**Twitter ye not**

Among all respondents, at most 13% of other business Masters make use of Twitter, but few use it in connection with finding out about business schools and courses. iTunes is used more widely, but principally to download music, film and TV. In the survey, at least 70% of most audience groups have used iTunes to buy music, film or TV. Up to 40% of other business Masters have used iTunes to download information about business or business school lectures, but at most 12% have downloaded business school marketing materials from iTunesU.

Increasingly social networks have become part of the media mix used by young people, but the role they play in finding out about business schools is less clear. The survey results indicate that among all student groups nearly two-thirds are using Facebook with more than 40% using LinkedIn, except among first degree students. Asked to select the one social network that they use most often, the choice among all student groups is Facebook.

With the exception of part-time/executive MBAs, more than half of the other student groups use their preferred social network on a daily basis and around two-thirds are using their preferred network at least two or three times a week.

However, despite high usage levels the social networks were unlikely to be used to find out about what and where to study. Facebook was most likely to be used to find old friends, to update a personal profile, to post information for friends and to send email.
Having least impact on what and where to study were directories, blogs, social networking sites and international agents working for business schools/universities. At only one school in the study were international agents recorded as being one of the factors most impacting the decision making process; this school scored poorly on brand strength.

**In touch, but out of step**

When asked about alumni services, respondents are most likely to agree or strongly agree that:

- Alumni relations are often in touch with me
- I enjoy the alumni magazine/newsletter
- The university could be using social media sites better to communicate with alumni

However, more than 50% disagree or strongly disagree that:

- I have got involved with activities for alumni
- I have made good contacts through the alumni network

Without a clear purpose and established benefits, alumni may be less inclined to take part in activities organised for them, although they will still welcome regular communication.

Experience of alumni services
Brand and value

There appears to be a link in students’ minds between value for money and brand reputation. Schools which students perceived as being low cost but high quality and high academic strength also tended to have a more positively regarded brand than other schools.

While quality and academic strength follow each other closely suggesting that the two elements are very much seen as reflecting the same aspects of a business school, there was a very different relationship with cost. The cost line moves significantly from school to school and where it is low, while quality and academic strength are high, it suggests that respondents at that school perceive the school to be offering good value for money.

On the accompanying chart School 3 has the largest consistent gap between the cost line and those for quality and academic strength. In the individual school results, School 3 had the most positive results for brand awareness and understanding.
As asked about their awareness and understanding of their school’s brand, an average of around 55% stated that ‘My school has a strong clear brand which is widely recognised and understood’. Such a response is similar to previous results over the six years of the study. However, among some respondents at particular schools in this year’s study, around 75% expressed a positive brand view.

Among full-time MBAs those with a positive view fell below 50% which may reflect a response to the economic uncertainty in the world. Having made a decision to study for an MBA as much as two years ago, current MBA students may now be a lot less certain about what their school will deliver for them.

Brand is one thing, but true understanding means seeing what lies behind a brand, where the reputation of a business school comes from. Offered 13 options about the reputation of their school, one stood out among all respondents:

- The business school had a strong reputation as one of the best business schools in the country

Three further factors stood out among many respondents as important reasons for choosing a particular school:

- it had a strong reputation largely based on its performance in the rankings
- It had a strong academic reputation
- It had a strong reputation for enhancing career prospects
Reasons for recommending your business school

At the end of the day

With the exception of full-time MBAs more than 75% of all audience groups say they would always or in most cases recommend their business school to students and to employers. Among full-time MBAs the figure drops to just under 70%. Three key reasons for recommending a business school emerge across the sample, although the strength of support varies between audience groups:

- Teaching staff challenged me to think differently
- The course content was very applicable to modern business
- Academic standards are high

The reasons that were most likely to be given for not recommending a school to students or employers were:

- Links with business and industry were weak
- The quality of teaching was poor
- The course was not what I expected
- My career expectations on graduation have not been met

To take part in the next round of The Business of Branding in March 2011, send an email to info@carringtoncrisp.com