

WHY BEING DISTINCT MATTERS: THE ROLE OF BRAND POSITIONING IN MARKETING PART-TIME MBA PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This research proposes that part-time MBA programs must be able to identify and utilize multiple program criteria in order to establish a distinct brand position in a highly competitive marketplace. The brand meaning negotiation process is introduced as a tool to organize the various meanings associated with a part-time program of study that arise from three sources: the marketer, individual, and social environments. Both administrators and faculty are responsible for maintaining the meanings in each environment to insure a distinctive perception of the program.

INTRODUCTION

MBA education has undergone an incredible transformation over the past few decades. In addition to an increase in the number of institutions that offer these programs of study, the programs themselves have become more specialized in order to target customer segments with distinct demands. Many of today's MBA programs not only offer a traditional program (full-time, two year) but also executive and certificate programs, as well as part-time evening and weekend alternatives. With the proliferation of graduate program options, the competitive pressure to attract a sizable cohort of quality students can be quite intense, especially in geographic areas densely populated with institutions of higher learning.

Bush, Ferrell and Thomas (1998) suggest that business schools need to take a more proactive stance in building market demand. The article's "practice-what-you-preach" message calls on B-schools to become more *strategic* in the ways they market programs of study to both actual and potential students. The resources (e.g., course offerings, technologies) are essential for attracting and retaining students; however, the *image* of the program that the institution communicates both internally and externally can also influence the student consumer. Hence, in a competitive marketplace that provides numerous options from competing institutions, as well as variety among types of programs both within and across institutions, creating a distinct position for an MBA program vis-à-vis branding might be an appropriate proactive strategy (Keller 2003).

PART-TIME MBA PROGRAMS

Part-time MBA programs continue to grow, both in terms of number of programs established and number of students enrolling in existing programs. An increase in selectivity, combined with a rise in diversity, have made part-time programs more reputable and enticing to both students and employers (Giacalone 1998). In some instances, part-time student graduates are at an advantage over full-time students, because their staggered completion dates enable them to take positions at times of the year when full-time students would not have completed their degrees. Further, part-timers often take positions that full-time students either do not consider or else turn down (Schneider 2000).

The Student Perspective

A part-time program enables the student to work toward an advanced degree while remaining employed. Although part-time graduates are less likely than their full-time counterparts to see big salary gains, part-time students compensate for this by generating income throughout their courses of study (Coolidge 1997; Schneider 2001). Unfortunately, although some employers at least partially fund or reimburse part-time study, such programs are not cheap. Further, an employee's performance in a particular class often dictates the amount of reimbursement (e.g., 100% reimbursed for an A). Taking into account such funding schemes, it is not surprising that at some institutions full-time, in-state students end up paying significantly less than their part-time counterparts (Lord 2001).

Although many part-time students are younger and single, programs have recently reported an increase of married individuals and/or individuals with family obligations. In fact, for many part-timers, the responsibilities of relationships and parenting co-exist with their academic obligations (Merritt 2001). Combine these responsibilities with the demands of coursework, and some part-timers believe they are at a distinct disadvantage. In addition, these students have less time to interact with each other, an experience deemed essential for the learning process (Coolidge 1997). Based on this information, the personal and social aspects of part-time programs

could have a direct impact on the potential student's consideration to attend.

Identifying Alternatives

One popular source for information on part-time programs is BusinessWeek Online (www.businessweek.com), which currently profiles over 280 programs. These range in size from larger programs (1300 plus students) to small, intimate ones (60-70 students). In addition to geographic location, these programs can differ on everything from tuition/fees to GMAT scores and yield (percent of accepted applicants who actually matriculate). While useful, such information is not always enough to provide a clear distinction among alternatives. Further, though it can be argued that this information bolsters the credibility of each program, the statistics fail to adequately address either the personal or social aspects of a given program, aspects that are deemed increasingly relevant for competing in a customer-oriented marketplace (Fournier, Dobscha and Mick 1998). Although institutions provide a wealth of statistical information about their part-time MBA programs, the customer is left with little information regarding the social context in which the learning occurs.

BRAND POSITIONING

Branding is one of the most useful strategic tools at the marketer's disposal, especially for purposes of distinguishing one's offering from others. Branding is often interwoven through every element of a product's marketing mix, from its design and packaging to its communication and pricing structure, and the most successful brands are easily identifiable via these marketing mix elements (Keller 2003). In today's marketplace, where the consumer is often faced with a myriad of options, the brand serves as a cue, a signal used by the firm to alert consumers that the product or service is not only of a certain quality but also personally relevant and culturally significant (Arnould, Price and Zinkhan 2004). As a result, the brand is able to link together the individual with other individuals or with specific social situations (Ligas and Cotte 1999).

The Brand Meaning Negotiation Process

Ligas and Cotte (1999) present a framework for explaining how a brand's meaning is negotiated and ultimately made sense of in the consumer marketplace. This framework suggests that a brand develops a consistent meaning as a result of information about the product/service that arises from three distinct sources: the marketer, social, and

individual environments. In order for the brand to be useful as a communicating device, the information pertaining to the brand from each of these three environments must be negotiated in a way that is amenable to all those who utilize that particular brand. The firm must create a consistent and unique image, based on multiple meanings that arise from the firm (the marketer), the marketplace (the social), and the consumer (the individual).

The marketing environment. When attempting to develop a brand for its part-time MBA program, an institution should begin by asking what information is currently utilized to attract prospective students. Although it is easy to identify similar criteria at a variety of institutions, it is not likely that these institutions can all tout possessing the same mix of "bells and whistles." Thus, one element of a successful part-time MBA brand would be that its positioning relies on a deliberate combination of a number of different criteria (e.g., "We are an AACSB-accredited, wireless technology-oriented, global partnership supporter"), as opposed to only one (e.g., "We are technology-oriented"). In reality, focusing on only one element of a program could be a waste of resources. For example, a number of programs market the notion of developing "excellence." Because of the broad notion of what excellence means, many programs can utilize this descriptor; thus identifying one "key" criterion does little good in distinguishing one program from another (Bisoux 2003b).

The individual environment. Logistics is often a major concern for part-time students. Whether it be commuting from work to class or determining an acceptable distance from campus to one's home, the part-time student must seriously consider travel arrangements when determining an appropriate program to enter. In response to this need for convenience, institutions put forth a variety of initiatives to make the program of study flexible for the student. Such initiatives include scheduling either multiple sections of courses or more periodic offerings of required courses, extended office hours for both administration and faculty, and greater reliance on technology for both communication and coursework. More recent technological and infrastructure initiatives include online course opportunities, providing branch-campus and off-site classes, and devising non-traditional course schedules (e.g., half-semester classes with weekend sessions). The intention of such acts is for the program to provide the personal benefits of convenience and flexibility.

It is also important for part-time programs to tap into other personally-relevant benefits. For example, in addition to signaling physical security (e.g., "This is a safe environment"), it might be the case that the program of study also offers emotional security (e.g., "Although rigorous in coursework demands, our program realizes the student's multiple life commitments and, as a result has put in place a policy on rewriting unsatisfactorily-completed assignments"). In terms of tapping into the individual's esteem and comfort levels, perhaps the program holds regularly scheduled events/seminars (beyond coursework) that deal with issues relevant to career development and/or enhancing study skills. Such factors motivate the student to not only enter and complete the program of study but also to explore how the education relates to his/her goals.

The social environment. Relevant meaning from the social environment might be easily overlooked, because a part-time program of study limits interaction. However, part-time MBA students, like their full-time counterparts, realize the benefits of interacting with their peers. Not only does course learning take place while working with others, but the opportunity also exists to learn useful information from others' experiences. Beyond the collaborative learning and potential networking opportunities, part-time students are likely to appreciate the camaraderie and informal socializing as much as traditional full-time students. The mistake would be to assume that part-timers have so many obligations in their other roles that they are uninterested in social opportunities through the program of study. The fact that a part-timer chooses to juggle yet another role is suggestive of his/her flexibility and willingness to take on more responsibility, including the opportunity to interact.

DISCUSSION

The brand meaning negotiation process provides a framework for administrators and faculty to identify various different, important meanings that could be attributed to a particular part-time program of study. Administrators can incorporate marketer meanings with relevant individual and social meanings, in order to effectively construct and uniquely position a brand in the marketplace. Faculty would be responsible for facilitating student experiences of more individual and social meanings.

Administration's Role

An article in the November/December 2003 issue of *BizEd* suggests that it is not enough for a business school to be a recognized player in the marketplace; in addition, the most successful business schools

must develop a brand identity based on being "first" or "the best" with regard to some criterion (Bisoux 2003a). The brand meaning negotiation process provides administrators with a lens to identify distinct criteria from numerous environments. By incorporating a brand positioning strategy into a part-time program's planning process, institutional decision-makers would commit serious effort and resources to establishing a unique perception for their program (Bush, Ferrell, and Thomas 1998). Focusing on only one criterion or core competency is no longer valid, because serious competitors will quickly retaliate by marketing the same or a similar message. Uniqueness comes from creatively combining criteria into a distinct image.

The Faculty's Role

Faculty members are key to the development of a distinctly positioned brand for part-time programs of study. Faculty must actively support and sustain the individual and social meanings associated with the program. They should actively engage the students on what they hope to accomplish with the degree once it is completed. For some, it might be to remain working at the same position; for others completing the degree might mean the opportunity to explore a new career path. Marketers acknowledge that customers are multifaceted, and that the accomplishment of a given goal is often seen as part of a larger "task" in one's life (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1987). In an advising capacity, this could involve something as simple as discussing with the student career and other opportunities for the future. In the classroom, providing the opportunity for more critical and reflective writing on case and model/theoretical analyses enables the student to not only address managerial issues but also comment on how his/her personal objectives relate to the issues.

Concerning the social environment, faculty need to continue developing interactive classrooms, ones in which the students work with and learn from each other. Arnould and Price (1993) explore the notion of "communitas;" group members learn from and ultimately enjoy the experience by living through it with others. From the part-time student's perspective, having the opportunity to engage and work with others who are going through the program for similar reasons/with similar backgrounds might make the experience more worthwhile. Continue to emphasize group work in part-time programs, not only because it enables these life style jugglers to meet the demands of the program, but also because it allows for more engagement and sharing of ideas.

CONCLUSION

Brand positioning is a viable strategy for institutions that are trying to market their part-time MBA programs, and the brand meaning negotiation framework is a useful tool for identifying the various meanings that arise from three environments: marketer, individual, and social. Part-time MBA programs could benefit from identifying and utilizing such meaning information, because these programs could create brands that are unique based on a number of dimensions, as opposed to on only one.

The Distance Learning Option

Although face-to-face instruction is more satisfactory, the need for convenience keeps interest in distance programs strong (Ponzurick, France, and Logar 2000). Unfortunately, issues such as failure to focus on computer and oral communication skills (Dacko 2001) and lack of consistency across different types of programs, i.e., full- versus part-time, online versus in person, often create negative perceptions of this option (Smith 2001). Current perceptions suggest that individual and social needs are not being met, thus work on brand positioning would force the issue of how to deliver both individual- and socially-oriented learning experiences.

This research provides one response to Bush, Ferrell, and Thomas' (1998) call for marketing business school education. Part-time MBA programs continue to gain prominence in the B-school curricula, and an increasing number of returning students demand such programs of study. By creating a distinct brand for the program, the business school not only develops a strategic marketing tool for attracting student consumers but also bolsters the presence of the program in the professional community.

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