Core Values Based Brand Building: Institutional Stakeholder’s Attitudes towards the Texas A&M University Brand

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Within the university setting, branding strategies are designed to create and develop meaningful differences among stakeholder attitudes and perceptions (Aaker, 1991; Clark et al., 2009). Since the athletic department often serves as the proverbial “front porch” of the university, branding initiatives become an important component for the subsequent image of the university as a whole. However, marketing scholars assert that branding strategies must be aligned and congruent with the university brand mission and core values in order to achieve effectiveness (Chapleo, 2005; Clark et al., 2009). As an element of building and maintaining the desired brand image, core values have emerged as fundamental characteristics that define the brand of an organization (Moser, 2003; Urde, 2003). Research has indicated that positive and negative attitudes toward intercollegiate athletics can contribute to the perceptions of both congruency and incongruency with the established university mission and core values (Putler & Wolfe, 1999). Over time, however, the increase in negative attitudes attributed to athletic department behavior brings into question their perceived alignment with the university core values. As an institution laden with values, the established brand promise of Texas A&M University is clear in its objective: to “model our core values in all that we do” (TAMU Brand Guide). The purpose of this study was to investigate stakeholder attitudes toward athletic department behavioral congruency with the stated core values of Texas A&M University.

Branding literature within the higher education marketing context has primarily focused on the external aspects of branding as opposed to in-depth investigations into specific universities (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Although research on this marketing construct is consistently expanding (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009), researchers maintain the need for additional investigation into university branding (Melewar & Akel, 2006). According to Wæraas and Solbakk (2009), a university must initially define its brand essence. This essence consists of clearly and precisely defining who they are by establishing specific core values, while also consistently demonstrating such values to both internal and external stakeholders (Chapleo, 2005; Clark et al., 2009; Jevons, 2006).

Core values have been traditionally viewed as pragmatic, enduring tenets central to an organization and serve as cultural cornerstones (Collins & Porras, 2000; Lencioni, 2002). From a branding perspective, Urde (2003) defined core values as overarching concepts and all-embracing terms that summarize organizational brand identity and serve as guiding principles for the brand building process. The process of branding further provides the organization with an avenue for differentiation through the foundation of representative core values (Knox & Maklan, 1998; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Urde, 2009). However, the establishment of such values must be met with commitment and consistency, as a failure to do so will disillusion stakeholders, further depleting the credibility and legitimacy of an entity’s brand (Collins & Porras, 1996; Ind, 2007; Sull & Spinosa, 2007).

Attitudes towards intercollegiate athletics vary significantly among university stakeholders, fans, and the general public. According to Putler and Wolfe (1999), there are several explanations for both positive (e.g., high graduation rates, alumni contributions) and negative (e.g., off the field violence, illegal financial payments) perceptions of intercollegiate athletics. Particularly relevant to this investigation, Putler and Wolfe (1999) state that these factors can contribute to the perceptions of both consistency and inconsistency with the established university mission and values, thus impacting the university brand. For purposes of this study, the university athletic department was used to investigate attitudes of such congruency or incongruency, as well as provide implications for insulation of the brand. In order to investigate stakeholder attitudes, the following research questions were developed: (a) What are stakeholder’s attitudes towards the behavioral congruency of the athletic department with the stated core values of Texas A&M University, and (b) What are the subsequent implications for the Texas A&M University brand?

Texas A&M University has long proclaimed to be a university established on foundational core values. As such, Texas A&M has established six core values in an attempt to display such characteristics: Excellence, Integrity, Leadership, Loyalty, Respect, and Selfless Service. This study implemented qualitative interviewing in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomena in question. Purposeful sampling was implemented for interviewee selection. Six internal and external stakeholder groups of Texas A&M University were identified for this investigation, including current students, alumni, faculty/staff members, community members, athletic department personnel, and athletic department boosters. The resulting sample consisted of thirteen individuals (N = 13) who were active stakeholders of the university. Data were collected via face-to-face interviews. In order to facilitate analysis of the collected data and establish trustworthiness, audio-taping, transcription, peer debriefing, member checking, rich descriptions, and a third party auditor were applied.
Data collected revealed four main themes regarding stakeholders attitudes towards the behavioral congruency of the athletic department with the stated core values of the university: (a) ‘Excellence’ equals winning, (b) For public relations purposes only, (c) Separation and isolation of the athletic department, and (d) Lack of leadership from the top-down. Of the core values established by Texas A&M University, ‘Excellence’ was the only value that earned consensus agreement among stakeholders as being exhibited by the athletic department’s behavior. Stakeholders indicated that ‘Excellence’ within the athletic department was primarily defined by and fulfilled through winning athletic contests. Stakeholders also indicated the possibility of any attempted core value implementation by the athletic department for the sole purpose of positive public relations. Such behavior was perceived as being rooted in ulterior image motives.

Further, stakeholders indicated a lack of emphasis and implementation of core values among the athletic department administration. As revealed by stakeholders, this attitude primarily revolved around the athletic department administration, as opposed to the coaches and student-athletes. Finally, stakeholder responses addressed the growing concern regarding the differences between the values of the university and the values of the athletic department. This final theme communicated the necessity of core value encouragement and involvement from athletic department and university administrative leadership. Although stakeholders acknowledged a lack of core value implementation by athletic department personnel, university leadership was ultimately deemed responsible for setting the guidelines and example for expected behavior, particularly pertaining to core value consistency. Additional conclusions and implications related to the Texas A&M University brand will be discussed.