

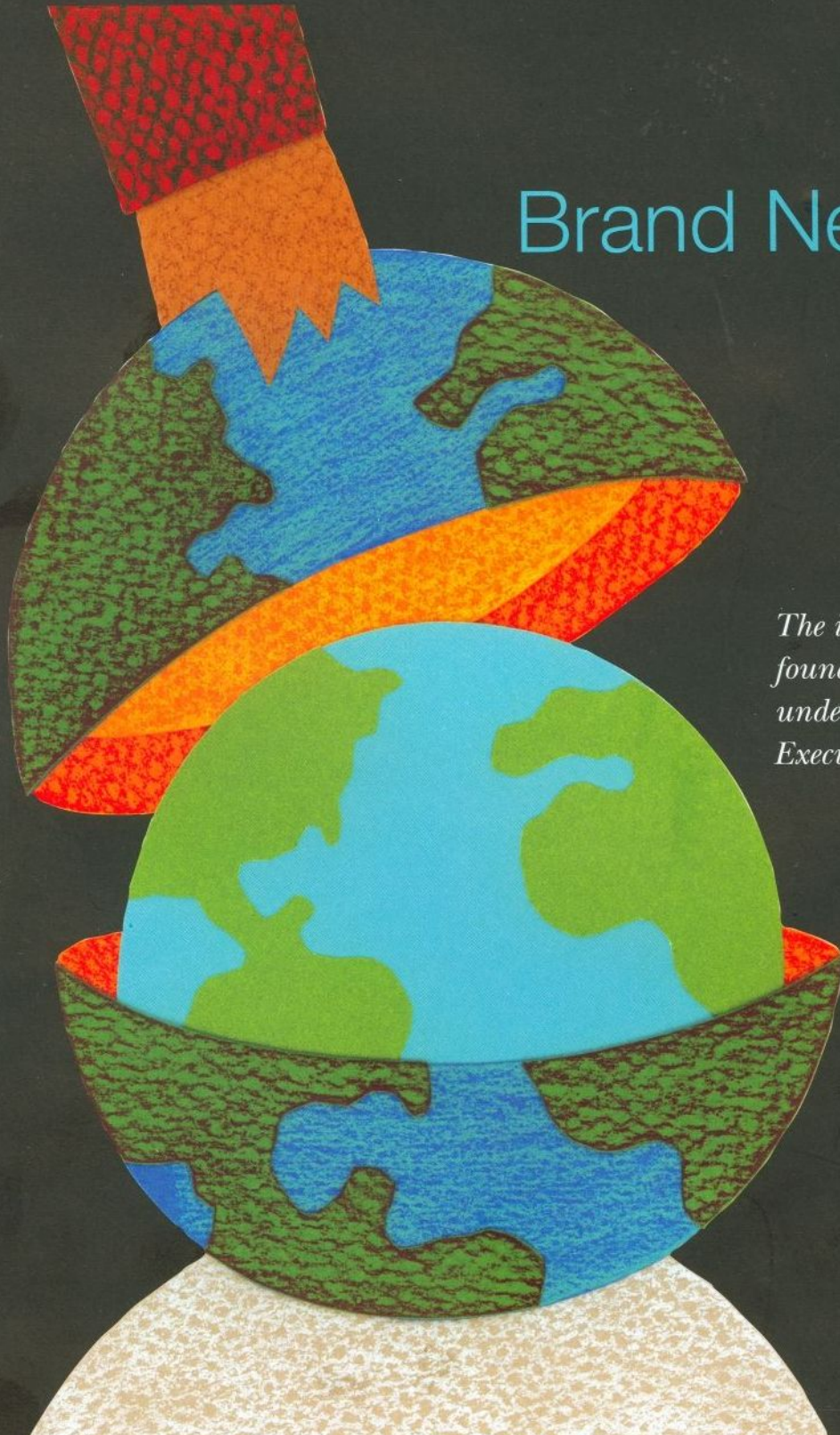
EXECUTIVE MBA COUNCIL

Executive Connections

Brand New World

*The industry lays the
foundation for better
understanding the
Executive MBA experience*

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Brand New World

THE INDUSTRY LAYS
THE FOUNDATION
FOR BETTER
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EXECUTIVE MBA
EXPERIENCE

The University of Chicago flyer with the headline *Professional Business Training* introduced the first Executive MBA Program in 1943.

Including a list of courses in the areas of accounting, statistics, economics, law, industrial relations, finance, and organization and management, as well as others, it described the new offering in a sentence:

“By following a prescribed program of study requiring class attendance two full nights a week or its equivalent, a student fully employed can make approximately two-thirds as much progress toward a degree as in a normal daytime program.”

Branding: Cornerstone concept

Now, 65 years later and with hundreds of programs throughout the world, the definition of the first Executive MBA no longer applies in quite the same way. Throughout the years, demand grew, the business world evolved, and attitudes formed and shifted.

Today, awareness and perceptions of the degree take on new meaning in a changing marketplace, and the concept of branding has emerged as an important one for both Executive MBA Programs and the Executive MBA Council.

Growth and competition

What is driving the interest in branding?

“As more and more universities establish Executive MBA Programs, the market is becoming crowded,” says Amy Cathey, director of the Full-Time MBA Program and former director of the Executive MBA Program at the University of Tennessee.

CALL TO ACTION

EXECUTIVE MBA COUNCIL EXPLORES WAYS TO PROMOTE THE EXECUTIVE MBA

In September, Executive MBA Council members completed a branding survey, helping shape the direction of future council efforts to promote and strengthen the Executive MBA brand.

The council will share the highlights of the learning from the branding survey at its 2008 conference in Chicago.

In late 2007, in response to members' interest in the topic, the council Board of Trustees formed a branding committee to begin discussions about the council's role as the voice of the Executive MBA industry.

Board members Ethan Hanabury, associate dean, Executive MBA Programs, Columbia Business School, and Lyn Hoffman, associate dean, Sloan and Executive MBA Programs, Global Partners, at the London Business School, co-chair the branding committee. George Bobinski, associate dean, Binghamton University/SUNY; Susan West, assistant dean for master's programs and director of the Executive MBA Program at the University of Alabama; and Beverly Stewart, director of graduate programs at the University of Missouri—Kansas City Henry W. Bloch School of Business and Public Administration, also serve on the committee.

"We are a member organization, and our members are interested in defining what we can do as an industry to ensure that business understands the value of the Executive MBA experience," says Hanabury.

In the last year, the branding committee has identified an approach and possible actions—from launching a strategic campaign to building corporate advisory panels to expanding public relations. The survey is helping the council to pinpoint the actions that its members feel will have the greatest impact.

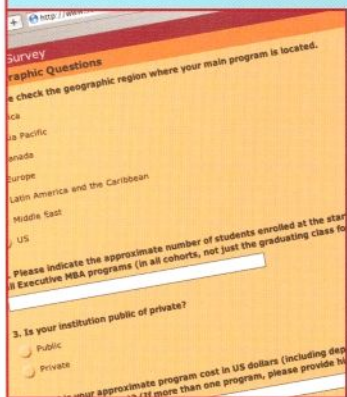
"We want to develop a sequence of actions that relate to an overall strategy, and we want those to be informed by what our members think is important," says Hanabury.

While the survey results will guide the council's next steps, several council initiatives relate in key ways to demonstrating the unique value of the degree.

For example, council research helps quantify the return on investment for both Executive MBA students and their organizations. In addition, the council has published a brochure, *Impact on Executive Education*, which offers an overview of Executive MBA education, including relevant research statistics.

Whatever the future directions of the council in branding the Executive MBA experience, they will be designed to complement the efforts of programs and schools.

"Clearly each school is making its own efforts to optimize the brand," says Hoffman. "We believe that the brand will be strengthened if the Executive MBA Council can get behind those efforts and proactively reach out to the wider world with clarity, and indeed examples and stories, about the success of Executive MBA Programs."



Some programs are differentiating based on geographic location or partner schools, says Cathey. In addition, interactive media offers much promise. "I think as an industry we are far from leveraging the abilities of our students and alumni to help us communicate about and build our brand."

The University of Tennessee is working to shape its communications and curriculum with return on investment in mind for its students. Programs need to understand why students choose programs, build on that competitive advantage, and do a better job of

designing programs that are different, which makes communicating the differences easier, says Cathey.

"Executive MBA students generally have simple needs—they want to advance in their careers, make a difference within their companies, and typically put themselves in a position to better provide financially for themselves and their families," says Cathey. "We need to be able to explain what Executive MBA Programs offer for our students in terms that are just as compelling and easy to understand."

program's branding when he visits a Rotary Club in a distant location.

"The ultimate branding success is when even those not involved in management are aware of the school," he says. If he finds community members who recognize the name and comment positively, he knows the school is making progress. "This takes long sustained promotion and only when substance and third-party endorsements coincide will it ever be realized."

A strong brand differentiates itself in a positive way in the mind of the consumer, says Cathey. Simplicity and being memorable also contribute to brand strength.

Communicating in a clear and compelling way that matches the needs and wants of target audiences is one critical component of developing a strong brand, says Westerbeck. "Brands have to be developed in ways that are highly attuned to target audiences if they are to succeed.

"The second factor is performance," he says. "Put simply, regardless of how well you communicate the essence of your brand, if people have a bad experience, the 'relationship' with that customer is hard to repair. And word spreads fast."

Executive MBA Programs also must support the brand of their business school and the branding of related programs, says LeClair.

What differentiates an Executive MBA Program from other business offerings is found in the experience level and quality of the student, as well as in the program's ability to invest in developing a "high-level" executive, he says.

Brand pursuits

In addition to its brochure on its Executive MBA Program, the University of Washington also publishes a guide for students, *Is an Executive MBA Right for You?*

The guide offers a clear explanation of the Executive MBA Program—its purpose, content, and target audience—and asks a series of questions that help prospective students determine if the experience is a fit for them. It also shares results of council research.

"One of the biggest challenges for us in general is that we are this product category that is not well-known," says Louise Kapustka, director of the Executive MBA Program at the University of Washington. "Because of that, we have to do everything we can to define what we provide and explain the experience that is unique to Executive MBA education."

The Executive MBA experience is unlike other experiences, says Kapustka, and makes the brand distinctive from other options.

"The 'executive' in Executive MBA makes a difference because of the students—their experiences and what they will bring to the program," she says. At the University of Washington, discussions with students often help administrators find the right program for students, she says.

In Asia, Executive MBA Programs are often viewed with equal or stronger reputations than other MBA programs and can help bolster the reputations of those other related business programs, says DeKrey.

HKUST uses a variety of techniques to promote its brand.

"We do event sponsoring, branding through teaching materials, such as an edited book, and more and more expert comments in news stories that carry the brand moniker," he says. "Getting through the clutter is the key and often word of mouth and unique advertising—we use airport billboards—are useful."

State of the brand

With the growth in Executive MBA Programs comes the opportunity to increase an understanding of what Executive MBA education really is.

"I think the Executive MBA has tremendous potential," says Kapustka, and investing in the brand's cache can help support continued growth of the industry.

The Executive MBA brand is at a crossroads, says LeClair, a point where it can rise or lose steam. Encouraging accreditation offers one way to strengthen it, as does emphasizing quality.

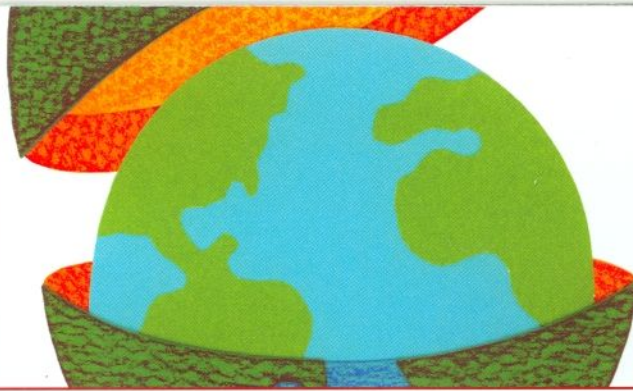
"To help distinguish itself, the Executive MBA industry could support collaborative efforts to educate the public on the differences of an Executive MBA and other MBA programs, as well as assist prospective students in finding the best match for their experience and expectations," says LeClair.

But the need for schools to develop their own individual brands will continue to increase, he says. "The proliferation of schools and MBA programs—and their wide variance in quality—means that schools cannot rely exclusively on the strength of the generic MBA brand as a global credential."

Future trends

For HKUST, branding efforts are moving into some new territory, which includes joint advertising with sponsors, sponsorship of leader of the year competitions and local golf tournaments, public relations of alumni activity, comments from faculty and deans in news publications, and development of books and cases.

"We like the idea of producing intellectual content like books and cases and will be doing more of that in the future," says DeKrey.



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STEVEN DEKREY, HONG KONG UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The proposition behind the first program—and much of the growth in programs—just isn't enough anymore, Cathey says.

"Our consumers—high-potential executives and their sponsoring employers—have more choices," she says. "No longer can Executive MBA Program efforts rely on a differentiated product offering—ie, a MBA program designed specifically for working professionals—to attract the best students. A university must be able to demonstrate how its Executive MBA Program might be different, or more appealing than the rest."

Steven DeKrey, senior associate dean and director at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) Business School, agrees about the role of competition. As founding director of the Kellogg-HKUST Executive MBA Program, DeKrey also led the development of one of the first such programs in Asia.

"In this era of growing competition and improving program options, individual Executive MBA Programs need to present their unique advantages to the market," says DeKrey. "Branding is the way to make these offerings memorable and top of mind."

Other considerations

The Executive MBA also competes with other programs that a school offers, such as Full-Time and Part-Time MBA Programs and other specialized master's degree programs, says Dan LeClair, vice president and chief knowledge officer for AACSB International—Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Effective branding can help address differences between programs, as well as misperceptions about the Executive MBA.

"The MBA is a generic brand that is highly valued," says Lyn Hoffman, associate dean, Sloan and Executive MBA Programs, Global Partners, at the London Business School and council board member. "The Executive MBA, introduced as a sub-brand, may have created confusion in the marketplace and uncertainty as to its rigor and value."

Industry voice

The Executive MBA Council wants to contribute to the strengthening of the brand. Several years ago,

Executive MBA Council members raised the issue of branding at the council update meeting that takes place during the annual conference, says Hoffman, and the council has begun to explore its options (*see story on page 5*).

"Our hope is that a wider branding exercise will benefit our members by supporting their claims as to the rigor and value of the Executive MBA," says Hoffman.

"Our intention is that the Executive MBA Council be the voice of the Executive MBA industry worldwide, giving clarity about the brand and effectively communicating its significance and worth to individuals and organizations."

Many interpretations

As managing director and principal of Lipman Hearne, worldwide marketing and communications firm, Tim Westerbeck works with schools and non-profit organizations on marketing and branding issues. He also will present as a plenary speaker at the 2008 Executive MBA Council Conference.

Branding can be a difficult word to interpret.

"There seems to be about as many definitions of branding as there are people under the sun," he says. "But on the most basic level, branding is about developing an emotional and intellectual connection with your target audiences that causes them to prefer your product or service over another."

Branding involves developing a relationship with the target audience based on their experiences with the product, he says. "The process of doing this is known as brand management—and it is a sophisticated process in today's highly competitive global marketplace."

Cathey likes the definition of branding from *BrandSimple* by Allen Adamson: "A promise that links a product or service to the consumer." LeClair describes branding as "a set of activities to identify and differentiate the products and services of an organization or group of organizations."

Brand strength

DeKrey views branding as the promotional activity that organizations use to ensure name recognition and enhance reputation. He tests the success of his