

## **Book Review**

### ***The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding Or How to Build a Product or Service Into a World Class Brand***

**By**

**Al Ries and Laura Ries**

**Reviewed by James Scannell  
Scannell & Kurz, Inc.**

The focus of this book is summed up in its last paragraph, which reads “What’s a brand?: A singular idea or concept that you own inside the mind of the prospect. It is as simple and as difficult as that.”

Throughout the book the authors stress the need to focus, to contract rather than to expand, to differentiate, to strive for singularity. Although written from the perspective of the for-profit sector, this book does discuss a number of points worthy of note in the academy. These points and their applicability to higher education are discussed below:

- Today most products and services are bought, not sold. Branding pre-sells the product or service to the user. Branding is simply a more efficient way to sell things. In translating this to higher education, this makes sense because we know that for the last 20 years it has been a buyers’, not a sellers’, market. That is why it is all about prestige, prestige, prestige. In real estate it is all about location, location, location. People buy for those reasons. The shift from selling to buying has enhanced, accelerated, and is caused in part by the rise of brands.
- The authors continue to talk about how branding is achieved with publicity, not advertising. In fact, they say you can’t build a brand from advertising. You can help sustain a brand with advertising but building a brand gets done through publicity. For colleges and universities it is things like athletics, taking public stands on important societal issues, breakthrough research, etc. In essence, what the authors are saying is that brands are born, not made.
- A lot is made of having your brand be number one. Leadership position in your market is the single most motivating factor in customer behavior. Lots of examples are provided. In higher education that is why leading with the “jewels in the crown” is critical.

- The authors talk about “you know your brand owns a category of products or services when people use your brand name generically (i.e., make me a Xerox copy; hand me the Scotch tape)”. The authors go on to say that words are the key to building brand identity. They note that the vast majority of brand communications takes place verbally not visually. (They have not accounted for the Internet so it may be actually different today.) Reality, they agree, rests in the visual world of shapes, colors, textures, and dimensions. But reality has no meaning without the context provided by the mind and the mind’s view is perception. To get into the consumer’s mind you have to sacrifice which means you have to focus, you have to limit, you have to identify, and articulate, the thing that makes you different.
- Finally, on this point the authors say that to be successful in branding a prestige product or service you need to do two things. One, you need to make your product or service more expensive than the competition and, two, you need to find a code word for prestige. To the extent that this is true, it provides a special challenge for low-cost public institutions who need to find a way to sell value that has meaning for the customer that is other than cheap.
- The authors talk about credentials, that is the collateral you put up to guarantee the performance of your brand. In our business, outcomes and demand (that is number of apps per seat) are our credentials.
- The authors take a strong stand that building your brand on quality is like building your house on sand. You can build quality into your product, but that has little to do with your success in the marketplace. We could relate to this by saying that higher ed thinks that faculty luminaries ensure quality and therefore will generate demand. But we know that 18-year-olds don’t really care about Professor “Superstar”. On the other hand, the authors attempt to prove their point by noting that the car that *Consumer Reports* says is the number one is ninth in car sales. In higher ed, however, it is different because *USNews & World Report* rankings do take into account the quality of the institution or where people apply. That is because the *USNews* rankings themselves represent quantification of demand. Because the consumer in higher education cares about who else is consuming -- that is the learning community -- and because the consumer is the product, this book’s take on the role of quality is not as relevant for higher education.
- The authors argue that a leading brand should promote the category, not the brand. Further, to build a brand in a non-existing category, to build something out of nothing, you have to do two things at once. First you have to launch the brand in such a way as to create the perception that the brand was first, the leader, the pioneer, or the original and second you have to promote the new category.
- A lot is made about brands that extend themselves such as beer with lite, draft, dark, ice, etc. and cigarettes with light, 100s, menthol, etc. but realize no more share of the market. They are arguing that most companies don’t look at the

overall effect on the market. They look at the success of the new company or extension of the old not knowing that it is taking away from market share that existed before. This would apply to higher ed if in starting a business program you just shifted all the economics and political science majors without building new demand. It wouldn't apply to adding a new adult degree completion program to a traditional set of offerings.

- The authors talk about if you are the dominant brand, you shouldn't only tolerate competitors you should welcome them. They even talk about locating similar businesses together (e.g., car dealerships on a strip). Boston, which is the Mecca for colleges and universities, would certainly fall into that category.
- The authors make a lot out of the difference in viewing a challenge from the outside versus the inside -- that is to say always recognizing what the customer's perspective is. Managers must constantly remind themselves that customers care only about brands not about companies. That may not be true in higher education because someone may care more about Wellesley College than about going to women's colleges. They do say, however, that if what is selling is the brand, that is what needs to be promoted. The authors talk about sub-branding as an inside out branding strategy that tries to push the core brand into new directions. It captures management's attention because of what it promises but not necessarily what it delivers. For example, higher education institutions need to be careful that new program offerings live up to the quality standards of the "brand" name, or they run the risk of degrading the perception of the overall institution.
- There is a whole section on "The Law of Siblings". For instance, with *Time Magazine* the siblings would be *Fortune*, *Life*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Money*, *People*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. Many state systems of higher education are following this approach when they begin to make clearer distinctions between the schools that are part of the system.
- The authors state that the power of a brand name lies in the meaning of the word in the mind, and thus for most brands a symbol has little or nothing to do with creating this meaning in the mind. This may not be true in higher education. Logos of "old Main" or the "Clock Tower" can carry a meaning in the mind of tradition and prestige. That may make higher ed different.
- The authors argue you should limit your brand. That is the essence of branding. Your brand has to stand for something both simple and narrow in the mind. This limitation is in a central part of the branding process and this limitation, combined with consistency over decades not years, is what builds a brand.
- The book talks about three occasions when changing the brand may be appropriate. First your brand is weak or non-existent in the mind. Second, you want to move your brand down the food chain and charge less. Third, your brand

is in a slow moving field and the change is going to take place over extended periods of time.

- A well-known brand that doesn't stand for anything or stands for something that is obsolete has no value. A brand that stands for something has value. Even if the brand is not particularly well known it can be worked with.

JS:rmh  
June 11, 2002