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Brand Inside Meets Brand Outside

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Building Brands at the Intersection of Design and Business Strategy

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Brand Inside Meets Brand Outside

by Karl D. Speak and Gilman Hanson

This case study on Argosy University—and the broader lessons it conveys—exemplifies the principle that brand development is an external and internal process. Karl D. Speak and Gilman Hanson discuss their work to determine Argosy’s brand ethos, as well as the steps they take leveraging that reality to create a robust brand platform that motivates employees and engages the target market.

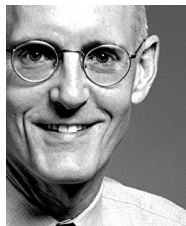


Building a strong brand has offered the promise of transforming the way organizations encourage customer loyalty, gain sustainable competitive advantage, and generate superior financial results. Clearly, some organizations have reaped those benefits by championing the discipline of corporate brand management.

Many organizations, however, are missing the boat. Management has been skeptical, and frankly much of that skepticism is warranted. Many organizations that have invested in building a strong brand have not been able to identify a reasonable rate of return for their investment. Many design and marketing professionals are convinced the measurement methods used to determine the return on investment do not truly reflect a brand’s possible contribution. Suffice it to say, it has been a diffi-



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cult job to convince executives that they do not know how to measure the *real* drivers of business success.

The issue is not the efficacy of brand; it is that many design and marketing professionals have limited their perspective on brand building. Conventional wisdom has focused brand building on using design and marketing communications to create a differentiated position in customers’ minds. Focusing efforts on creating a strong, admired brand image in the marketplace is only part of the formula for creating the kind of brand equity that affects the bottom line. A focus on only the *outside* brand limits the brand’s potential and the benefits it can deliver to an organization.

An organization must look inside to build and manage a strong brand on the outside. Organizations with strong,

admired corporate brands all have one thing in common—a strong, aligned culture. The culture of these organizations is focused and passionate about how they use their beliefs and competencies to deliver distinctive value to customers. These organizations have strong brands on the *inside*.

Organizations admired for their brand strength have learned the most important brand-building axiom—*the brand on the outside is only as strong as the brand on the inside*. An outside brand, even if it offers measurable economic benefits, will never reach its true potential without a strong brand on the inside. Therefore, a dual approach is required for building strong brands.

This article provides a case study of how an innovative organization is using the dual brand-building approach.

Argosy University: A brand in need of a higher degree

A brand demonstrates its relevance and vitality by successfully extending its equity to deliver more value in the targeted marketplace. Every successful brand extension has a multiplier effect on building brand equity. Unsuccessful extension activity—or none at all—limits and ultimately diminishes a brand's ability to improve financial results.

Argosy University (part of Education Management Corporation, parent company of The Art Institutes) is a respected, leading, for-profit educational institution. The University was formed in September 2001 by merging three academic institutions, consolidating 18 campuses into a single university system. Its core curriculum focuses on the behavioral sciences, and has established itself as the leader in applied psychology.

As a result of its category-leading position, this corporate brand enjoys the clear possibility of extending its success in post-graduate education to other curricula. Further brand extensions would enable Argosy to take advantage of the robust growth in the for-profit education

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sector and reinforce its differentiated position, keeping competitors off-balance.

Argosy University has a mixed record in extending its brand. The institution recently extended its brand through the successful introduction of online post-secondary and graduate programs. However, the brand has made some missteps in brand extensions in the past. Examples of less-than-successful extensions include the introduction of

new curricula and non-graduate-level programs. The unsuccessful extensions left a lingering negative afterglow on the University's abilities. The result was an erosion of confidence internally and externally, which created a chink in the armor of the brand.

Although the brand demonstrated some strength in the past, it also faced some challenges to its continued growth. Clearly, the culture or brand inside the institution lacked alignment and employee engagement. There were many reasons for this, including the merger of the three academic institutions. A corollary to the misaligned culture was the lack of a clear articulation and understanding of the brand's values.

It was time for Argosy University to develop and execute a dual brand-building program.

Discovering Argosy University's brand possibilities

The potential of all brands lies within the organization; the strength of any brand starts on the inside. The possibilities for a brand are created at the nexus of what is believed possible on the inside and what is relevant and distinctive on the outside.

Discovering the brand possibilities for Argosy University was a daunting challenge. Sensing the origins of the brand's beliefs and actual values in a recently merged organization was challenging, to say the least, and there are no shortcuts to this process. Our team took on the challenge by conducting personal interviews with more than 100 faculty and staff members across all 18 campuses. The interviews produced rich insights into the brand's inside pos-

sibilities and began the process of creating advocacy for the ensuing brand strategy and internal brand-building program.

The next step in the process was to conduct a robust brand assessment study. This quantitative study assessed the perceptions and attitudes of more than 1,500 students and prospective students. The resulting insights confirmed some long-held beliefs and in other cases created a new perspective on the potential for building a strong brand. In addition to the research study, we conducted a thorough brand communications audit.

We also conducted a comprehensive vetting of the organization's business strategies to ensure that the forthcoming brand strategy was grounded in the realities of the business. Ultimately, the brand strategy must be held accountable for delivering positive results to the business end of a for-profit education company.

Synthesizing the portfolio of information produced illuminating and provocative insights. These insights were used to create a brand platform that set the stage for brand possibilities that had hardly been imagined.

Creating a brand platform that inspires everyone

A well-developed brand platform provides a practical framework that can be used to guide the organization to consistently deliver what is most important to its customers and prospects. The brand platforms with the most staying power must be based on a process that includes the client at every step along the development path. Creating a common language is fundamental to any such process. Most executives are not fluent in the discipline of brand, and therefore an open and approachable set of learning models must be used to facilitate full engagement in the brand development process. Our experience over 20 years has taught us that there are two important concepts that must be established to support active executive engagement: a simple model that describes brand, and a set of benchmarks that delineate a strong brand from a weak brand. We have used the Brand Tool Box[®] Business Brand Model with great success as a tool to define brand (Figure 1). This pragmatic model presents the brand as a set of three core perceptions and has proven itself adaptable

across the whole spectrum of industries, government, and nonprofit organizations. Being perceived as distinctive, relevant, and consistent are the three simple benchmarks that distinguish a strong brand from a weak brand. The brand model and strength benchmarks are the two simple learning models that create the framework for an inclusive process that engages executives, ensuring their long-term support of a brand platform.

It is axiomatic from a brand technician's perspective that a solid brand platform must be distinctive, relevant, and consistent. The most effective brand platforms meet an even higher standard. A first-rate brand platform inspires employees to go above and beyond to deliver what is important in the brand relationship and has aspirational qualities that conjure up the goals and ambitions of individuals in the targeted audience.

Developing a brand platform that supports effective dual brand building—*brand inside* and *brand outside*—requires a different dimension than the traditional brand-building model. The *neo-brand platform* must describe the brand with an organizational development sensibility to support employee engagement (brand inside



Figure 1. The Brand Tool Box[®] Business Brand Model is a pragmatic way to present a brand as a set of three core perceptions (competencies, standards, and style) and has proven itself adaptable across the whole spectrum of industries, government, and nonprofit organizations.

building) and exude creative possibilities to capture the fascination of prospective customers (brand outside building).

A neo-brand platform must be multi-dimensional to support the dual brand-building regimen. Most important, the brand platform must be anchored with a *brand ethos*. In this context, a brand ethos describes the one most important value residing inside the organization.

Identifying a brand ethos requires keen insight, and it must be grounded in the “truth” of the organization. A well-founded brand ethos becomes the basis for defining the cadre of brand platform elements, starting with a brand vision and culminating with a brand character.

All the hard work involved in conducting interviews, hanging out on campuses, and engaging with students finally produced that “aha” moment and helped us to discover the brand ethos, which we described as *supportive learning environment*. This phrase struck a common chord with those who had been at Argosy University for a long time and captured the imagination of the entire staff and faculty.

The brand platform was subsequently thoroughly tested with a large number of prospective students, providing the university with a great deal of confidence that it resonated well and would most likely spur inquiries from prospective students.

Designing a new visual identity to guide brand building

With so much apparent misalignment within the institution’s culture, it was vital to create an inclusive brand aesthetic that was inspirational with stakeholders, administration, staff, and alumni (inside), and relevant and informative with targeted prospects (outside) at the same time. It’s important for people—administration, faculty, and students alike—to believe in their investment and allow it to be part of their dream.

Hanson Associates began the creative process by developing a new theme: The Human Side of Success. This embodiment of the brand ethos led to the first incarnation of the revitalized brand, a symbolic shield that unites the fundamentals of the institution (Figure 2). The new green and gold shield symbolizes the dual aspects of the brand promise—a laurel branch to signify academic and professional achievement, and a flame image for passion and personal development.



Figure 2. The new shield symbolizes the dual aspects of the brand promise—a laurel branch to signify academic and professional achievement, and a flame image for passion and personal development. The type embodies academia in a contemporary style.



Figure 3. Apollo Belvedere allows us to put a human face on Argosy University’s brand story. Literally. This highly recognizable image evokes traditional ideals of truth. Yet it does so in a personal way that strikes an emotional chord. By focusing on the face of the statue and its thoughtful, piercing persona in our designs, we’ve created an image that is at once timeless yet immediate, universal yet personal and involving. It is also unlike anything in the competitive marketplace—serving as a memorable icon that unites and distinguishes all of Argosy’s marketing.

The Argosy University type style was selected to be contemporary and forthright, while also echoing academic performance and tradition. The sophisticated color palette portrays a positive upward direction—a direction reflecting Argosy’s newfound growth. The brand also needed to provide emotional relevance to the primary audience—more than 70 percent of whom are working women between the ages of 25 and 45 who want to enrich their personal lives and advance their professional careers.

The interpersonal style of imagery and colors supported the brand as it came to life across all 18 campuses in a comprehensive brand system. While shadow figures and other modern-day images flesh out the interpersonal aspect of the university’s story, the Apollo Belvedere statue embodies its more traditional ideals (Figure 3, see page 24).

The new design style evokes a supportive learning environment in which academic knowledge is enriched and enlarged by the acquisition of the interpersonal skills so vital to success in today’s multicultural and communication-dependent environment. Signage and interior walls were designed to expand the brand in living spaces (Figures 4 and 5).

Engaging faculty and staff to build a strong brand inside Argosy University

Internal brand building is largely about creating enthusiastic, engaged employees who admire how the organization’s values and competencies make a distinct difference for its customers.

Effective internal brand building leverages the relationship-building insights gleaned from brand management. But treating internal brand building like another marketing communications program is a mistake. It is vital to integrate the particular sensibility that organizational development brings to the understanding of human processes that can create positive change among employees and organizations.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd. has created a powerful, proven process we call the Power of Alignment that creates engaged employees by facilitating the alignment of their personal brand with the organization’s brand. Three unique aspects of this process deliver sustainable customer-centered employee engagement.

1. The innovative alignment of personal brand to the organization’s brand creates a clear and powerful platform for employees to determine how their connection with the organization enables them to con-



Figures 4 and 5. The brand identity carried into the architectural spaces in Argosy University’s 18 campuses—exemplifying the brand values at a human scale.

- tribute to making a difference with customers and fellow employees.
2. The use of the congruent learning models of brand, both personal and business, creates a quick and effective understanding of brand as the organization's framework for connecting with customers.
 3. Personal development activities embedded in the training portion of the process leave employees with a positive feeling about themselves and their organization.

Argosy University was ripe for a robust internal brand-building program. A cadre of certified trainers was dispatched in two waves to conduct 50 training sessions. Each campus received two doses of internal brand-building training. The first iteration was an executive-level workshop focused on encouraging the campus leadership team to become brand leaders. The second wave of training involved all faculty and staff on each campus. Each half-day training workshop proved to be effective in gaining support for building a strong brand inside each campus. So-called brand-right behaviors were identified and simulations were conducted to reinforce behaviors that would deliver on the outside brand's promise.

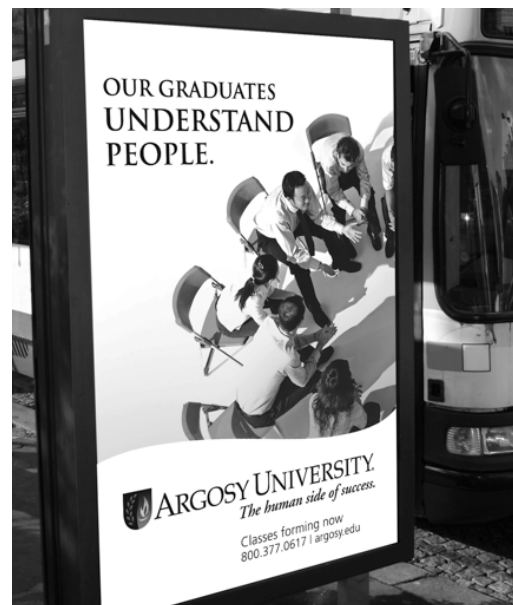
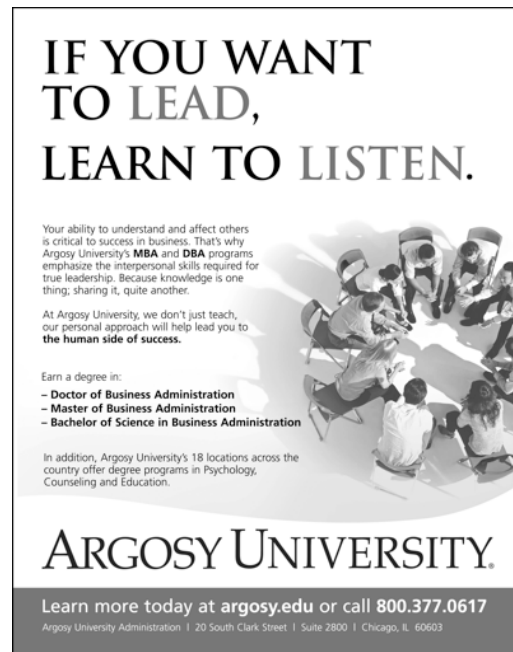
A fundamental benefit of internal brand building at Argosy University was the beginning of a culture that was aligned and energized. A more-aligned culture is sure to produce more-effective brand building, adding necessary leverage to the new corporate identity and creative platform that was re-positioning Argosy with prospective students. In essence, the new, stronger brand inside would pay off by building a stronger brand outside. A stronger brand for the University would enable it to more-effectively extend its brand, providing the platform for renewed growth and the potential to make an even greater impact on its students.

The Learn to Listen advertising campaign builds the outside brand

As part of a comprehensive integrated strategy to stimulate inquiries in existing and new markets, we were asked to develop a new advertising campaign for Argosy University. The new brand awareness campaign was implemented across various media platforms, including print, newspaper, TV, web, outdoor, and direct mail. The

campaign also served to garner support with key stakeholders as they started to live the brand on a daily basis.

The creative theme, If You Want to Learn, Learn to Listen, asked a success-focused question that was answered by a learning action. It was given a strong visual presence with a series of distinct and memorable student interaction images. Support copy stressed Argosy University's position that interpersonal skills along with academic excellence are necessary to affect others and to achieve success (Figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8. Advertising was created to communicate the Human Side of Success brand theme with student-interaction imagery and interpersonal-skills-focused headlines.

The campaign is attracting new students, serving as an internal rallying cry for faculty and staff, and building student pride in Argosy University.

A synchronized marketing program increases applications

The success of the new brand and advertising campaign led the university to ask us to produce all of Argosy University's collateral material. It was critical to build a positive relationship with prospects and reflect Argosy's new brand consistently throughout all media (Figures 10 and 11).

Hanson Associates developed a conversational and compelling message style, supported with interpersonal (groups of students in active conversation) visuals, to create a warm and engaging set of materials that helped to increase prospect applications and supported students' experiences with relevant information. The brand design style brought a new level of relevance to the university's collateral materials and web applications.

Measuring the duality of success at Argosy University

The new dual brand-building context requires an expanded set of measurement parameters. It is still important to measure the impact of the new brand strategy on short-term business transactional drivers—that is, lead generation, referral rates, and increased applications and admissions. A strong brand outside has a positive impact on these marketing measurements.

Assessing the strength of the brand inside requires a different framework. Evaluating the strength of the brand inside requires measuring employees' understanding of the brand, their perception of their alignment with the corporate brand, and the level of engagement necessary to consistently deliver on the brand platform.

Internal brand building is a niche type of organizational development initiative, and many of the performance measurements that have been developed by organizational development professionals can be customized and implemented to measure the brand inside the organization. The four levels of training effectiveness known as the Kirkpatrick Learning Evaluation Model can be an effective performance measurement to evaluate the initial internal brand-building training program.

There are a number of employee-attitude survey tools that can be used to measure other elements of the brand inside. The most effective of these is a customized employee engagement instrument. The brand-inside assessment tool builds on an employee engagement survey by measuring how well employees understand their role in delivering on the requirements of the brand platform (How do I fit in?) and evaluating employees' perceptions of how their daily activities contribute to building a stronger brand for the organization (How do I matter?). Innovative companies take engagement measurements further and evaluate whether employees feel their personal brand is nourished and strengthened as



Figures 10 and 11. Brochures and course-selection guides convey the brand promise to new prospects, along with pertinent information. The website echoes the brand and complements the print materials with a highly interpersonal and friendly design style.

a result of the organization's culture.

We created a solid dual platform for brand building for Argosy University, and the early indications show it is delivering positive results. An important measure of brand leverage for Argosy University is the number of inquiries from prospective students. Incorporating the brand platform in the marketing communications mix has increased new student inquiries by 10 percent.

Argosy University has experienced similar positive results for the brand inside. The company has noted positive results in levels 1, 2, and 3 of the Kirkpatrick model. In addition, the brand platform was a key driver in redirecting its core curriculum and improving its service delivery standards on campuses.

The formidable success of its recently introduced online curriculum will provide substantial energy to boost the Argosy University brand to reach the next level, and the recent introduction of an undergraduate curriculum offers more room for growth through brand extension. Both brand extensions will enable Argosy University to claim even more territory for its brand to grow.

Lessons Learned: Building a Strong Brand

1. *Begin at the top. It is unquestionably important to get the full support of senior management to begin the brand-building process.*
2. *Brands are built from the bottom up. Focus initial brand building deep inside the organization. Engaged employees create the most expansive brand possibilities.*
3. *Find and work closely with brand champions inside the organization. You will often find the strongest brand champions in the most unlikely places.*
4. *Speak your mind—that's what they pay outside consultants to do. Strong brands need people with a clear point of view and the passion to express it.*
5. *A stunning brand platform is inspiring for everyone involved with the brand.*
6. *Working with expert, trusting partners inside and outside the organization produces exceptional results.*
7. *Solid research findings produce credible brand platforms and disrupt conventional wisdom.*
8. *The true brand ethos is the keystone for engaging everyone in the brand-building process.*
9. *Great visual design creates emotional fuel for employees to embrace a brand strategy.*
10. *Great work + talented people + FUN = great brand building. ■*

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