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Universities' experience with brand.

The role of design in managing university communication and branding.

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Abstract: This study focuses on the concept of brand in the university context, evaluating the distinctive nature of design management in public institutions. The paper presents a main theoretical background, reviewing and discussing literature on branding in Higher Education, in particular addressing the concepts of brand identity, reputation, corporate image and visual identity, through the lens of marketing experience.

The study shows how strategic marketing and institutional communication is gaining importance in Italian universities, moving beyond logos and names. In terms of practical implications, we describe how brand and design management are implemented as a strategic resource in a highly-revealing case study, within the perspective of action research.

By stressing three issues – branding, visual identity and communication 2.0 – from a situation of poor visibility and with a small investment, results can be achieved in terms of reputation and value, with an impact on the economic plan of the University.

Keywords: Branding management, Marketing experience, Institution's Communication, Corporate identity, Visual identity

1. University, community and communication

In Italy, Public universities are nearly always the main cultural institution of the city, as much due to their core mission of education and research, as to the dialogue and participation they enjoy with the city and its surroundings. The wealth of knowledge, skills and expertise they contain, constitutes the shared heritage of a whole region, whose wealth shines through the communicative interaction between the multiple parts.

Within the institution, the coexistence of high numbers of people (students, teachers, PhD students, grant holders, associates, administrative personnel) confirms that the university is first and foremost a community, and, historically, such a structure preserves, manages, develops and disseminates

society's cognitive framework (Boffi, 2002). The academic world owes its vitality to the relationships between its parts, in student-teacher relationships, as much as, more broadly, between the organisation itself and outside players (at all levels: families, business world, other institutions, etc.), playing an economic role within the social system as well.

The approach we intend to use to observe the complex university organisation is one focused on design management, in order to understand how the tools offered by related disciplines such as branding communication and marketing holistically contribute to the development of the University itself.

Within an organic and multi-component system such as the university, relationship flows are multidirectional and involve the processes to produce knowledge as economic interests are generated by overall performance. It is therefore necessary, within a context of increasing competitiveness, that the university organisation consciously use tools to manage the branding process, moving past the still-widespread spontaneity and profitably investing in integrated communication activities, to achieve improved results and long-lasting advantages.

Institutional communication (Dal Buono, 2016) must be planned and used as a lever to achieve specific goals that the university deems essential via a specific brand strategy with the awareness that, to date, trust in the cultural and educational role of a University is not only assured by its origins and tradition, but is constantly gained and legitimised precisely through effective actions communicated clearly and transparently.

The main goal of this essay is to learn what methods to use to build and foster an institutional brand identity, while steering broader repositioning of a university's image, with the aim of creating value added for the Institution at multiple levels.

To this end, we chose the action research approach. Action research is an interactive and participatory research method (Berg, 2001), based on an interrelated sequence of activities, mainly qualitative, (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), according to a model that typically involves investigations and discussions within the organisation: listening and determining cognitive needs, planning interventions, then implementing, interpreting the results, and sharing the evidence and implications within the organisation itself.

The case examined —Ferrara University— may be considered strongly characteristic and revealing (Yin, 1994, 2011) by virtue of the fact that this University has never had an integrated branding project, nor a bold and coordinated corporate image. With the change in governance, it was decided to wager precisely on these elements to qualify the university's own offer and mission overall, at national and international levels, as well as towards multiple audiences.

2. University branding

The business world has been the one most engaged in applying (Dal Buono, 2016) trademark challenges and the branding concept (Aaker, 1991), using marketing tools. Between this millennium and the previous one, branding policies—used so competitively worldwide as to stir up critical movements (Klein, 2000; Conley, 2008)—have now reached the realm of Higher Education (Brookes, 2003) and are beginning to assimilate the concepts and practices of the goods and service industries.

The language of marketing (Anholt, 2007) raises eyebrows when applied in the university milieu, especially in Italy, as it seems to contradict those responsibilities and goals normally associated with the University world—educating, imparting knowledge and developing it through research—that, certainly, cannot be subject to profit generation. The management/corporate approach to governing

Universities—which was adopted at the time of the radical shift from elite to mass universities (Boffo, 2002), and now it is imposed at a national level and even mandated by government policies—can nonetheless be interpreted and adopted positively (Grassi & Stefani, 2007), not by uncritically altering the institution's mission, but rather by looking to it as a possible management model in terms of efficacy and efficiency.

The concept of brand, when associated with a Universities, can stand independently, and can be developed through specific methods and processes; when effectively combined with institutional communication, helps achieve strategically planned goals. Managing the process within a university context, while it confers substance and recognisability to the institutional organisation, helps bolster the value perceived by its publics.

The competition between Universities has emerged mostly in the form of “winning” students; therefore, in order to avoid risking lower numbers and revenues, academic institutions are now driven by a renewal process, questioning themselves on their own results, by first analysing the institution's “brand reputation” in relation to target audiences.

There are as many definitions of brand (Brenna, 2016) as there are models that represent management methods (Carmi, 2009), within a massive debate held over the past three decades. Kotler (1978), in general terms, considers it “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors”.

Therefore, in the university context, it is a tool to distinguish and influence the choices not of “customers/consumers” in the classical sense, as much as those of families investing in their children's education, for instance, as well as the many other audiences with which the university needs to communicate the value generated by education, research, and the so-called third sector.

Regardless of its conscious and planned management, university branding occurs precisely where the Institution acts and communicates, both internally and externally, thus generating a collective opinion regarding it. The strategic management of the University brand is therefore an institutional task of great responsibility, that brings prestige and visibility, increasing valuable elements—in terms of brand equity—that can also be assessed in economic terms.

Universities, as complex institutional organisations, can be viewed and designed as “brands”, with specific personalities, reputations, and levels perceived of attachment. Viable university branding activities must be able to seize the features of the academic context and not betray its traditional values. Indeed, the university “brand” should encapsulate the set of expectations and benefits the University ensures and, conveying these via the educational system's tangible and intangible elements, fulfil the expectations promised to the target audiences.

The catalyst for the institution's image and identity is the brand itself, the tool connecting the institution and its public, and it is also a device to create social sense, as it's built through the expression and integration of the users—both at the intellectual/cognitive level, and the emotional/affective one.

The brand takes the form of a value encapsulated by the concept of brand equity (Fiocca, 2004; Fortezza & Betti, 2009), the result of a continuous relationship between the institution, its members and users, that solidifies and strengthens over time.

Just as in the context of a company, following the most accredited models (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), managing strategic levers could help optimise the brand and its evaluation in economic terms. Communication comes into play as the preferred tool in the overall process of value creation, and

making the Institution itself relational, the goals it pursues, the strategies it implements, determined via the brand strategy.

A progressive “strategic self-awareness” (Morcellini, n.d.) is taking place even at Italian universities, through the recognition of the communication and promotional actions sustained, shown by the AICUN Research Report (Brioschi, Catarinangeli, Marino, & Scioli, 2016).

3. The experiential perspective

There can be no discussion of university branding without referring to “experience”, which, indeed, is one of the most debated topics of the past few years in management and marketing literature worldwide (Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2011; Fortezza, 2013; Fortezza, 2014).

It is believed that experiences provide added value to the individual when the following conditions occur: when the intellect and senses are fulfilled by it (Ritzer, 2000); when they create opportunities for socialising (Cova, 2003; Fortezza, 2009); when they allow one’s identity to be expressed (Rifkin, 2000); and, finally, when they provide an opportunity for self-realisation.

It is undeniable that this is precisely Universities’ primary mission, especially with their own main user base, students.

Therefore, rather than being seen as institutions that merely provide a service, Universities can be viewed as “bodies that govern experience production processes” (Fortezza & Pencarelli, 2011). In “evolving” from the concept of service to that of experience, the users’ emotive and emotional involvement increases sharply.

In this sense, Addis’ (2005) reference to literature on the origin of emotions is particularly interesting, revealing how experiences generate responses to the perception of stimuli, triggering transformations in the basic processes of the individuals living them. These are manifestations that concern the relationship between individuals and surrounding environment. Similarly, Boswijk, Thijssen, and Peelen (2005) speak of a “change in perspective” for those having the experience. The difference between services and experiences, then, is not merely a terminological one, inasmuch as it pertains instead to the value expectations and perceptions internalised by the users (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

The role of a University, assuming this perspective—between value creation processes in terms of experience and relative integrated communication strategies—can be significantly expanded, involving the academic community overall, in an active and participatory manner, with a positive influence precisely on personality, reputation and attachment (Aiello, Donvito, & Grazzini, 2014) to the University brand.

In this context, identity and visual communication elements play a critical role in the immediate significance of the experiential mood of the academic community, inwardly and outwardly.

In this sense, symbolic signs, recognisable visual elements, work, together, as “landmark” for the users (Soscia & Cottarelli, 2005; Fortezza, 2009).

There is value-added if these landmarks are coordinated with one another and speak an appealing and pleasant language. Just as it is well known that “attractive things work better” (Norman, 2011), so do experiences designed and managed with proper communication—so that they generate positive emotions first, long-lasting memories later—come together in a true brand value.

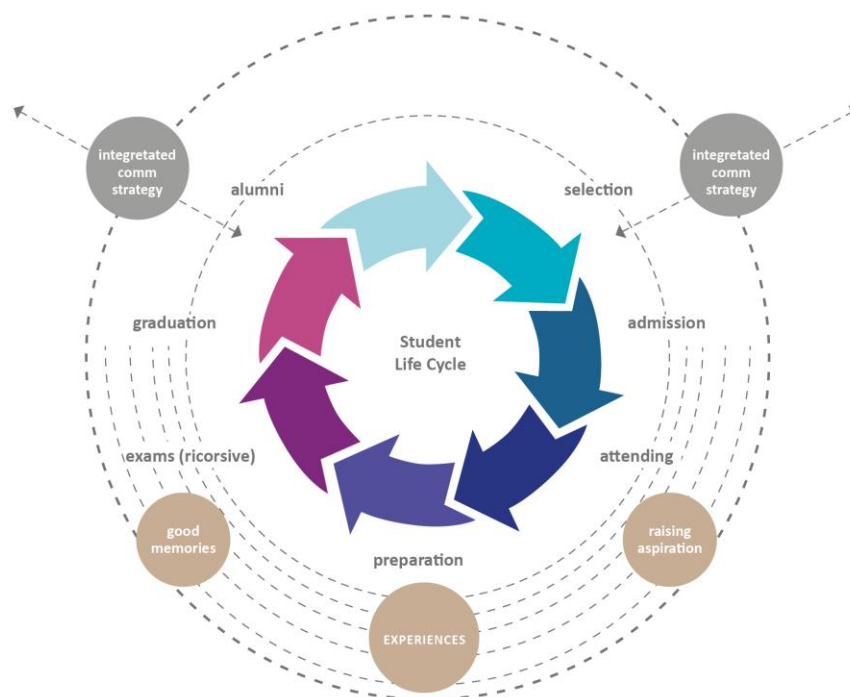


Figure 1. Life Cycle of the student, experiences and integrated communication strategy (elab. Dal Buono).

4. Holistic branding. Corporate image and identity for universities

For those who come into contact with the institution, whether directly or indirectly, their collection of opinions, assessments and mental images is constantly evolving, and changes depending on the institution's ability to communicate. The term used to describe this concept is *corporate image*, which comes from the language of marketing and is widely used even in the design world (Henrion & Parkin, 1976).

Even the use of the word "corporate", which comes from "corporation" (compare with *branding*) (Anceschi, 1985), fittingly applies to the institutional context (universities, cultural institutes, public bodies, non-profits, representative organisations). Literally-speaking, *corporate image* is the image projected by a corporation and can be described as the idea that institution can convey, externalise and transform into "reputation". That image directly reflects on the social and economic capital of a company, and is thus an essential intangible asset. And it is precisely on this intangible production, in the context of the advanced economics of the post-modern contemporary world, that the new centre of gravity of economic value—centred on knowledge and relationships—will focus on (Rullani, 1992).

In the specific context of institutional communication, the message that the sender—the institution—intends to convey is the organisation itself overall, in its complex and organic form. In institutions such as universities, all academic bodies and their individual components, as they relate to one another and interface with the world outside, implicitly communicate in the name of the institution, they become its representatives and, by personally living the brand, contribute to giving substance to its overall image.

Within an integrated communication system where each activity contributes to creating and disseminating the company's identity, influencing its image, it becomes crucial to coordinate and

anticipate tools, methods, and messages themselves. If it's true that "it is impossible not to communicate" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), then the visual, figurative component, conveyed using analogue and digital media, projected with the tools of visual design, and combined with the proper and suitable linguistic expression, gains a key role even in institutional communication.

Following Melewar and Jenkins' model (2002), where corporate identity is built using visual components, the engine to array all the means of communication is the corporate visual identity.

This corporate image determines all the semiotic elements of the brand, and the means to apply them to all communication formats, harmoniously and, indeed, in a coordinated manner.

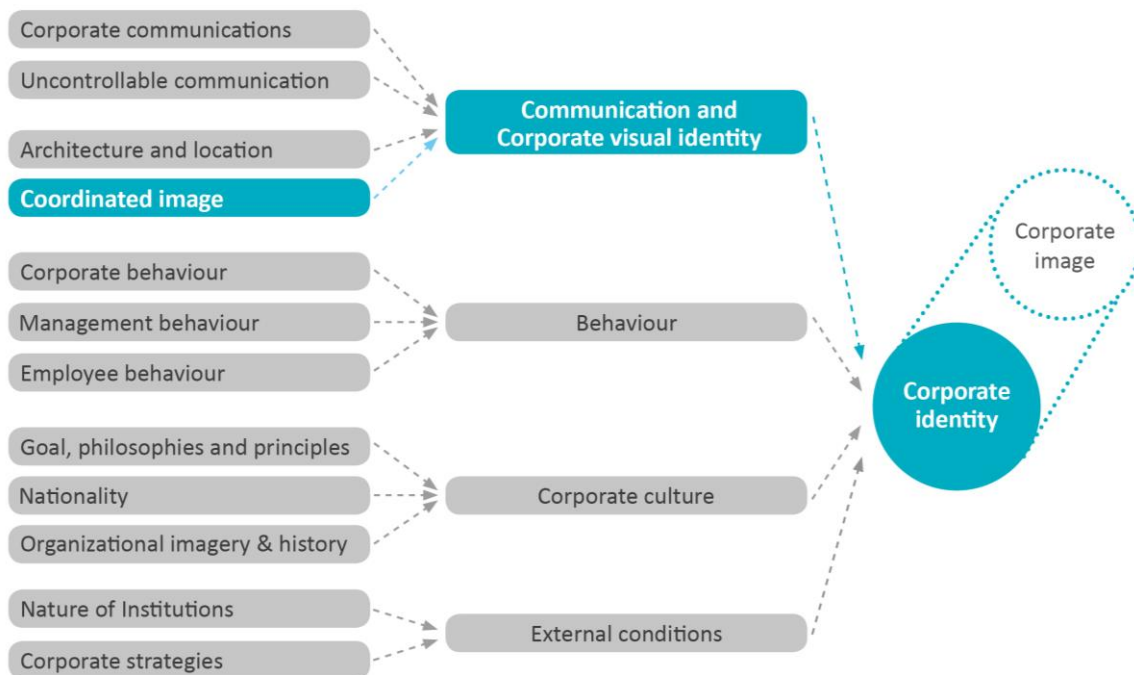


Figure 2. Melewar and Jenkins Model (2002). Corporate identity divided into four areas and the role of corporate visual identity (elab. Dal Buono).

Aneschi (1985), aligned with Henrion and Parkin (1967), when discussing corporate branding, sketches the effective metaphor of "artificial person", where the institution is a plural entity, made of distinct yet connected parts, "like bodies whose limbs are scattered"; the collection of communication artefacts that represent it, in all their forms, paper and digital, coexisting and integrated with one another, are "cognitive prosthetics that allow it to extend the reach of physical and communicative action" (Aneschi, 1985).

Graphic design for non-profit organizations (Vignelli & Laundry, 1980) is the first study on the branding of associations whose end goal is not profit and it was drafted as a manual of guidelines on visual identity. Two key terms appear in the introduction, *consistency* and *appropriateness*, the pillars on which identity rests on. *Consistency* implies the uniform coordination of communication tools so that they are mutually congruent and, bolstering one another, cooperate to create the institution's overall image.

It is the designer, even inside institutions, who plays the role of manager and director to preserve this consistency over time, ensuring that each step of the communication process matches the goals established, and endeavouring to lend *appropriateness* to the overall work, i.e. the corporate identity.

5. The design of institutional visual identities

In the corporate identity design process, the synthetic element recognised as the core of institutional communication is the trademark. This semiotic artefact, which at once signifies and communicates, lends recognisability and distinction to the institution.

The trademark addresses the visual memory of its users, reaching them through a tangible image that conveys reputation, promises and results, that the academic system intends to disseminate.

In a survey of the “state of the art” of visual identities (Martino & Lombardi, 2015) and the most recent restyling (Dal Buono, 2016) of Italian universities, there is a significant rise in trademarks that feature a *sign* component (heraldic coat of arms) and a *logographic* one (institution’s name in full).

Preserving the coat of arms (Rauch & Sinni, 2009) implicitly values the institution’s origins, recalling the archetypal meaning of trademark along with that of “brand” (from *brand*, to burn a distinctive mark).

Today, nearly all Italian universities are equipped with the visual identity manual, absorbing Vignelli and Laundry’s instructions along with commercial marketing experiences. In keeping with other long-established institutions, as highlighted by studies carried out worldwide (Balmer, Greyser, & Urde, 2007; Kristensen & Šontaitė, 2009; Drori, Tienari, & Wæraas, 2015), they largely stand out due to the symbolism of the seal, in conjunction with a verbal notation that matches the institution’s acronym, adding a modern naming component. Less frequently, and where the institution’s context allows it, there is a shift away from classic emblems, towards forms that consist of alphabet signs in modern styling. The quality of the signs stylising historic or historicising seals, stems from the graphic skills of the various authors (Rauch & Sinni, 2009).

Analysing the updated visual identity manuals shared online in open-access form by some Italian universities, reveals that the design and the management of the various projects has, often, seen the use of professional figures from the same schools. This is the case, out of many, at the universities of Bolzano, Florence, Trieste, San Marino, and Sassari, some of which are aided by the presence of professors specialised in visual culture and design.

We can infer a specific determination for research, driven from within, and aimed at building a new, original lexicon, one born precisely within the academic institutions (if not yet a dynamic visual identity, as in some cases especially outside Italy) (Dal Buono, 2016).

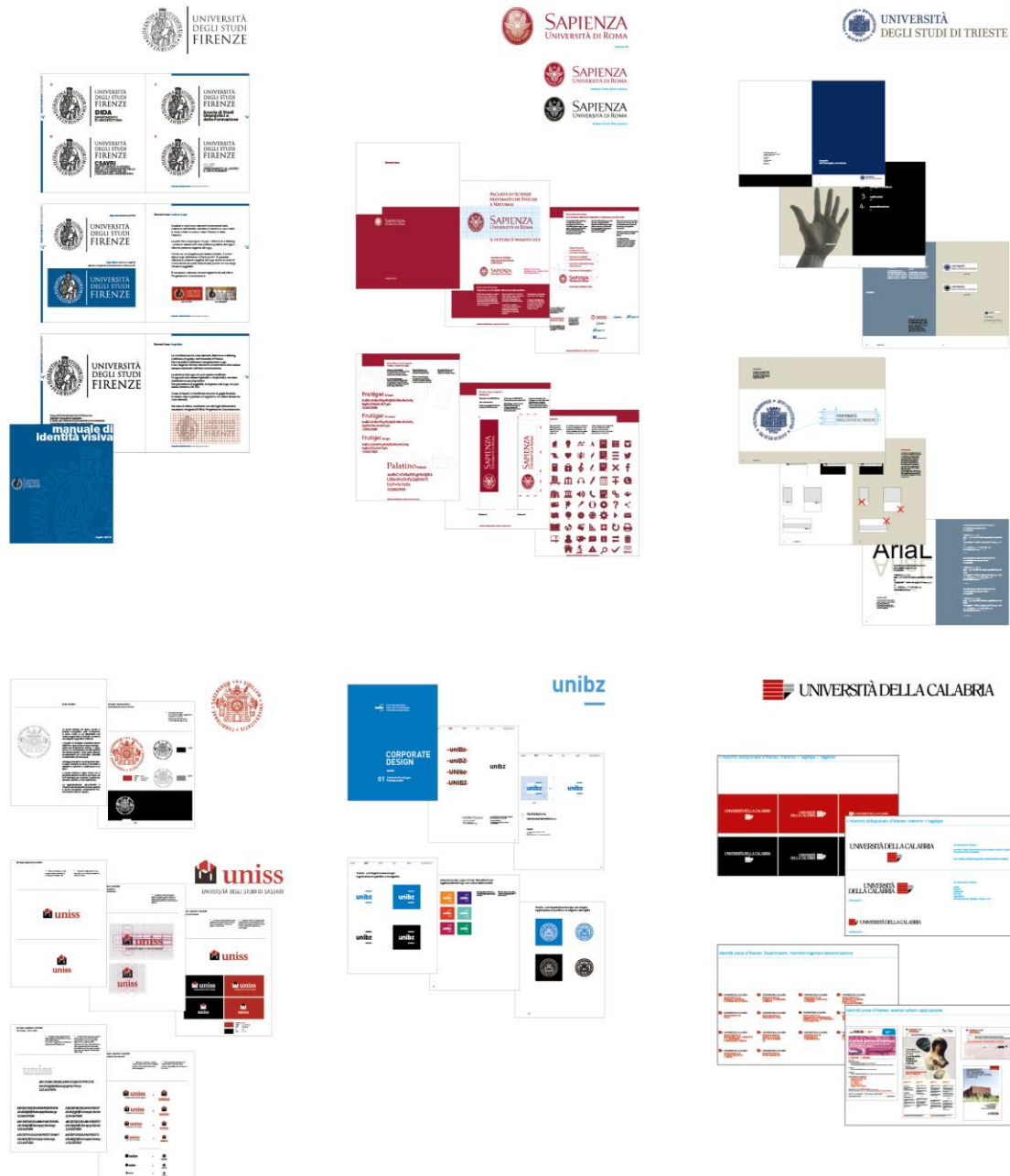


Figure 2. Comparison of logos and manual of visual identities of some Italian universities. Top: Heraldic coat of arms. Down: mix heraldic and modern signs (elab. Dal Buono).

6. The action research process applied. A case study

In 2015, the University of Ferrara decided to launch a self-evaluation process of its own academic statement, starting with reviewing and planning communication activities, and then putting a team of design and marketing teachers in charge of this project.

The context is an old, medium-sized (approx. 14,000 students) Italian public university, with 12 Departments and 1 Macro-Faculty, diverse educational offerings, various locations, including prestigious palaces, closely enmeshed within the historical city centre, where the institution is highly interwoven with the social, cultural and political dynamics of the city.

The Deans' representatives then found that a unified and systematic management of the University's communication and branding was required. As it was not possible that individual projects could resolve such a complex and fragmented situation holistically, they proceeded to sketch a single plan, to be implemented in stages, according to the action research model, optimising the resources available and/or mobilising resources for activities no longer deemed essential.

The project began from the necessary stage of analysing and recognising the problems and critical issues present. The initial stage of the investigation involved a reputation survey, using general questionnaires and direct interviews with samples of students from various departments, and administrative personnel.

This cognitive listening stage provided an accurate survey of the issues as a basis for planning and crafting the interventions required, and currently ongoing, of which we intend to provide a snapshot here.

Some of the initiatives deemed necessary to unlock the starting situation, requiring special investments (with a specific budget quantified), were included in the general budget process, in view of optimising resources, and within the general context of public spending reduction.

The project was thus divided into goals, actions and indicators, to be integrated within the chancellor's 3-year Mandate Plan, in order to plan shifts in resource allocation in terms of personnel, and specific budgets to invest on individual actions.

The communication renewal project was, indeed, inserted into broader redistribution of human resources, in a university organisational chart revised in terms of functions and services by listening with administrative personnel in order to optimise the skills and aspirations of individuals.

The first stage of the project involved, in the overall reorganisation, the reviewing and bolstering of the role played by the Communications Office, not just by integrating specific skills (via resource reallocation), but also through a precise redistribution of duties in the interest of optimisation, and a reduction in wasted time and energy, with an operating model that provided support from the core outwards, more intensely and systematically.

In terms of system, it is necessary to have professional figures that manage the various elements of the brand in a directorial manner and with a comprehensive and strategic vision—elements that depend on one another and which are often disjointedly managed in such contexts.

6. 1 Problems and critical issues as a starting point

The reputation survey raised awareness that the University's perceived view did not reflect its true value, with limited capacity for spill-over at the regional, national and, therefore, international level. Analysing the communication actions carried out and the media used, highlighted the absence of an integrated and coordinated communication logic, made obvious by the lack of a recognisable, consistent, if not promotional, visual identity of the Institution, one that constituted it into an effective "landmark" (Soscia & Cottarelli, 2005; Fortezza, 2009).

The corporate image that emerged, judged as devoid of appeal, urged specifically to search for methods to work on the emotional component of communication, which can strongly influence the sense of loyalty and belonging, not just in students, but in all human elements of the organisation.

To complete the picture, and as a consequence of the above, there is an ineffective and inconsistent on-line presence (website as position 2.0) that, instead, when managed, shows an Institution in step with the times and relational, close to its members.

6.2 Planning and implementing the interventions

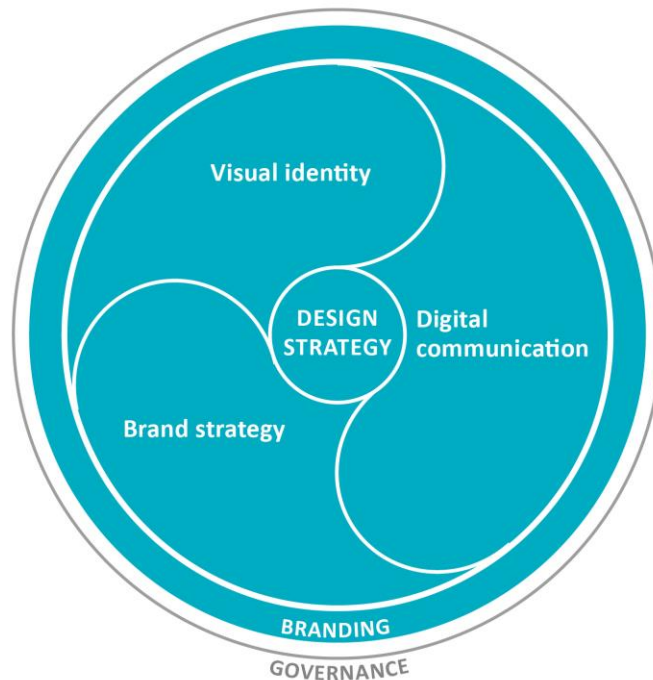


Figure 3. The planned relation between the three areas of intervention in the whole branding strategy (elab. Dal Buono).

The project outlined three areas for intervention deemed to be essential for building the basic framework and thus develop the brand over time.

First, fine-tuning a comprehensive strategy for communication and (integrated) brand positioning, that could unequivocally, effectually and distinctively steer the University's image towards both internal and external audiences.

An effective brand strategy is an indispensable step for confirming the University in a distinctive position (first at a national, then an international level), as well as one of the goals explicitly stated in the chancellor's Mandate Plan.

The action includes planning (and budgeting) the initiatives and actions assessed for the greatest possible leverage (quality storytelling, targeted and sustainable sponsorships, relations with opinion leaders and qualifying ambassadors, promotion of Alumni, nurturing talents, e.g. Career days, etc.).

Concurrently, we planned to intervene on the perceptual element of communication, implementing an integrated institutional communication strategy. The project includes the study of a comprehensive, consistent and recognisable system of visual identity, starting from restyling and defining basic elements (trademark and logotype), and outlining the shared guidelines to use (corporate identity manual), to be progressively applied to the new digital framework as well, and various projects planned for the future, such as merchandising.



Figure 4. Results of a co-design workshop (Course in Industrial and Product design, UniFE) about the Institution's visual identity.

The social and interactive side of communication, the so-called 2.0 dimension, was deemed essential for determining an organic communication strategy, that would serve to connect—via the major modern social networks—“customer care” with external promotional relations.

Outlining a recurrent and generative communication strategy (including management protocol) that involves the Communications Office, will initiate the process of recognisability, identity creation, loyalty building, and rapprochement with users.

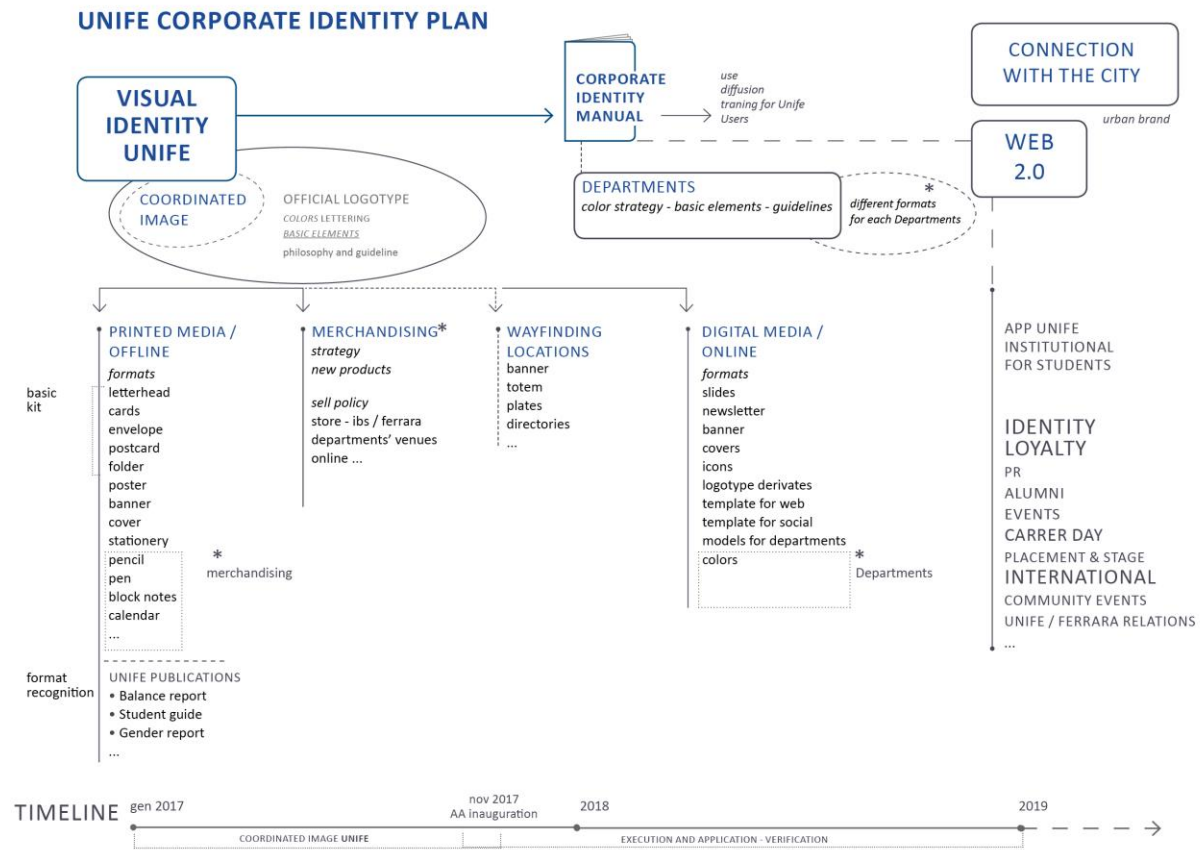


Figure 5. Planning the renovation of University's communication formats. Ongoing design project.

7. The added value of implementing an integrated strategy. Conclusions

The project, to best promote the University and seize advantages in terms of reputation and ranking, involves a first year of fine-tuning strategies, then continuing with the development of specific projects (e.g. international dimension, Alumni, merchandising); finalising the strategic planning of University identity and group events; increasing cooperation with the city with initiatives to promote the area.

Assessing the brand's performance is a decisive tool for rating the growth of brand equity, and could be carried out with regular checks on the brand strategy, comparing quantitative data (number of applications and registered students, presence at events and presence on social media, etc.) as well as qualitative data, via regular audits, and comparing results as a function of planned targets. The potentials and trend of the brand strategy and design-oriented communication, if positive, can turn into a quantifiable value with the construction of an assessment model able to reveal a Brand Equity marker, based on yearly statistical research that helps position values—responsibility, reliability, expertise, quality, reputation and institutional size—and expressing a potential “balance sheet” value.

Such a value system expresses a circularity of the initial formulation of the design management process of the university brand.

We believe that a project that reforms the communication framework of a public University—led by interdisciplinary skills—is effective when management conditions similar to those described so far occur, i.e. internal coordination with mobilisation of human resources for optimisation purposes, earmarking an estimated budget for specific actions within the strategic plan (for which the University should be assessed internally as the appropriate expertise is not present); then specifying which parameters confirm the execution of the actions and advantages achieved, within the timespan established for the stages of the project.

Through the close interrelation between a clear brand vision (that marks the specific cultural elements of the Institution relative to its context), a digital communication perspective and visual design components (effectively developed), the project takes on, as value of originality, the development of the human and participatory component as a lever for innovation. Thanks to these conditions, an open path emerges that can flexibly accommodate the various issues that have arisen over the years, following and promoting cooperation between multiple interpreters.

In this view, the design of distinctive elements of the University image, which are instantly perceived by users, easily recognisable and which stir memorable emotions (Norman, 2011), are the basis for a broader process of significance (Biel, 1992) in experiential terms.

Here, design joins broader processes of value creation and management of the Institution, representing a tool that can help gather shared instances, sentiments and emotions that can and must be at the heart of participatory and strategic branding, no longer managed purely in tactical terms over the short term (Semprini, 2008), thus aligning with broader trends in the world of branding and corporate communication.

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