

# 8 steps to establishing your distinctiveness

The qualities of an institution that make it distinctive only remain effective until they are copied by others. So what better than identifying a property that is inherent and cannot therefore be adopted or imitated?

## What this is

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The art of being distinctive requires strategy, market research and positioning – it is not just a final phase of communications. Here, Louise Simpson of The Knowledge Partnership considers the advantages for those universities which have a truly unique proposition and discusses other keys to effective distinctiveness.

## Why it's useful

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The strongest points of distinctiveness are those that no one else can rival. Louise draws on her own research and experience, over a number of years, into what makes universities memorable.

## Making it work for you

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As Darwin knew, those of us who are distinctive, who stand out from the pack, are more likely to flourish, as the points of distinction lend competitive advantage. So what makes something distinctive? The brain works in complex ways, but we know that things that we remember are usually

to do with factors that surprise, are novel in some way, colourful, or quirky. Children will know a zebra before they learn to identify a mule. Distinctiveness requires bravery, and selectivity. You can't be distinctive if you are all things to all people. At the end of the day, distinctiveness is about being focused – on what you want to be, what you want to offer, who you want to appeal to, and how you communicate all of those things. The art of being distinctive requires strategy, market research and positioning – it is not just a final phase of communications.

The strongest points of distinctiveness are those that no one else can rival. Thus arguably Oxford has an innate advantage over other UK universities because of its age. As Ries and Trout (1986)<sup>i</sup> argue in their seminal book on Positioning, the Battle for Your Mind, being first/the oldest is one of the most important aspects of being distinctive, and therefore memorable. It is no coincidence that the most well-known universities in any country are often the oldest too.

Universities that are neither new nor old, set in undistinguished towns, with parades of generic shops need to try harder than Oxford and Harvard, and they know it. They need to be distinctive through their people and product, through intense communications effort and through

focus. I have undertaken research for several years into what makes universities memorable, and the findings clearly show there are some rules that can be extrapolated to guide the process of establishing 'distinctiveness':

1. External stakeholders only remember one, maybe two things about a university. You have to do something big, bold and different to others to be noticed.
2. Actions are needed, not good intentions or described values. You won't be admired for what you value, or what you are trying to do, although real ambition is applauded. You need to prove you are doing something to impress people.
3. You are more likely to be noticed if you are the best at something cutting edge –better to be first in ophthalmics than 40<sup>th</sup> in cancer research.
4. You have to explain your points of difference in an interesting way (it has to be repeated consistently through bespoke and campaign communications and ideally face to face with your most senior stakeholders).
5. The more you involve people in your endeavours, the more likely they are to understand you, remember what you are doing and

become advocates.

6. Moral codes or green policies are not points of distinctiveness, simply expected manifestations of good management and humanity.
7. People remember people more than things. Therefore academic stars and charismatic leaders are one of the best ways of being distinctive.
8. Your points of difference will only be noticeable for a finite length of time – i.e. until someone else offers the same 'distinctive' things as you.

<sup>1</sup>**Title:** Positioning: the battle for your mind  
**Further information:** by Al Ries and Jack Trout  
**Edition:** rev. ed.  
**Publisher Details:** New York ; London : McGraw-Hill book company, inc  
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#### Guest contributor

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#### Find out more

[www.distinct.ac.uk](http://www.distinct.ac.uk) has a growing resource section.

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