

BRIEFING NOTE

Finding something great to say

TIPS ON RUNNING A WORKSHOP TO FIND YOUR ORGANISATION'S 'BIG IDEA'

You want to be distinct, to be heard and for people to respond to your story. The problem is you've got so many things to say. Some of these are seemingly not that different from other universities, but are nevertheless very important. Others appear different, but are not necessarily that important. So, how do you run a workshop to find the big idea, the one overriding story you want to be famous for from all the facts, research and different stories people have told?

BE CLEAR ON THE OUTCOME

The outcome of the workshop should be to achieve a shared understanding of the attributes that make up what you stand for. This becomes the brief for the creative expression, as well as a 'moral compass' for the organisation – identifying the things you must stop doing and things you need to start doing.

We suggest you don't start out to run a workshop with the intention of finding a single statement or worse a strap line. Park for a moment the development of a creative expression (how it will actually be

communicated to people; that's a separate workshop) and use this time to start defining the fundamental story. What you'd actually tell someone about your organisation if you meet them, in simple, clear language. ***Get your story clear first, then look for creative and operational ways to bring it to life later.***

KEEP A REALITY CHECK THROUGHOUT

Because the value of this final statement exists only in how it can ultimately be expressed, either operationally or creatively, avoid signing off any statements until the

reality of how these ideas can be delivered or how they look has been fully explored. It might sound great on paper but how will it change what you do or be visually represented? You'll probably want to test some of your ideas, or elements of them, on key audiences. Be aware that the simplest of stories can be brought to life in a very creative way. So, don't worry about making them 'sexy'; focus on simply articulating that which is a true expression of the organisation. The 'creative leap' that would follow this workshop simply needs a solid platform from which to launch.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

If we look at how people perceive your organisation, it's usually through a combination of aspects that together form a bigger picture in their mind. These include:

- What other people say about your organisation;
- Perceptions of your peers and the stories associated with your sector;
- How much people have heard of you;
- The truths that come from what you do, how you do things and where you are;
- The way you say things – your tone of voice, the quality of your messages.

So, to make a workshop more effective, less challenging and the end results more beneficial, approach it in the same way – build a foundation of multiple statements. From these, an overall positioning and big idea will start to emerge as the workshop develops. It's as if you're painting a picture or creating a sculpture. Build the final piece from a series of smaller marks, through messages, statements or attributes that collectively make what you say believable, and this will form the picture from which the big idea will come.

Think of the workshop having two parts:

- Identifying the attributes that form the big picture.
- Finding a way to hold, evolve or pull everything together to encapsulate the big idea.

Identifying the attributes

It's wise to consider some of your objective attributes such as portfolio, teaching styles, research areas, location, size, campus, or diversity of the student body. There will of course be others that reflect your situation or evidence you've gathered. But because HE can seem to have more similarities than differences, it's worthwhile to spend time thinking about ways people perceive you and ideas that might have come out of a perception audit. It's both of these types of attributes that will need to come together to make the bigger picture, but the HE sector often spends less time discussing perceptions. Here are some suggestions of elements you could discuss:

1. **Why?** – Get people to explore why they have a passion for what they do that is released by working at this particular organisation. Then capture the essence of these as a single statement.

2. **Customers** – What would an advocate say about the organization? Capture the essence of this.
3. **Truths** – What evidence is there to support current key sales messages?
4. **Experience** – How do you want to make your students feel?
5. **Tone of Voice** – How would the organization speak if it were human? Define your personality and voice rather than simply listing values.
6. **Brand Story** – How the organisation meets a core human need wrapped up in a narrative statement. Try thinking about following an individual's experience where barriers stopped them achieving a goal, but were overcome to gain a greater outcome.
7. **Big Idea** – A label that sits above all the above attributes. It could be in the form of a particular benefit, a belief or simply a concept. This statement should have a strong emotional core to it and capture the essence of the other attributes.

In order to explore these attributes, you may need to start off with some simpler approaches that you then gather together. You could try:

- **Storytelling:** Ask people to share their story and pull out relevant themes. This works well for both the 'why' and 'customer' attributes.
- **Benefit analysis:** Sector, Identity, Experience, Service and Product. Identify three key ones per area then weight and rate using the distinctiveness criteria: Real, Rare, relevant. This approach works well for 'truths'.
- **Benefits behind the benefit:** For each key benefit, explore further what the benefit really is. You're trying to move people's perception from functional to psychological benefits. This works well for 'truths'.
- **Archetypes:** Use these personality models to explore your tone of voice. Visual language is also helpful for discussing 'tone of voice' in fact as some it can be a way of expressing an organisation through multiple images.

Finding a way to hold it all together

Once you have simplified and collected a short statement for each attribute, here are some techniques and tips for pulling it all together:

1. **Visual Metaphor – A visual metaphor for connecting the attributes.** Rather than simply listing a set of attributes, create them within a visual metaphor. You could use a coat of arms, a molecular structure, orbiting planets or simply speech marks. Try and find something visual that reflects your organisation. This will make it all feel more relevant and improve the experience, as it helps people feel that there is a structure and an end goal.
2. **Fluidity – Try not to be too precious at any stage.** As in sculpture, get ideas down quickly but also go back and revisit previous statements against each other. Keep the whole concepts active and evolving.
3. **Benchmarking – Not judging your story in isolation.** Our eyes see things through contrast and that's how you need to view your story – in contrast to others. It's very difficult to see the degree of difference between organisations without actually holding one up against the other. Use the same list of attributes you use to form your big picture and then fill in your view of how they come across. Usually two competitors are enough to help inform the debate at this stage, although you can reference others.

DOES THIS WORKSHOP APPROACH REQUIRE EXTERNAL FACILITATION?

The simple answer is yes. The hardest thing is for anyone to be subjective when they talk about themselves. They either become too modest or over-claim. People also know too much, far more than would be of interest externally. What that means is they jump beyond the obvious to the abstract. A facilitator can stand back and challenge as to whether or not what is being said makes sense and will make people stand up and listen.

OUTLINE WORKSHOP AGENDA

1. Introduce the objective, 'Shared understanding of what we stand for'.
2. Review the organisation's strategic goals and key challenges to ensure summary statements that are built during the session are judged against this background.
3. Build the attributes that form the overall story within predefined fields and set within a metaphoric frame.
4. Try developing and aligning the attributes to explore and pull out a central theme (the overall story or big idea).
5. Position against the competition - what's their story? Use the same fields to benchmark.
6. Start to plan to test the concept against how it can be implemented.
7. Finish by asking the question, 'does this capture the essence of what we're about?' If not, keep evolving by simplifying and getting to the core underlying emotions.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS:

- Don't let the opening expectation be that you're looking for a single big idea or a creative idea. You need it, but let the big idea emerge from a collection of messages and thoughts that form part of a bigger picture.
- Constantly test the attributes throughout the process by thinking how they can be brought to life creatively and operationally. Avoid trying to finalise a creative expression of your identity during the session. Build a platform of truth by exploring what you'd stop and start doing as an organisation. Then use this output to form a creative brief from which ideas will form later.
- Use an external facilitator to challenge and give an external perspective. You'll all know too much and this will create complexity in the answers when what you need to do is move towards simplicity.
- Make it work for you by selecting the right attributes and metaphor that reflect your key challenges and culture from which you can build and frame your story.
- Try different techniques for getting people to explore the different attributes, from use of imagery or structured analysis, through to storytelling and benchmarking against the competition.
- Keep looking for the underlying core human emotion within the story that acts as a driver for decision making.

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For over 20 years, Richard has worked with commercial and educational organisations, all of whom want to find creative solutions to telling their story – who they are and what they stand for.

Richard originally studied to be an artist, trained in design and marketing and is a life-long student of behavioural science. He has been a creative director, head of strategy and lectured on branding across Europe. Throughout his career, he has worked in several top creative agencies and now heads up his own strategic branding consultancy, Accrue Brand Value. His role in transforming an organisation that is mediocre to one that forms a rich emotional connection with its stakeholders, requires the alignment of its leadership, its people and its customers around a central idea.



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