

Packaging degree programmes to drive demand

Received (in revised form): 14th January, 2022



JOHN TRIERWEILER

Vice President and CMO, Rochester Institute of Technology, USA

John Trierweiler is Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer for Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) and is responsible for goal setting, strategic development and tactical execution for marketing and branding, communications and PR/editorial, as well as digital and web. As the chief marketer and communicator for the university, he leads a broad effort to shine a spotlight on RIT as a creative and innovative university that leverages the power of technology, the arts and design to move the world forward. John's division of marketing and communications works in close partnership with enrolment management, advancement, colleges, centres, programmes, as well as the other divisions that make up the university. Prior to joining RIT, John served as Chief Marketing Officer for the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. Before working in higher education, he held executive marketing positions at companies including Cablevision Systems, Time Warner Cable, Bumble Bee Seafoods and H.J. Heinz. John is a graduate of Michigan State University and holds an MBA from the University of Michigan.

Rochester Institute of Technology, 22 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester NY 14623, USA
Tel: 585-475-4727; E-mail: jktcmo@rit.edu



KINNARI SEJPAL

Associate Vice President, Rochester Institute of Technology, USA

Kinnari (Kin) Sejpal serves as the Associate Vice President for Marketing Strategy and Creative Services at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). In this role she leads a team of branding, marketing intelligence and creative professionals. She also oversees college-level marketing functions and guides brand initiatives for RIT's global campuses. Kinnari has led a successful rebranding initiative, kicked off a national reputation campaign and helped launch a holistic and integrated web presence for the university. She comes from a higher education background, having previously worked at Purdue University, where she held a variety of roles within the marketing strategy area. While at Purdue, Kinnari earned Master's in communication and MBA degrees. Prior to Purdue, Kinnari worked at the intersection of theatre and education, overseeing marketing efforts for the Academy for Creative Expression (ACE) Productions in Mumbai, India.

Rochester Institute of Technology, 22 Lomb Memorial Drive, Rochester NY 14623, USA
Tel: +1 585-475-4643; E-mail: kin@rit.edu

Abstract

'Can you promote our programme?' This question may sound familiar. As might the answer. Marketing each academic programme/degree/major is challenging due to inherent obstacles such as promotional inefficiency and allocation of finite resources. As such, the question really became about packaging of programmes as compelling products. In response, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) marketing and communications launched a pilot: in close partnership with enrolment management, we identified programmes that met a certain set of criteria and developed an area of study called New Economy Majors with a positioning strategy that ladder up to the master brand. The teams then collaborated with the provost and colleges to bring this promotional effort to life in the most effective and efficient

manner. As a result, programmes saw enrolment success and at the same time the effort bolstered overall brand awareness for the university.

Keywords

higher education, higher education marketing, brand management, product marketing, programme marketing, New Economy Majors

ABOUT ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY (RIT)

Founded in 1829, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) was an early pioneer in practice-based and cooperative education. Today, RIT is a premier career-oriented doctoral university with strong programmes in engineering and technology, computing and information sciences, the fine arts and design, the liberal arts, health care and the sciences, and business, which prepares students for success in a globally integrated society. Beyond the main campus in Rochester, New York, RIT has international campuses in China, Croatia, Dubai and Kosovo and is home to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. RIT currently has more than 19,000 students and more than 135,000 graduates from all 50 US states and over 100 nations.

INTRODUCTION

Positioning, packaging and promoting occurs among multiple layers and multiple audiences within higher education. Brand architecture helps to provide an understandable framework, as it defines:

- How brands are structured within an organisation, such as a university¹ (see Figure 1);

- How the master brand, sub-brands and other entities relate to and support each other;
- How sub-brands and other entities reflect and reinforce the core purpose of the master brand.

At the highest, or master brand, level is the university itself. Below are the primary sub-brands, defined here as the colleges, divisions and global campuses that make up a university. Next are secondary sub-brands, such as departments and schools. Finally, under the master brand umbrella one will also find endorsed and sponsored entities, including centres, institutes and initiatives.

Of note, however, brand architectures generally do not extend down to the university's *programme* level. Why is this important? Because in reality the primary source of revenue for most universities — tuition revenue — comes from these very programmes, which as noted are generally not featured or even appearing within a brand's architectural framework.

This was the challenge — or as we saw it, the opportunity — to embrace and incorporate the academic programmes themselves into and as a branded element and differentiator for RIT in the hotly competitive higher education marketplace. Providing a strong umbrella framework would highlight and elevate these programmes in a highly efficient and effective manner, while at the same

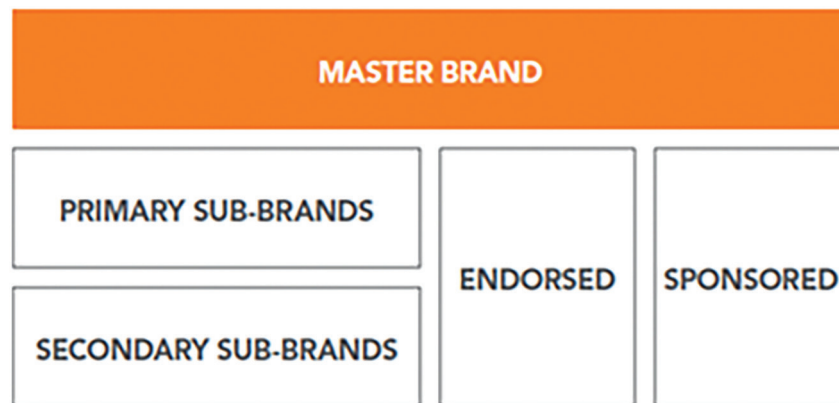


FIGURE 1 Sample brand architecture

time strengthening the positioning of the RIT master brand.

A POTENT BRAND PLATFORM

At the highest level, RIT has created a powerful vision and mission that was born of deep research into what makes RIT better, different and special within the higher education category. With the leadership of RIT's president, along with input, buy-in and support of the three university governance groups (students, faculty, staff), we were able to align the university's brand positioning and brand identity system with the university's:

1. Vision/mission;²
2. Strategic plan;
3. Blended (philanthropy, government, research) campaign.

The brand identity system created the visual and verbal/written language to bring the brand platform to life in a consistent and compelling way across the primary units and levels of the university, and to deliver the brand platform to the various audiences being targeted.

PROGRAMMES AND PARETO

The Pareto Principle, better known as the '80/20 rule' — that 80 per cent of consequences come from 20 per cent of causes — applies across a multitude of areas, including population and wealth distribution, taxation, computing, occupational safety, operations, grocery stores, as well as sports (baseball's hot-test measurement scale is Wins Above Replacement (WAR) from the best players causing the majority of wins). It certainly applies to higher education, where for example the majority of a university's enrolments generally come from a limited percentage of high schools,³ and where the majority of a university's tuition revenue is driven by a relatively small number of degree programmes being offered to students. And RIT is no different.

It is equally true, however, that close to 100 per cent of those involved in offering academic programmes (teaching, administering, housing, etc.) want their programmes to succeed. Statements often heard on campuses across the US (and the world) include:

'We have low enrolment in our programme; how can we (you) fix that?'

‘We are unique, we just need to market it.’

‘Once students find out about us, they love us.’

‘We are the best-kept secret in higher ed!’

These statements generally posit marketing (also often described as ‘marcom’) as the back end of the process — in other words: we created this programme, now ‘do marketing’ to bring in the students. It is important, however, for marketing to be at the table earlier and ideally at the beginning of the process. Marketing can be an important contributor in the co-creation process, through elements such as ensuring there is programme demand and a differentiating element to a given university’s offering.

THE THREE-LEGGED STOOL

At RIT, we strongly believe that the path toward success in achieving enrolment goals is through the design and deployment of an academic version of that famously sturdy metaphorical three-legged stool (see Figure 2).

With achieving (or exceeding) enrolment goals as the platform, we hypothesised that the three legs of the stool giving us the best chance to succeed are:

1. Marketing and communications;
2. Enrolment management;
3. Colleges (and other degree-granting units).

At RIT, while the three areas roll up to three divisions — ie enrolment management, marketing and communications, and academic affairs — the relationship between them is one of



FIGURE 2 The three-legged stool for effectively and efficiently achieving enrolment goals

collaboration and partnership. There is a shared understanding of the ultimate goal: position RIT for best-fit students and attract them to our distinctive product offerings. Until 2016, RIT did not have a marketing function at the leadership level. With the creation of the vice president (VP) and chief marketing officer (CMO) position and thereby the Division of Marketing and Communications, a dedicated arm focused on strategic and integrated marketing communications was developed. This group is focused on building awareness and elevating the reputation of RIT; the enrolment group, on the other hand, is in charge of nurturing student prospects through the admissions funnel. This clear understanding of roles and responsibilities has further solidified the partnership between the two groups. Needless to say, having strong alignment between marketing and communications, enrolment management and the colleges is crucial to successfully moving prospective students through the customer purchase cycle. Trying to find the win-win situation — or, in this

case, the win-win-win — requires having an understood and shared goal as the single most important step toward achieving the desired outcome of driving increased enrolment.

CATEGORISING PROGRAMMES AT RIT

The first step was to recognise that it is inefficient, uneconomic and, practically speaking, impossible to support programmatic growth across RIT's entire portfolio of 250+ programmes. As a result, marketing and communications worked closely with enrolment management to create and define a framework that allowed us to categorise programmes at RIT (see Figure 3).

1. The first group was made up of known, 'high' brand equity programmes with a searchable pathway (ie associated with common searchable major lists such as college board), eg game design and development;
2. The second group are those that are known, searchable, and have 'medium' brand equity, eg graphic design;
3. The third group consisted of known, searchable, and 'low' brand equity programmes. This would include pro-

grammes that may generally be considered less 'differentiated' offerings, eg accounting.

A fourth group emerged, however, and one that seemingly had a bleak prognosis — a programme that: 1) was unknown; 2) had no brand equity; and 3) had no readily searchable pathway. While not a likely target for promotional focus, we overlaid this with additional criteria concerning 'viability'. Our definition of viability was that a programme must meet each of the three following criteria:

1. Once known, the programme generates great interest from, and appeal to, students;
2. Programme provides very strong outcomes, with high demand from employers;
3. RIT is distinctive in the major, while reinforcing RIT's positioning and core differentiators.

UNICORN PROGRAMMES

Programmes that could meet all three criteria listed above would be unusual, special, and with much to offer. While not mythical in nature, we tabbed these as 'unicorn' programmes. The



FIGURE 3 Categorisation methodology for degrees, majors and programmes at RIT

first step was to identify which programmes might be the best match, and the second step would be to devise a packaging and promotional effort to help shine a bright and deserving spotlight on them.

For the first step, the enrolment management team was already leaning toward certain programmes that were multidisciplinary and, based on employer trends and the competitive landscape, appeared to be attractive. Another foundational piece of research was the World Economic Forum's (WEF) 'Future of Jobs' Report from 2020.⁴ The WEF's report highlights the projected top skills five years out, along with the top job roles seeing increased demand across industries. We also cross-tabbed these findings with information from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Occupational Outlook Handbook.⁵

We then collaborated with our enrolment management and academic partners on the design and creation of a framework for assessment. We described the viability framework of assessment earlier; however, we also wanted to ensure the programmes were:

1. Mission-critical:
 - a. Does it match the overall vision and mission of RIT? Is it multidisciplinary, operating at RIT's sweet spot: the intersection of technology, the arts and design?;
2. Brand-centric:
 - a. Does it build on RIT's legacy of outcomes? Does it help position RIT as always being onto something amazing, new and relevant?;
3. Forward-thinking/future-focused
 - a. Is it signalled as a programme that is highly likely to grow, based on the WEF, U.S. Bureau of Labor

Statistics, employer input and other sources of information?

Marketing and communications, enrolment management and the provost took the lead in identifying the criteria and coming up with the set of programmes that fit within them. It was imperative, especially for marketing and communications, to be at the table and drive decision making in order to conceptualise and launch the marketing plan. Enrolment management needed to be part of the process for lead nurturing and fulfilment. And last, but certainly not least, the provost worked with the deans to secure their buy-in and get them on board with the idea of promoting a category rather than their department or college.

1. Motion Picture Science (College of Art and Design);
2. New Media Design (College of Art and Design);
3. Photographic Sciences (College of Art and Design);
4. Packaging Science (College of Engineering Technology);
5. Robotics and Manufacturing Engineering Technology (College of Engineering Technology);
6. Digital Humanities and Social Sciences (College of Liberal Arts);
7. Imaging Science (College of Science);
8. Human Centered Computing (Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences);
9. New Media Interactive Development (Golisano College of Computing and Information Sciences);
10. Microelectronic Engineering (Kate Gleason College of Engineering);
11. Supply Chain Management (Saunders College of Business);
12. Individualised Study (School of Individualised Study).

OTHER PROCESS PARAMETERS

Other parameters that were set and informed our launch process were the following:

1. The initial focus was on undergraduate programmes:
 - a. We believed, however, that a strong packaging and promotional umbrella would also help improve awareness of and interest in related graduate programmes.
2. The campaign was a beta or pilot programme:
 - a. If it worked, we would look to create additional promotional and packaging opportunities for other groups of programmes;
 - b. This was not the only vehicle for promoting undergraduate or graduate programmes.
3. This programme list was neither permanent nor endlessly expandable:
 - a. The programmes in the initial launch would not be 'frozen' in place; successful programmes might 'graduate' off the list, while new programmes might make their way onto the list;
 - b. Risk of dilution was considered if the list became too large and therefore less special. The classic branding philosophy was applied: if most/many programmes are treated as unique, then none of them is truly differentiating. So we were intentional about keeping the list narrow and targeted.

NAMING THE CATEGORY

Higher education is notorious for naming conventions that do not always take into account the shopping and

buying process of the consumer.⁶ In trying to be unique and separated from the pack, universities tend to forget the importance of brand alignment and findability. In short, names should be spoken in the prospective students' language. With that in mind, we sought to develop a category name that RIT could make ownable, scalable and capable of being promoted in a campaign without much explanation or decipherment. Consideration also needed to be given to the fact that the category name and supporting content would not make the programmes sound elitist or special in comparison to all other programmes not falling under the same umbrella.

Multiple stakeholders worked together to brainstorm names; the idea was to explore all classifications of the naming process, including, but not limited to, acronyms, familiar terms, original words and made-up words. While not exhaustive, these ladder up to what naming research suggests: literal, attribute, legacy, initials/numbers, word combination, invented, related, alliteration/rhyme, and inquiring.⁷ Knowing that there would be a follow-up research and testing phase, the committee gravitated toward descriptive and literal, and steered clear of anything that required further decoding.

'New Economy Majors' was selected unanimously to meet the criteria set forth for the category. Importantly, this phrase:

- Reflected RIT's vision and mission;
- Reinforced RIT's brand of always being on to something amazing, new and relevant;
- Reminded consumers of RIT's leadership of being a step ahead and future-focused.

Additionally, the phrase was:

- Easily understood;
- Relatable;
- Topical — especially in the COVID-19 pandemic and (eventually) post-pandemic world;
- Had search engine optimisation (SEO) value, especially when accompanied by supporting content.

In order to prove the hypothesis that the ‘New Economy Majors’ phrase met our requirements and also resonated with key target audiences, ie prospective students and families, we conducted a research study with a representative sample of these groups. We developed and distributed a survey that included questions such as:

- Have you heard of the term New Economy?;
- What is the first thing you think of when you see/hear the term New Economy?;
- How likely are you to click on an ad for New Economy Majors?;

- What words or phrases do you associate with the term New Economy Majors?;
- Choose three descriptors that closely relate to New Economy.

In addition to close-ended questions, there was space for respondents to provide open-ended comments on any aspect of the name.

Both parent and student study results were conclusive: not only did the New Economy Majors phrase pique curiosity, but respondents were also likely to associate the ideas of emerging careers and future-focused degrees and would take the next step of inquiry and exploration. This is exactly what we set out to do.

There was also significant effort expended on the look and feel of the concept. A graphic of a burst with RIT colours, shapes and fonts combined the idea of staying true to the RIT brand while giving the category some vitality, to signal something new and exciting was happening here (see Figure 4).

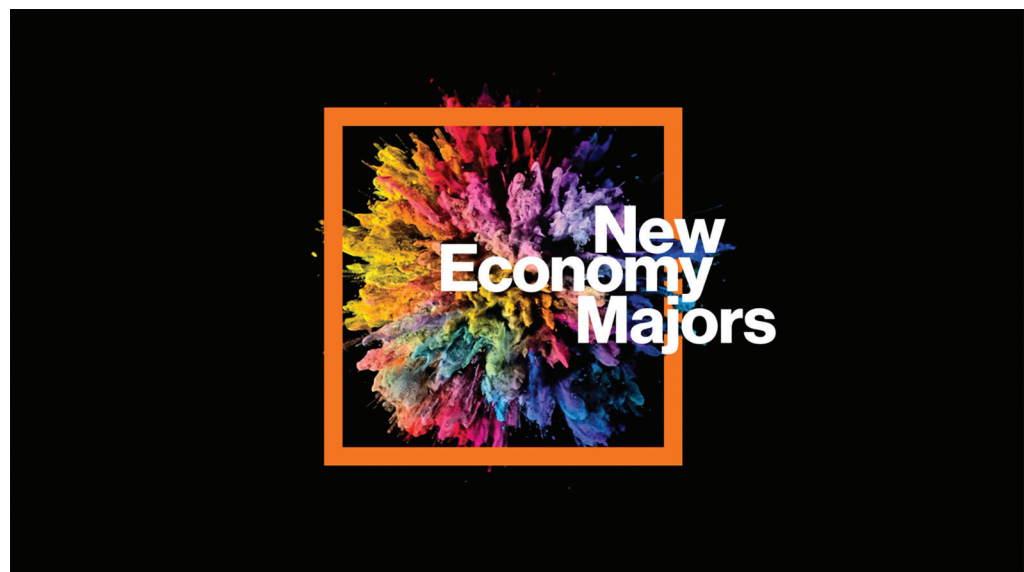


FIGURE 4 Graphic representation of the New Economy Majors design system

MARKETING PLAN FOR THE CATEGORY

With the list of programmes finalised, the name selected and the buy-in process under our belt, we moved on to the next step of the process: a marketing, communications and sales plan.

The first step was to build awareness of the New Economy Majors category. Once audiences were in the fold, they would then be invited to learn about the nuances of different programmes on the list such as academic curriculum, experiential components and postgraduate pathways.

In order to build awareness at a category level, an integrated marketing and communications (IMC) plan needed to be developed. There is strong, consistent evidence that IMC is the most effective process to adopt in the present complex multichannel digital environment.^{8,9}

Using paid, earned, shared and owned tactics (the PESO model), we launched the category with:

- A webpage that functioned as the primary destination for all media tactics;
- A press release that was picked up in multiple higher education trade publications, including *University Business*;
- RIT enterprise and college-based social media platforms (eg Facebook, LinkedIn);

- Advertising campaigns aimed to increase RIT awareness and reputation in the marketplace;
- Admissions materials such as viewbooks;
- President's Annual Report that was sent to higher education peers.

For the prospective student market in particular, the goal was to move prospects through the entire purchasing funnel. To that end, it was imperative to have a formalised sales process that took the hand-off from marketing and nurtured leads all the way to matriculation. Marketing and communications, enrolment management and the colleges came together to plan and execute a four-step process from awareness to action (see Figure 5).

To promote individual programmes within the category, college marketers worked closely with the enrolment management and marketing and communications groups. They deployed tactics such as e-mail and print communications, social media, and ask me anything (AMA) sessions. Attention was given to ensure consistency in and continuity of New Economy Majors messaging at the programme level. College marketers took the messaging foundation developed for the category and adapted it for their specific programmes. For example, as mentioned earlier, a key value proposition for New Economy Majors is preparation for emerging careers. For

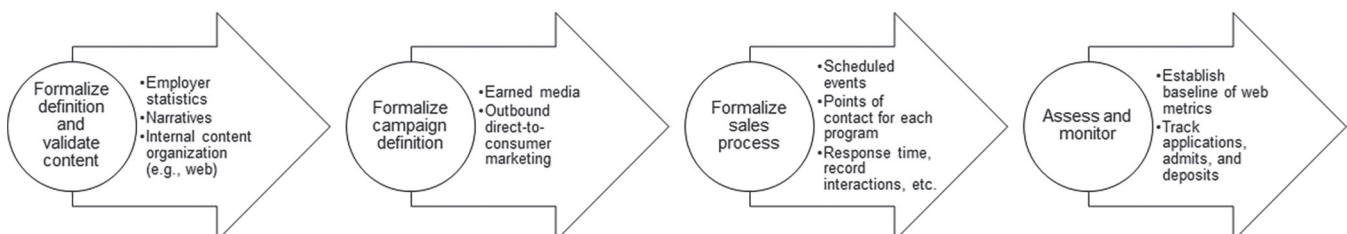


FIGURE 5 Process to make a higher education programme category successful

each programme, the focus continued to be on emerging careers; however, the information went deeper in terms of the types of up-and-coming careers students can expect to pursue upon graduation.

RESULTS

With a launch time frame of only four months during the post-accept (ie yield) season, we saw impressive results on both the marketing front as well as through various stages of the admissions process. Website engagement and sessions were the key performance indicators to assess effectiveness on breadth and depth of awareness. The 12 New Economy Majors pages saw a year-over-year increase of 59 per cent in pageviews and new visitors who came to the RIT site as a result of the New Economy Majors initiative increased by 62 per cent. While direct attribution cannot be made at this time, there is a substantial degree of certainty that because of our packaging and promotion efforts, enrolment in the 12 unicorn programmes went up by an average of over 13 per cent versus the previous year.

LOOKING FORWARD: THE FUTURE OF THE CATEGORY

As these impressive results started to come in, a conversation quickly began among RIT leadership considering a potential ‘evolution’ for our New Economy Majors. As a result, we are moving in the direction to elevate our positioning so that RIT becomes the New Economy University or the University for the New Economy.

Rationale for considering a move in this direction relates in part to the continued dramatic changes that have been

exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Gen Z audience that provides its own unique perspective on the situation.

- *COVID-19*: The pandemic accelerated a trend we have all seen: the desire and need for students (and their worried parents) to exit college ‘job-ready’. As noted in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, COVID-19 is reshaping the future of work, creating an opportunity for colleges and universities that can build (or already have) the curricular and co-curricular profile to meet the also-evolving needs of Gen Z students.¹⁰ For example, universities (like RIT) with an extensive history of cooperative education (co-op) would have an edge by providing meaningful work experience while still in college;
- *Gen Z*: At the same time, it is equally clear that Gen Z students still want more than ‘just’ a job. Yes, they want a job. Yes, they want a career. And they also want to improve the world. Gen Zers firmly believe they can do both: they do not have to sacrifice their hopes and dreams while fully understanding that jobs, incomes and security are crucial steps to achieving these higher-level goals. According to a report by the branding and marketing agency Ologie, Gen Zers want what they do to mean something and are confident they will be the ‘generation to change our world — for Good’ — in both senses of the word.¹¹

With the above as backdrop, it has become clear that RIT’s role can and should be much larger than offering a small suite of programmes meeting the needs of the New Economy. Rather, the university *itself* is geared for the New

Economy. A New Economy University should include elements such as:

- A creativity and innovation mindset, providing the ability to think differently, anticipate change and flex to adjust to it;
- Operating in a space at the intersection of technology, the arts and design, linking to areas at the forefront of future jobs and skill sets;
- Strong co-op and internship experiences to prepare students for the real world *in* the real world;
- Consistently first to market with new programmes that anticipate trends and marketplace and technological evolution;
- Embedded entrepreneurial spirit and attitude that rewards exploration and iteration.

As noted earlier, however, the risk with this strategy is the potential dilution of the current focus on New Economy Majors. Our goal is to ‘thread the needle’ — to take advantage of the clear opportunity while still emphasising a subset of our 250+ programmes as particularly relevant to this space. We believe we can accomplish this task, whether by putting a highlight or spotlight on certain programmes, or some other promotional mechanism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, if done well, developing a category of programmes can be an effective and efficient way to shine a light on both the programmes within a category and the institution as a whole.

For higher education in particular, packaging and promoting a product category can help combat the realities — or, at least, alleviate the negative effects

— of limited budgets and rising costs in an increasingly competitive landscape. In RIT’s case, we have proven that by creating a compelling category, success can be achieved. This is especially true when there is alignment with and integration between:

- Marketing and communications, enrolment management and colleges;
- Marketplace needs and product offerings;
- Emotional and rational positioning attributes;
- All sides of the integrated marketing and communications machinery.

It is also a reminder that these types of effort are not ‘one and done’. Evolving with the times, while ensuring the strategic underpinning stays constant, is a fundamental takeaway for higher education institutions for which brand building and awareness can take significant time and investment. As long as there is a solid brand foundation that can stand the test of time, there is always a playground to accommodate flexibility and fluidity to stay relevant and adapt to any changes — even those such as a once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge gratefully the collaboration, contributions and counsel of the following people at RIT: Ellen Granberg, Provost and Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs; Ian Mortimer, Vice President, Enrollment Management and Associate Provost for Adult and Online Education; Bob Finnerty, Associate Vice President of Communications; Jeff Arbegast, Senior Associate Director and Head of Design; Brian Wetherby, Assistant

Director, Brand Marketing/Multimedia Writer.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- (1) Ologie (June 2018) 'Brand Architecture: Identity, Lock-up, and Icon Style Exploration', Presentation to RIT Senior Leadership.
- (2) At RIT, we shape the future and improve the world through creativity and innovation. As an engaged, intellectually curious, and socially conscious community, we leverage the power of technology, the arts and design for the greater good.
- (3) Zucker, B. (November 2021) 'Perspectives on Market Geography and Market Cultivation', Human Capital Research Corporation (HCRC).
- (4) World Economic Forum (January 2020) 'Future of Jobs Report – Jobs of Tomorrow: Mapping Opportunity in the New Economy', available at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/jobs-of-tomorrow-mapping-opportunity-in-the-new-economy> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (5) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (May 2020) 'Occupational Outlook Handbook', available at: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (6) Blanchette, R. (June 2017) 'Why Eccentric Colleges and University Program Names Can Hinder Organic Traffic', Carnegie Higher Ed, available at: <https://www.carnegiehighered.com/blog/why-eccentric-college-and-university-program-names-can-hinder-organic-traffic/> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (7) Heisey, G. (2015) 'Nine Naming Categories to Help You Find the Right Company Name', Brand Door, available at: <http://branddoor.com/product-name/seven-company-name-categories/> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (8) Child, L. (September 2012) 'Managing Integration: The Route to Integration', Admap, available at: <https://www.warc.com/content/paywall/article/managing-integration-the-route-to-integration/en-GB/97800> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (9) Keller (July 2016) 'Unlocking the Power of Integrated Marketing Communications: How Integrated is Your IMC Program?', *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 286–301.
- (10) Sellingo, J. (July 2021) 'The Future of Gen Z: How Covid-19 Will Shape Students and Higher Education for the Next Decade', The Chronicle of Higher Education, available at: <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Chronicle%20of%20Higher%20Ed.%20-The%20Future%20of%20Gen%20Z.pdf> (accessed 14th January, 2022).
- (11) Ologie (June 2020) 'This is Gen Z', Presentation to RIT M&C and Enrollment Management.