

Rebranding the DMBA - Selling an Educational Innovation

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Executive Summary

The current environment of the digital media industry has created a demand for professionals with a deep understanding of business issues and trends within this industry. In reaction to this, St. Edward's University created a Master of Business Administration in Digital Media Management in 2005. This program was the first of its kind in the world, and despite its status as an academic innovator, it has achieved relatively little recognition, both academically and within the related industries. This lack of brand awareness is creating a potentially detrimental situation for a product and service that are increasingly in demand. Through a study of the existing brand characteristics and value, this paper will offer targeted recommendations to guide the university's future marketing and branding efforts for this program

Keywords: St. Edward's University, Digital Media Management, branding solutions, higher education marketing, digital marketing, MBA,

Introduction

In the fall of 2005, Saint Edward's University introduced an innovative and state of the art program into the school's graduate course catalog. This program is the Master of Business Administration in Digital Media Management. The program is a highly recommended, accredited program that gives students insight into the world behind the film, music, gaming, television, and interactive media while gaining a strong foundation in traditional business school concepts.

While the program itself is of great necessity within the digital media industry, the communication, marketing, and promotion of the program is quite lacking. The firm of JTTSB Marketing has been asked by the administration of St. Edward's University to aid in a rebrand of the Digital Media Management MBA program in order to enhance its presence in the digital media industry. JTTSB Marketing has created three proposals for innovative ways to spread the word about the MBA in Digital Media Management.

Brand Situation

The Digital Media Management MBA program was launched in the fall of 2005 by Russell Rains, J.D. Mr. Rains has nearly twenty years of experience as a civil law attorney whose focus was on entertainment law, trademark, copyright and securities arbitration. He also has experience as an adjunct law professor at St. Mary's Law School and as a guest lecturer at the University of Texas. He originally began teaching Business Law and E-Commerce classes at St. Edward's University in 2003. Based on his knowledge and experience of the entertainment industry, Mr. Rains saw a need to provide a business education for individuals interested in this field. He wanted to establish a place where students could learn traditional business school concepts and gain a better understanding of the music, film, video game, and interactive media industries.

The Digital Media MBA program has now entered into its sixth year with an average of 23 students in each class, a number that has increased from the original ten-member class. A unique characteristic of the program is the cohort structure; the students continue to study and learn with the same group of individuals throughout their time in the program. Each fall a new cohort begins classes and will graduate in the spring two years following enrollment in accordance with a strict two-year curriculum. This system allows students to connect, share

thoughts, and work on projects in an intimate way that many students may never experience in larger, generalized programs offered throughout the country.

The current marketing efforts related to the program are very limited. Although, St. Edward's University was the first school to offer an MBA with a digital media management focus, little was done to publicize the course. The first issue we recognized is that there is no unified name used for the program, either at the administrative or student levels. Some argue that the official full name (MBA in Digital Media Management) is redundant or too wordy, and many students cannot seem to find an effective way to introduce the program to friends or family. Another issue is that with every product or brand, there is generally a known symbol or logo defining the brand. However, the digital media MBA program has at least three known logos that have been used interchangeably in the past five years. An inconsistent logo is a guaranteed way to create brand confusion related to a product.

Additionally, there is no obvious national presence of the program. This issue is mainly because the program has little to no web presence. The program can be found specifically on the St. Edward's University graduate program page, but when performing a Google search for Digital Media graduate programs, St. Edward's university is nowhere to be found. Our research found that at least three different articles have been written on the need and interest in the Digital Media programs. Each of these articles suggested fifteen or more schools offering such programs, but St. Edward's University was not included in any of these lists. This is astonishing considering the Digital Media Management program at St. Edward's University was the first of its kind. The university should be the first college listed in articles of this nature.

An interesting fact relating to the online presence issue is that there are students worldwide applying for this program and yet there no national presence for this particular program, much less a global one. So, this raises the question of how these prospective students are finding the Digital Media Management program. The students must have a specific idea of what they are looking for and search for those ideas and words. This demonstrates that there is a focused channel of individuals passionate about the benefits of the program. However, there are others who might have less focused goals and are looking for an interesting and innovative MBA program. This is the type of individual that the program should actively seek out if it is to continue growing in quality and diversity.

Currently, the DMBA program is sustained by the already existing strong interest in the

digital media industry. As stated before, there is currently an average of 23 students admitted each year, however many are wait-listed or rejected outright. The most influential path the brand is utilizing to gain external recognition is by key faculty and staff presenting guest lectures and speeches around the nation as well as in some foreign countries. These discussions are focused on the digital media environment as a whole or about the program and what it offers to the industry and students. The Assistant Director of Admissions, Kay Arnold, attends conferences and lectures concerning higher education and about the program specifically. Another initiative that Ms. Arnold continues to pursue is the placement of the program and brand within the annual South by Southwest (SXSW) music, film, and technology conference. Ms. Arnold ensures that the program has a booth available at SXSW and then personally staffs the table to promote and distribute information about the program to potential students and industry professionals.

Proposed Solutions

We have developed three suggested paths for the DMBA program's marketing and branding efforts. These three targeted brand awareness campaigns focus on the three major audiences for the program -- academic, business, and creative/technical.

Business Focused Campaign

The second possible solution that our company is proposing for the Digital Media MBA program's marketing and branding needs is focused on improving its standing within the digital media business community. The goal of this campaign is to make the St. Edward's Digital Media MBA program widely known and respected within music, film, video game, and interactive marketing industry circles. In particular, this campaign aims to improve awareness about the program at large digital media companies. These companies are struggling to adapt their operations for the digital age and they should view the graduates of the program as being uniquely qualified to help them make this transition successfully.

Basic Steps. Similar to the first proposed solution, this campaign will require some foundational work on the basics of the Digital Media MBA brand. First, we will create a new, high quality, and consistent set of branding elements for the Digital Media MBA program. These will include a new logo, designed with the concept of business prominence in mind. Also, we

propose the adoption of a new tagline: “Training tomorrow’s digital media leaders.” In addition, we recommend that the name of the program consistently be referred to as “MBA in Digital Media Management,” since this emphasizes the management aspect of the degree that would be so essential at a large organization.

Next, we believe that this campaign should strive to impart certain brand associations on the Digital Media MBA program. Specifically, the brand associations should be “business savvy, strategic vision, cutting edge technology, career focus, and success.” These brand associations should especially resonate with the hiring managers at large digital media companies and ensure that graduates enjoy a high level of career success. Please note that these words will not necessarily appear in list form in the marketing materials, but they should be carefully considered when writing promotional copy for the program and when choosing imagery to represent it.

Another concrete step the Digital Media MBA program can take to improve its stature in the digital media business community is to encourage students and professors to speak at industry conferences, such as NAB, SXSW Music/Film, and the annual Digital Media Conference. This will effectively create greater awareness among attendees at these conferences, as well as give the students a reputation as wise consultants on digital business issues. Also, the Digital Media MBA program could form partnerships with local digital media companies, allowing employees at these firms to attend DMBA classes at night while continuing to work.

Digital Efforts. In addition to these basic branding strategies, there are also a number of specifically digital branding strategies that the DMBA program should pursue in conjunction with this business-focused campaign. First, the program should place ads on the websites of industry trade publications and specialized blogs, such as Digital Media Wire, Hypebot, Billboard, Hollywood Reporter, and Gamasutra.

Secondly, St. Edward’s should create a new website specifically for the Digital Media MBA program containing info about career successes of former students, particularly those in prominent digital media business positions. Also, this website should contain a centralized job board for business-focused digital media positions nationwide, in order to draw visitors from across the industry, and increase awareness of the program.

In addition, the program should invite guest speakers from prominent digital media companies to appear at St. Edward's. The university should record audio and video of these presentations and post it online (both on YouTube and on the main Digital Media MBA site). Then, representatives from the DMBA program should publicize this content on industry-specific blogs, thus drawing more visitors to the site and reinforcing the brand associations of "business savvy, strategic vision, cutting edge technology, and success."

Finally, the program should maintain a database of former students that is available (by log-in only) on the Digital Media MBA website. This would help DMBA students to better network with one another, thus encouraging greater business success. Also, it would provide graduates with a reason to continue interacting with the Digital Media MBA brand over time, reinforce their perception of the program as "career focused," and increase the likelihood of positive word-of-mouth from these former students.

Benefits. There are a number of clear benefits that would result from this proposed business-focused campaign. First, the Digital Media MBA program will likely experience an increased number of applicants with significant business or executive experience. Also, graduates could expect to receive more and higher quality job opportunities at large companies in established industry circles. Finally, the Digital Media MBA program would potentially receive more funding from industry sources, due to closer partnerships with large companies.

Drawbacks. However, there are also a number of drawbacks that may occur as a consequence of this proposed campaign. First, it may create a public perception that the Digital Media MBA program is too cozy with industry, and lacking a community-focused or academic component. Second, the program may receive fewer applicants who are interested in unconventional career paths, such as nonprofits or the arts. Also, the Digital Media MBA program may become less diverse, in terms of the age range of the students, skewing more toward older students. Finally, the program may lose its current focus on the future direction of the digital media industries, due to increased attention to current business realities.

Creative/Tech Campaign

The third possible solution that we are proposing for marketing and branding the Digital Media MBA program is focused on improving awareness of the program within the creative and tech communities. In particular, this campaign aims to enhance the reputation of the program among amateur or professional musicians, filmmakers, video game developers, graphic designers, marketers, and others in “creative technology” fields. This campaign recognizes that the majority of applicants currently in the Digital Media MBA program come from these fields. Also, it acknowledges that the creative/tech aspect of the Digital Media MBA program is perhaps its most unique identifying trait, and is therefore a natural candidate to form the core of its brand message.

Basic Steps. In keeping with our aforementioned proposed solutions, this campaign will also require some basic branding steps before discussing the digital branding initiatives. First, we will create a new, high quality, and consistent set of branding elements for the Digital Media MBA program. These will include a new logo, designed to highlight the concepts of creativity and technology. Also, we propose the adoption of a new tagline: “Unleash your digital creativity.” Lastly, we recommend that the name of the program be officially changed to “Digital Media MBA ” rather than the current “MBA in Digital Media Management.” The rationale behind this suggestion is that “Digital Media MBA ” is more catchy and is generally how students and the public refer to the program already.

We also recommend that this campaign attempt to communicate a particular set of brand associations. These brand associations should include “innovation, creativity, individuality, Austin, and creative/tech convergence.” Please note, we believe the inclusion of “Austin” as a brand association is logical, due to the strong existing association of the city with music, film, and technology. Taken as a whole, these brand associations should strongly resonate with creative individuals who are interested in gaining more business skills, but turned off by traditional MBA programs. As previously mentioned, these words will not necessarily appear in list form in the marketing materials, but they should be taken into consideration when developing promotional materials, both written and visual.

The final basic marketing/branding step we recommend as part of this campaign is for the Digital Media MBA program to form a close partnership with SXSW. This annual event is an

excellent opportunity to reinforce the brand associations of “innovation, creativity, and technology”, due to the strong focus of SXSW on film, music, and the internet. Therefore, we recommend the Digital Media MBA program undertake an experiential marketing initiative during the festival, for example holding a party with tables set up to show off St. Edward’s brochures and other materials. This will clearly help increase brand awareness of the Digital Media MBA program among an audience that will likely have a strong interest in its unique offering.

Digital Efforts. Due to the creative technology focus of this solution, the digital aspects of the campaign are essential to its success. First, we recommend that St. Edward’s create a new website specifically for the Digital Media MBA program. This website should emphasize the diversity of students in the program, the wide range of topics covered, and the unique take on business issues. Also, the website should include a blog where creative projects of current and former students are posted and discussed.

In addition, the Digital Media MBA program should increase its presence on social media sites, such as Twitter and Facebook. However, the program should not simply post bland updates about happenings within the program. Instead, the DMBA social media accounts should post engaging links, news, and information about digital media issues. The goal is to make these accounts a trusted source of news and information about digital media and create content that drives a discussion among current and former students, as well as creative types and techies. This will result in more discovery of the Digital Media MBA program through positive word-of-mouth.

Another form of engaging content that the Digital Media MBA program could utilize is video recordings of class and guest lectures. Therefore, they should invite more guest speakers from local creative fields and tech startups to do presentations about digital media business issues. These recordings could be posted online and used as another method to inspire conversation and increase public awareness of the Digital Media MBA program.

Benefits. There are several benefits that would flow from this proposed creative/tech campaign. First, the Digital Media MBA program would receive more applications from students with an interest in creative fields, such as music, film, video games, and advertising.

Since most of the current students already have this background, rather than a traditional business perspective, this would essentially reinforce an existing trend. This would also potentially result in more students who are open to unconventional ways of approaching business problems, and therefore possibly more adaptable to future trends.

In addition, the concepts of creative industries and technological innovation closely align with the stated strategic goals of the City of Austin. The city intends to promote these industries in order to generate economic growth and prosperity. Therefore, having the Digital Media MBA program embrace these concepts as core brand associations may result in more financial support from city government. Finally, and most importantly, emphasizing the characteristics of “creativity, innovation, and technology” will help to further cement the existing brand identity of the Digital Media MBA program as being an unconventional take on a business degree.

Drawbacks. Unfortunately, there are also several potential drawbacks associated with this proposed campaign. First, the emphasis on unconventional traits may result in fewer applicants with corporate or executive experience or ambitions. Also, graduates may be faced with potentially less lucrative jobs directly out of school, due to a focus on creative fields, resulting in smaller alumni charitable gifts to St. Edward’s. Finally, implementing the social media marketing activity described above may require hiring additional personnel. However, we believe this may be a good internship opportunity for current students or a first job for recent graduates.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that the St. Edward’s Digital Media MBA program is highly innovative, in demand, and successful. However, despite its many strengths, the program currently lacks a cohesive branding and marketing strategy to ensure continued growth and success. Therefore, we recommend three possible solutions to address this problem. One solution features a strong focus on academic excellence. The next solution is primarily concerned with business and career issues. The third and final solution suggests emphasizes the creative and technological aspects of the degree program.

Out of these three options, JTSB Marketing recommends that St. Edward’s utilize the third solution. As discussed above, we believe this approach is most compatible with the

existing nature of the program. Most current Digital Media MBA students already have a strong affinity for creative fields, and wish to pursue unconventional career paths within these industries. A hybrid focus on technology and creativity represents the most important characteristic that defines the Digital Media MBA as being unique among all other MBA programs. In addition, these traits are strongly compatible with the city of Austin and with the annual SXSW festival and conference that takes place every year in the city. Finally, this solution utilizes social media in order to generate positive word-of-mouth rather than relying on traditional advertising that may be less effective with young audiences. Therefore, we believe this campaign holds the best potential to clearly define and strengthen the brand of the Digital Media MBA program and ensure its continued success for many years to come.