



## Brock offers a lesson in boldness

University promotes a 'whole-brain approach' to education with arresting ad campaign



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It's a funny thing.

Here we are at the height of the university recruitment season – the anxiety! the excitement! – in which the nation's post-secondary institutions aim to lure the best and the brightest students in the land.

You would think that universities would be hard at work marketing themselves. And they are – if you count that sea of glossy brochures featuring shiny-faced young people and ivy-covered buildings.

"The Americans call it 'Three and a Tree,'" says Richard Fisher, chief marketing officer at York University, by which he means the improbable grouping of three students standing under a tree, grinning their heads off.

The trouble with such bumpf is that it doesn't actually mean anything. "Essentially, what they're saying is our education is about students and buildings," Mr. Fisher adds. "Well, we all have students and buildings, so what's next?"

Mr. Fisher spent 20 or so years in ad land – he left TBWA\Chiat\Day Toronto seven years ago – so he brings the relevant bona fides to the conversation. Here's what he sees: "The fact is that universities haven't gotten to grips yet with what brand advertising means." What universities do is market programs – business, engineering. What they commonly fail to do is differentiate themselves.

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Brock University president Jack Lightstone.

It's true. I'm looking through a deck of advertisements sent to me by Noel O'Dea, the president of Target Marketing & Communications Inc. in St. John's. Given Mr. O'Dea's fondness for the phrase "differentiate or die," you can imagine that he doesn't think much of what's out there. (Interestingly, an ad for York is a rare standout in the group.)

Barbie and Ken dolls. Wedding cake couples. There are many derisive descriptors Mr. O'Dea offers up when evoking the not-quite-real



pretty people who populate the ad offerings. And the slogans: "Eighty per cent of them sound like they came from the same vocabulary pool," he says. "Cover the banner and ask, 'Who's this for?' The ads are indistinguishable."

Mr. O'Dea hasn't pulled together the campaign evidence just for fun. Last fall he got an out-of-the-blue call from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. Brock, with 17,000 full-time students, was having not quite an identity crisis. Let's call it an identity moment: how to stand out in the higher-education marketplace. In order to do that, Brock needed to better understand its own DNA – and how that DNA was being perceived by prospective students and faculty.

In the view of president Jack Lightstone, Brock had become an institution of unrelated identities. "We decided that a branding exercise was absolutely critical to the future of the institution," he says. First it turned to Educational Marketing Group, Inc., a Colorado-based marketing firm. "They had town hall meetings and focus groups and one-on-one interviews with almost 700 faculty, staff and alumni," he says. "The good news was that students, faculty and staff interviewed understood our brand. They valued it.... The bad news was that outside of that group, people didn't understand our brand."

So the university tapped Target. "We were perfect in one sense in that we didn't know anything about



**Brock University's ad campaign uses the faces of students Lisa Neville and Rohan Kothari (top) to emphasize the school's holistic approach to education.**

them," says Mr. O'Dea. Target had never undertaken a university campaign before, and Mr. O'Dea still seems slightly shell-shocked from rediscovering that universities are "tangles of complexity" with numerous interest groups busily erecting seemingly impenetrable silos.

Nevertheless, the ad agency and the university found a match. Mr. O'Dea decries the trend to vast auditoriums stuffed with under graduates. ("Whatever happened to sitting around the feet of a learned professor?" he asks. Or at least meeting one's professor once in a semester.) Brock champions smaller class sizes and – this is key – a whole brain approach to the students.

By that, Mr. Lightstone means a student's social awareness, emotional development, connection to the

community – artistic development, too. "I think what will distinguish Brock in this exercise is the notion of reaching beyond boundaries," he says. Here's an example: Brock is involved in the economic development strategy for the region around St. Catharines. "We are wholly involved in the development of the communities around us, economically, socially and culturally."

If you can break out of disciplinary boundaries – and interact across them – it's just a short leap from there to saying, "Now you must be involved in the world," he says.

In what is one of the most arresting university campaigns to come along in a very long while, Target created a bold look that explores a whole brain examination of students, faculty and alumni. And so we meet Rohan Kothari, majoring in biological sciences but working on mastering the sax, and MSc candidate Lisa Neville, a licensed gliding instructor who lauds Brock's dual major course offering (Earth sciences and biology). Each image is bifurcated: an oil painting substitutes for half of Mr. Kothari's face; an eagle for half of Ms. Neville's.

"I think the power of the brand expression in the marketplace is making sure it's instantly recognizable," says Jack Lightstone, who finds the images not only distinctive but "hauntingly beautiful."

Target's work for Brock may be the most distinctive campaign launched by a Canadian University since York unveiled its award-winning branding initiative five years ago. Created by the doug agency, that campaign, which still anchors York's marketing work, plays on the idea of exploring one topic from more than one angle. Example: a damaged student locker has the word "Loser" spray painted upon it. "A physicist sees applied force. An educator sees systemic failure. A psychologist sees acute suffering." (That campaign was awarded the gold medal for best university advertising in North America by the U.S.-based Council for Advancement and Support of Education.)

There is an obvious end goal to all of this. "What we want to do is increase and improve the pool [of students] from which we are choosing," says Brock's Jack Lightstone. The success of the campaign will therefore be measurable year over year. (York, having emerged from an acrimonious strike, has seen applications drop by 10 per cent this year.) "It's not that Brock didn't know what it was doing," says Mr. Lightstone. "It's that we never systematically attempted to cast that out into the world beyond us."

**Target**