

## THE PROMISED BRAND

The Foster School of Business articulates its essence, 90 years in the making

Type “brand, definition” into Google and you’ll get about 1.7 million hits. A brand is a logo, a brand is an experience, a symbol, a product, a concept, an asset and a design. The multitude of perspectives on branding does not make it a very approachable topic. And yet, given the naming gift for the business school, the dean’s vision for achievement, the ongoing addition of top faculty members and the imminent groundbreaking for world-class facilities—we *definitely* need to be talking about the brand of the Michael G. Foster School of Business.

Fortunately, we’ve got marketing faculty who’ve been integral in our approach to branding Foster. We also engaged with local brand experts, Parker LePla, who have helped the likes of Apple, HP, Starbucks, Fred Hutchinson and the City of Seattle with brand management and strategy. The branding effort has involved a half year’s work: analyzing results from nearly 800 brand surveys, working with an internal team to distill a set of brand guidelines and then testing them in scenarios across the breadth of the business school.

And yet the zillion ways to define “brand” persist. So let’s begin with our definition of what a brand is, and what we should expect it to do for the Foster School of Business.

Stripped of all marketing jargon, a brand is the promise you keep. Expanding on that, “It’s the outward face of an organization’s strategy, and it’s driven by consistent actions and communications from the internal stakeholders,” says Mark Forehand, associate professor of marketing at the Foster School. He points out that while many organizations “chase their tails trying to land on the right differentiator du jour,” a brand should really embody something you can own. It’s not about having the right buzzword at the right time, but focusing on your unique strengths and approach to your market.”

Consider Volvo. You probably associate their brand with safety—despite the market presence of numerous safe car manufacturers and ubiquity of safety in auto industry marketing. But for Volvo, a promise kept means adding safety features before they’re mandated (e.g. seatbelts), excellent safety records in its factories and eliciting hundreds of customers to share their stories via the ‘Volvo Saved My Life Club.’ They promise safety, and so they own safety internally and *then* they tell their story externally. You can’t build outside of your walls what you don’t own inside them.

So what is the Foster School of Business trying to own? Dean Jim Jiambalvo has clearly articulated his vision for the school, and that is to become the best public business school in the nation. Further, his work to define the strategy for attaining the top spot has led to a focus on three areas: leadership, strategic thinking and leveraging Seattle.

Combine the dean’s vision and strategy with an intensive round of brand research, discussions across a diverse brand team and a competitive assessment, and you have all the ingredients necessary to formulate the Foster brand promise:

*We develop leaders who think differently and make a difference.*

Is our business school the only one focused on leadership? Certainly not. Is the focus on strategic thinking to produce new answers to age-old questions our sole domain? Not by any stretch. But our commitment to this

promise will chart the course toward long-term differentiation. The brand promise works like a compass, guiding decisions and communications, helping us decide what to focus on and what to de-emphasize.


It’s important to realize that while the work to better manage the school’s brand is recent, the elements of the business school brand were set in motion with its founding more than 90 years ago. Strong brands do not exist as overlays to what is really happening at an organization, but exist at the core of what an organization stands for. Similarly, a well conceived brand process does not create a brand, but refines it. “The idea,” explains Forehand, “is to be able to clearly articulate your brand so that you can be deliberate about managing it over time.”

Not surprisingly, a brand cannot live in a vacuum. Part of brand management involves looking at the ways your brand interacts with internal and external audiences—and that includes the competition. The trick is not to steer the ship haphazardly by reacting to other brand messages in the market, veering around each one until you’ve completely lost your course. Back to our example: when Volvo sees a host of advertisements from other auto makers touting the safety of their vehicles, this isn’t cause for Volvo to stop owning safety as their brand promise. If anything, it’s a call to recommit to this promise by making sure the brand is aligned throughout the organization.

As part of the recent brand work, the Foster School of Business has a positioning statement that encapsulates the brand promise and brand attributes that make our school stand out. It’s a bit of a mouthful, but it’s not meant to be used verbatim, but rather to capture the spirit of the brand. It goes like this:

*One of the nation’s great business schools, the Michael G. Foster School of Business is recognized for alumni who roll up their sleeves and solve complex, unstructured real-world problems. Leveraging Seattle’s dynamic business community, we foster a learning environment with a unique blend of competition and collaboration. Bringing together the highest-caliber faculty, innovative business people, and a diverse student body, we develop leaders who think differently and make a difference.*

In the years to come, we’ll be referring to this statement and holding it up as a benchmark to make sure we’re living our brand and keeping our promise. It’s going to be an exciting journey, not least because the path we’re taking is to the top.



PAMELA McCOY  
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### LIVING THE BRAND?

Every day, in many ways, alumni of the Foster School are thinking differently and making a difference. We’d love to hear the ways that you or someone you know is living the Foster brand.

To share your story, go to [www.foster.washington.edu/stories/](http://www.foster.washington.edu/stories/)