

What's Your Learning Brand?

Building a brand creates visibility and helps differentiate your offering • BY PEARL SUMATHI



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All contributors to Perspectives are current students or alumni of the University of Pennsylvania's executive doctoral program for senior-level talent and learning executives.

The learning community, and learning leaders in particular, have long been interested in the idea of branding the learning function.

As a learning practitioner, I have grappled to determine what a learning brand is. A review of common literature suggests this concept has only been loosely defined at best, and there is little available to actually help build it or the features that differentiate the learning function and its initiatives from competitors.

The Corporate Learning Factbook 2014 by Bersin by Deloitte concludes that corporations are investing more in employee development, and training budgets increased by roughly 15 percent on average in 2013. Therefore, there is an increasing focus on the learning function and the complex role it is expected to play within organizations.

This places more responsibility on learning leaders to differentiate their contributions and to deploy focused efforts to increase visibility of the learning function. Building a brand is arguably the most significant strategy learning leaders can undertake to differentiate offerings, create visibility and meet ever-increasing business challenges.

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My doctoral research study, "Branding the Learning Function," considered how a brand is built as well as what constitutes a learning brand. This study was done in a leading technology firm and interviewed about 24 different stakeholders in learning functions, beginning with the learning staff and including employees, business and line leaders, and HR staff.

While logos, tag lines and websites no doubt help to promote the learning function, the following components also played an integral role in building the learning brand. Though this was a single case study, it revealed some important findings that have implications for corporate learning functions seeking to understand and build their learning brands. For instance:

Specific programs do not build the learning brand. Though this technology firm had some flagship programs, stakeholders' experience with learning was not dependent on a particular program, but rather reflected the learning cycle as a whole. This eliminated the notion that a set of well-regarded programs for one segment of the organization can influence the way the rest of the organization perceives learning.

No specific part of the learning cycle influences the learning brand. Study data showed the entire life cycle of learning and development played a fundamental role in creating the brand experience, beginning from needs analysis and program design, development, execution, classroom experience and follow-up post training. Therefore, each of these components required careful consideration and attention as they all affected and shaped the learning function.

Leadership involvement is a factor in branding. Leaders play a critical role in a company's learning process. Data showed that programs that had more leadership involvement were rated more highly compared to other programs that had less leadership presence. Finding ways to frequently collaborate with senior leadership can help enhance the learning experience for all employees.

Learning culture also influences branding. How an organization drives learning, and the importance it places on the ongoing learning and career development of its employees, influences the perception of the learning brand among the workforce. Creating and perpetuating a culture that values learning requires great commitment to the effort and persistence over time. This effort must also align with the organization's values and traditions. But when such a culture exists, it does seem to play a significant role in branding efforts.

Though learning practitioners are aware of the benefits of branding learning, they lack conceptual clarity and information on how to formally approach and go about building these brands.

These research findings demonstrate that while there is no single solution, the combination of these four elements can affect an organization's learning brand. This study takes us one step forward in understanding the learning brand and potentially forms the genesis of an important agenda for the learning function: to create a compelling value proposition and visibility for learning. [CLO](#)