

Image 101 now in session

By Holly M. Hacker

Nike has the swoosh and "Just do it."

McDonald's has the Golden Arches and "I'm lovin' it." And now the University of North Texas has a brighter shade of green and the slogan "Discover the power of ideas."

The new color and catch phrase are part of a "branding campaign" the Denton campus launched last week with all the hoopla of a pep rally. Trumpeters played and cheerleaders sashayed as a sliding panel in the student union opened, revealing new logos and slogans to a crowd of about 1,000.

UNT is the latest example of how marketing is no longer just a major on college campuses. It's a whole approach to building a university's image in hopes of wooing talented students, top-notch faculty and big donations and grants. "A brand is how you are really perceived. It's tied to your reputation so when someone sees or hears your name it evokes an image," said Rae Goldsmith, vice president for communications and marketing at the Council for Advancement and Support of Education in Washington, D.C.

If this all sounds very corporate, well, it is. Universities are discovering' what big companies have known for years: To sell a product, you need to stand out from everyone else. You need an identity, a story to tell. A brand. "We hope UNT's updated brand will unite all members of the university family with a common purpose and identity, while it sets us apart from our competitors," said Deborah Leijaert, vice president for university relations.

Universities have promoted themselves for a long time, really. Prospective students receive glossy viewbooks from the admissions office. Colleges design seals and logos that go on letterhead and diplomas and sweatshirts. But college leaders didn't call it marketing. That was something for toothpaste or cars, not hallowed institutions of higher learning. "It's not until probably the past 10 years it's come out and people have been talking about it as something that brings benefits back to the institution if it's done strategically and well," Ms. Goldsmith said.

So what changed? In a word, competition. Universities and colleges have seen state and other financial support dwindle. Prospective donors have lots of choices about where to give money. Obsessed with moving up in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings, colleges all want to attract the best students and most dollars. "I think we're just in a new day and age where we can't sit back and expect our customers to come to us," said Darcie Champagne, director of marketing at the University of Houston, which is wrapping up a five-year, \$5 million image campaign. "There's competition just like there is in any business."

No one's calculated just how much universities are spending each year on branding programs, or how many are doing it. But there are enough out there — public and private, four-year and two-year — that the practice has spawned contests, conferences and plenty of consultants. The American Marketing Association sponsors an annual "Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education." CASE gives awards to universities for the best branding programs.

Close to home, Texas Christian University has worked for more than five years to make sure that "we consistently brand ourselves with our various audiences," said Tracy Syler-Jones, director of communications. That includes using the same logo and color of purple on everything from its Web site to billboards to brochures. "We want to make sure they know it's us," she said.

The Dallas County Community College District is spending \$1.3 million on a campaign that includes ads for radio, TV and even DART trains. District leaders want would-be students to know that not only are the colleges affordable and close to home, but they also have qualified faculty members and successful students, as spokeswoman Ann Hatch explained. "A lot of times people tend to identify with their four-year institution and not the two-year institution they started with," she said. "We're trying to change that."

How well these programs work is open to debate. Surveys done in relation to the University of Houston's campaign found that the campus became more recognizable to business leaders, prospective students and others. But in the *U.S. News* rankings, for what they're worth, UH held steady as a fourth-tier national school. Such campaigns are "a giant waste of money," said James Twitchell, a University of Florida professor and author of *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Mega-church, College Inc., and Museum-world*.

Dr. Twitchell said the situation has turned into an academic arms race, with every university trying to one-up the other in building an image and identity. "Now that everybody's doing it, there's no competitive advantage. ... It's a zero-sum game." And he predicts we'll see a lot more of it before we see less.

Experts say that branding isn't just about fancy logos and memorable slogans — there has to be substance behind the flash. If you're going to say you have great faculty, you'd better have great faculty. UNT officials say the branding campaign is tied to a new academic plan to make their campus a national research university. As for UNT's current consumers — the students — some say the fresh logo, eagle mascot and sayings are exciting. Others aren't quite sure what to make of all the hype.

Junior John Proft, a music major, said: "It's weird, because our education should be the selling point."

