A Branding-Tool for Japanese University English Language Programs

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Introduction

    This paper is divided into two parts. In Part 1, I will discuss some basic ideas from marketing and branding. Then in Part 2, I will provide a conceptual overview of an English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) resource website based on content-based instructional (CBI) methods. This paper is relevant to educational marketing administrators, second language instructors, web developers, media production specialists, and publishers or anyone involved in the language education industry and its peripheral industries. This might seem like a broad target audience, but what I hope to communicate through this modest paper is that those in the educational field need to seriously consider the fact that educational institutions operate on a business foundation, and to effectively tackle issues that involve the promotion and competitiveness of an organization, ideas from the above sectors need to be considered. Branding is not only about changing the color of a logo or changing locations. The re-branding of a university, a faculty, or a department takes large to small-scale changes / additions / transformations and other processes needed to adapt to the current market situation.

    Incidentally, I believe that this paper will indirectly inform and clarify how emerging technologies and trends in the "digital-visual-app / i-everything culture" can be woven into the educational setting; specifically, into EFL materials. As with all technologies and trends, the status quo is temporary; thus, in order to "future proof" or still be relevant in a couple of years, the concepts described in this paper are not meant to be set in stone. Unlike an obsolete personal computer, the concepts in this paper are meant to be shapeless, formless, malleable, and constantly open to modifications.

Part 1: Marketing and Brands 101

    "Design is everything." Adding to this notion by graphic designer, Paul Rand, marketing maverick, An-

drew Locke, says "Marketing is everything, and everything is marketing." If you are reading this paper, you are probably someone involved in the EFL industry in Japan and probably wondering how the two quotes above have anything to do with language education. "Everything," I say. Educational institutions are brand images, and brand images, just like Nike, Coca-Cola, Harvard University and all its enterprises — Harvard University Press, Harvard Business Review Magazine, Harvard Business School Press — emit the culture and personality of an organization. Personalities impact decisions just like a boring personality or bad breath will determine if a person gets a second chance or not.

Famed brand consultant, Wally Olins, poses several questions to organizations in search of image improvement:

"Does your organization have a clear brand architecture? If so, what is it? If it doesn't is there a good reason for the present state of affairs? What can you [those in the decision making process] do about it?" (Olins, 2008).

By answering these questions, organizations can better understand how they are viewed and / or how they *want to* be viewed by the public. Also, organizations need to realize what are obstacles that prevent its core beliefs to be expressed. Educational institutions need to project a healthy personality in order to be competitive. And these days, that's not even enough. In order to be competitive, educational institutions need to entice and offer prospective students what other schools can't. Of course, the issue of creating and maintaining a good image is a much more complex and intricate process than creating revamping the school logo or website; however, the principles behind the idea of "standing out from the crowd" is a marketing standard that is evident in our daily lives. As marketing guru, Seth Godin would argue, organizations, products, and services that aim to be competitive need something worth making a remark about; hence the term "remarkable." People don't usually describe ordinary / run-of-the-mill products and services as remarkable. People make remarks about things that are unique, unnatural, or just plain different.

Remarkable!

I feel sorry for Mr. Hosono, my local Nissan dealer. I've known him for roughly five years, and he still has not sold me a new car despite his consistent and professional service. Will he ever be able to sell me a car? Quite possibly because of several reasons: 1) I have owned my Nissan for approximately nine years. I have seen the engine compartment about three times (indicates how much I maintain my vehicle). I have had literally zero breakdowns since I first purchased it back in 2001. Am I am satisfied customer? Yes. Will I buy another Nissan? Yes. Will I buy it from Mr. Hosono? Yes, because he and my car have maintained a healthy experience in my mind. When I think of the brand "Nissan," I think of a good product; courteous staff; as well as strong leadership represented by Nissan CEO, Mr. Ghosn. Nissan created a positive brand image in my mind. My experience with the Nissan brand will certainly spread and potentially infect those around me.

What made me purchase Nissan in the first place? Nissan offered a type of vehicle which stood out (in my eyes) from the other car makers. It made me say things to myself that other cars weren't able to - "That car can get me to the ski slopes safely / comfortably / fashionably / affordably." For me, the car was "remarkable."

Shibuya University (SU) appeared on CNN news in 2007 because its founder, Yasuaki Sakyo, at the age of 28, created an educational network which made it distinct from mainstream educational institutions in Japan. The outstanding point of Shibuya University's educational principles run contrary to traditional methods, e.g. there are no entrance exams, and they foster an environment where everyone learns from each other — teachers can be students, and students can be teachers. In addition, there is no Shibuya University campus per se; classes are held in cafes, restaurants, record shops in the Shibuya district of Tokyo. These are just a few things that made Shibuya University worth remarking about.

Nagoya Bunri University (NBU) appeared on a number of Internet news sites because they did something which, more or less, was worth talking about. In the 2010 academic year, incoming students in the Department of Information and Media Studies program all received an iPad (Apple's new tablet device). Was this some kind of marketing ploy or was this strategy based on sound pedagogical theories? It didn't matter because the university made the news and received exposure. The percentage of how many good vs bad remarks were made about the iPad "presents" is difficult to gauge. Moreover, how much this news-making event will affect their image, future student intake, and revenue will depend on how consistent they can maintain their image as an institution with a "remarkable" program among other things.

University Lemons

Educational institutions, just like any large organization, operate somewhat like an automobile with many moving parts. If one of these parts become faulty, the whole thing will either not function effectively or be regarded as a "lemon" (in the United States, cars that are a piece of junk are often referred to this citrus fruit). Lemons (not the fruit) hurt car companies, just like "The Pinto" damaged the image of the Ford Corporation. For those who remember the famous (or infamous) Pinto, which, by the way, TIME Magazine labelled as "one of the 50 worst cars of all time," is now synonymous with junk. When we hear the brand "Pinto" we don't think of "Mercedes Benz" or "BMW." When someone says "Ford Pinto" we think of dangerously exposed gasoline tanks; we think of premature death by flames, and getting roasted because of a small fender bender isn't good for any brand image.

What do Pintos and German cars have to do with EFL in Japan, you might think? Brand image. I repeat: in order to attract students, the image of the institution must be healthy. The brand image of a school must project an idea or feeling that students want (or think they want) — not something they want to avoid like hot flames.

As universities in Japan struggle to deal with the shrinking population, the competition to attract students is already fierce. Open-door policies of accepting any student are becoming the norm, and getting "good students" is becoming more of a forgotten memory. The retreat of many universities in and around the Tokyo Metropolitan area back to the center of Tokyo is a signal of a return to the drawing board; a beginning of the brand revitalization process. Good. It's a healthy start; but the brand update should not stop there. Relocating to a trendy part of Tokyo is a huge boost for a school's image, but more work is needed in order to compete in the educational market. Unlike President Obama's foreign policy, consistent "change" is necessary in all parts of the organization including the departments and subdivisions; even the small fringes of an institution need a facelift.

For those who doubt how a tiny, seemingly irrelevant part can affect the whole, let us revisit a grossly embellished media spectacle in 2010. Unless you were living in a cave or shipwrecked like Mr. Crusoe that year, you probably remember the hoopla surrounding the iPhone 4's antennae design "flaw" (a.k.a Antennae-gate). The small gap (1mm in width) on the bottom strip / handle / antennae of the iPhone supposedly created dropped calls and other reception problems. This caused weeks of negative media publicity and Apple had to quickly shift to damage control mode. High-profile heads went rolling, and this put a dent in Apple's stock prices. Reports of people returning their iPhones were constantly making headline news (even if a small group of people actually did ask for a refund). The situation was not looking good for Steve Jobs and his illustrious industrial design team. This is the same team responsible for the highly visible iPod, iPad, and other Apple products.

Apple responded with various measures to erase the brand stains, including giving away free iPhone covers, and eventually the company made it through intact. As of this writing, the iPhone 4 is the most popular smartphone in the United States with 26.2% market share. Long story short — image is everything, and everything is image. Educational institutions also need to take care of their image.

I think I've already established that in order to get more students, one major factor educational institutions need to consider is the brand image and positive remarks are important. Let us now move on to Part 2 and how the above points relate to EFL materials development.

Part 2: Content-based EFL Materials

This second portion of the paper will now focus on two points: 1) encourage the integration of content-based instruction (CBI) methods in language programs as part of an EFL curriculum; 2) propose an online resource website dedicated to improving students' English and teaching additional skills for visual communication.

Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

CBI language methodologies and resources have been in foreign language instruction and are nothing new. Of course, there is variance in subject matter, course objectives, language assessment, etc. among EFL programs in Japanese universities, however, the one consistent element is that students are taught something; a subject in English, e.g., teaching EFL learners science or instructing students how to analyze and critique films in English. Instructional materials, lectures, and discussions would be in English, and tailored to meet the needs of second language learners.

Again, such materials are nothing new in the EFL world; however, the website that will be proposed in this paper conceptually utilizes available technologies and networking channels which in theory, will create a wider audience. The website described in this paper does not necessarily have to be exclusively for Japanese learners of English; such a website can be localized to fit the needs, style, and mode of learners from other countries. The resource website will have a graphical user interface (GUI) tailored for Japanese students; therefore this population will be referenced throughout this paper.

Before going further with the current discussion of developing online, content-based instructional resources, I will veer off topic to discuss the nature of online videos; specifically that of YouTube. Needless to say,

the following will be rudimentary for tech-savvy readers.

YouTube

The proliferation of computers, camcorders, video-equipped mobile phones, and video dubbing / pirating techniques have given birth to countless numbers of websites worldwide that provide free online video content. It is now possible for literally anyone with the technical skills and equipment to broadcast video content over the Internet to reach a world audience. This democratization of communication has given rise to websites such as YouTube which contain a nebulous variety of content ranging from personal home movies to copyrighted materials from a variety of sources. The videos are free and accessible from PCs and mobile devices, so it's no surprise why it has become so popular in such a short time since it's inception. YouTube was created in 2005, acquired by Google soon after, and will soon (if not already) surpass television as the major source for worldwide entertainment.

Aside from entertainment purposes, YouTube videos can play a role in the classroom. EFL practitioners have shown clips in class as part of a listening / viewing activity, or requiring students to do the task as homework. In some of the courses that I have taught at Jissen Women's University (JWU), Tokyo, Japan, I have often used clips from YouTube to illustrate various cultural aspects of urban-American street culture. In a Business English course that I have taught at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS), Tokyo, Japan, I have shown short interviews of brand marketing specialists to introduce the idea of "brand consulting." Without YouTube, it would have taken a tremendous effort (if not impossible task) to collect such specialized video clips in DVD format. With YouTube, the videos are readily available and easy to integrate into classroom sessions (provided the classroom has an Internet connection and some means for projection, e.g., monitor, projector, etc.). Additionally, the videos on YouTube provide a source of authentic usage of English. How such videos appear on YouTube in the first place is somewhat of a mystery unless they are part of company's promotional campaign.

Genuine news broadcasts from reputable media sources, a traveller's video diary, or a confused teen ranting about Britney Spears on YouTube can also offer student-viewers a microscopic view of other cultures, and be expanded to provide a starting point for classroom discussion.

Another way to incorporate YouTube into the EFL classroom is to have students create skits in English and upload the clips onto the Internet (del Rosario, 2009). In this way, the students are making use of the target language as creators of content rather than passive viewers. The above are just a few ways how YouTube can be used as a source for classroom resources.

There are some things for EFL practitioners to consider before using YouTube videos in the classroom. One crucial point is that the language in the clips are in natural, native-level speed and might deter EFL learners, i.e., the videos might be too difficult for students. Depending on the nature and source, some videos contain slang, incorrect grammar, profanity, and other realistic use of English. Moreover, there really is no organization in the materials for teaching students about specific vocabulary or grammatical structures. Unless the videos are part of some form of English language learning series, video clips are sporadic on YouTube. One obvious remedy for videos with crude content is for teachers to preview clips beforehand and choose whatever is appropriate.

One popular genre of videos on YouTube is that of do-it-yourself (DIY) type tutorials or self-study guides on just about any activity imaginable, e.g., "How to make a website" or "How to use a power drill." However, most of these "How to ~" videos on the Internet are aimed at native speakers of the language that they happen to be in. Hence, videos in English were intended for anyone who can understand English; they were not created specifically for English language learners.

Ni-ichi.com

"Ni-ichi.com" is an initiative under development by the media production group, Language by Design (www.languagebydesign.net). The Ni-ichi.com website aims to provide free visual communication tutorials for Japanese EFL learners. The Ni-ichi.com website is based on the notion that second language learning is more engaging when the learners use the target language for genuine, uncontrived acts of communication. "ni ichi" is Japanese meaning "two-one" in English which is a representation of the numerals "2-1." The two numbers represented as "21" in white Helvetica-bold with a red background in a road sign-style logo format, symbolizes the 21st century; a signpost for users indicating what is needed ahead to effectively participate in global communication in the digital era.

The Ni-ichi.com website will contain a series of video tutorials on photography, videography, graphic design, presentation slide design, and presentation skills. In addition, the website will also contain downloadable worksheets for classroom use that correspond to the video tutorials. The worksheets will comprise of EFL communication activities including listening, writing, and speaking. Activity durations will range from single class (90 minutes) activities to semester-long curricula (15 weeks).

The following is a simulation of what the Ni-ichi.com tutorial videos will look like, i.e. the flow of the sequence when the users click on the "play" button.

Each video clip will open with a short introduction in Japanese, followed by the tutorial itself in English. The tutorial will contain a short lesson (e.g. a cameras shutter speed, or contrasting colors for slide design) followed by a task of some sort. The tutorial will then end with a review session of important vocabulary, concepts, and skills. This ending will also be in Japanese. Thus, the language sequence of each tutorial clip would run in the order of Japanese - English - Japanese. This sequence can, of course, be modified with different patterns, e.g., Japanese - English - English, or all English (English - English - English).

One reason for including Japanese as part of the instructional dialogue (as opposed to an all-English tutorial) is that the target of the videos is for false-beginners ~ lower intermediate level Japanese learners of English. Again, the above is a conceptual model of the video tutorials and is still under research and development.

Conclusion

Those in the educational field have probably heard of buzzwords such as "multimedia" or "educational technology." Things are very different now than ten or fifteen years ago. CD-ROMs and Flash animation are a thing of the past. This is the era of web-based, mobile-ready, content-distribution aided by social networking services (SNS) and micro-blogging. We are living in exponential times which means we in the educational field

have to provide a dynamic curriculum that reflects this new reality.

The current students' experience and voices will certainly carry over beyond the schools walls, and assist either in favor or detriment to an institution's brand image. What students experience during their four years in university will have some impact on prospective student application. The question now is how to make prospective students, their parents, junior and senior high school teachers, and cram school teachers make positive remarks about the school.

Returning to Olins' questions at the beginning of this paper, organizations need to begin asking questions which will help define their image. Otherwise, what an organization represents and the objectives they wish to meet will be unclear. Whatever brand image any organization hopes to express, that image has to be:

"...big, simple, and true."

Eric Scott, brand consultant.

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