

You Are What You Sell: Branding the Way to Composition's Better Future

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ABSTRACT

Composition professionals who bemoan the public reputation of writing instruction should consider more strongly using the marketing approach called “branding” to establish a stronger public relations position for better composition programs. There is no short-term hope to rescue the reputation of all writing instruction, because on the whole it is an unbranded “commodity,” offered in many forms entirely beyond the control of fully-informed, fully supported composition professionals. Such composition professionals could, however, establish a strong “brand” of well-informed composition. Such a brand would establish an independent and higher public profile, and it could become a “market leader” that would improve the quality and reputation of all writing instruction. Branding well requires a more sophisticated understanding of “branding” than most composition professionals have already, but the new understanding is not difficult and has many points of connection with the field’s own best practices. At base, good branding is good rhetoric, and its ethics depend on its uses, not its nature. The Council of Writing Program Administrators could serve a particularly valuable role in branding efforts.

INTRODUCTION

In the last half-century, professional scholars of writing have developed solid, reliable information about how students learn to write. Remarkably, almost nobody other than professional scholars of writing and their closest allies knows anything about it. In the summer of 2009, when Stanley Fish published a series of provocative editorials about writing instruction in his *New York Times* blogs, many hundreds of public comments overwhelmingly called for a more voluminous and more reductive teaching of gram-

mar and spelling, to be “taken care of” and “gotten out of the way” before college. Professional scholars of writing know that we have learned to teach a much more complex subject, one so broad that it can only be scantily summarized by the Outcomes Statement for First-year Composition of the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). But the true nature of our best work remains largely unknown by the public that, ultimately, pays for our services. Most likely 9 out of 10 doctors (or lawyers, or accountants, or welders) believe that we still set themes and mark all errors in red pen—or don’t, for reasons variously attributed to do-gooder wooly-headedness, misguided politics, or sheer laziness. If “we” refers to professional scholars and writing teachers who know better—my definition from here on of who “we” are—then nobody understands us. That misunderstanding costs us—and our students—dearly.

I have no interest in asking for sympathy, however. We can and should do something about being misunderstood. I hope to persuade larger numbers of us that composition professionals have much to gain from the marketing practice called “branding”—a rhetorical practice that we too often trivialize and misunderstand, ironically in very much the same ways that many of our audiences trivialize and misunderstand the term “writing.” We do participate in a market, even if an unusual one. As rhetoricians, we should recognize that particular rhetorical methods arise to do particular kinds of work, and that the rhetorical methods of marketing are best suited to do the work of informing large populations about the value of what we do. In simple terms, when your product is better than your consumers believe, you have a marketing problem.

But marketing and branding cannot come to the rescue of all of writing instruction. My specific interest in “branding” arises from my strong belief that we must distinguish a particular range of writing instruction as the best that we can offer, and then strengthen the image of exactly that range of writing instruction. The best approach should merge a strong composition “brand” with the profession’s best-informed desires; and the best “owner” of such a brand is the CWPA. Ultimately, branding CWPA Composition could both improve public awareness of the best writing instruction and make better writing instruction more common. Market demand for CWPA Composition could lead more institutions to want to claim to use it, and if we have methods in place to ensure that those claims mean something, we can make a more fully expert kind of writing instruction more common.

THE STATE OF COMPOSITION'S CURRENT BRAND: BRAND X

One of the first tasks in good branding is to investigate a brand's history. In this part, I mean to focus on broad perceptions. Certainly, there have been pools and rivulets of different kinds of writing instruction, but the main stream is now common knowledge among us. For many decades composition's essentially generic brand, accurately read by all concerned, was error correction. Poorly paid grammarians dutifully corrected grammar and failed those who could not master it. While the service was not highly effective pedagogy, it screened out some of those whom other professors did not want in their classrooms, and it showed to the world at large that the University was serious about literacy. In essence, there really was no "brand" because the service was a simple commodity, done about the same nearly everywhere. The result was "Course X," as the "subversive" 60's era book of that title called it (Greenbaum and Schmerl). As *Course X* said in its "Dedication," "Freshman English is not a course; it's a problem" (ix). If composition had been a product on a shelf, it would have been strictly store brand, if not simply generic.

At some point, however, teachers discovered some interesting phenomena, most notably that writers who used better writing processes tended to be more successful. Suddenly, there was expertise to claim, and a way to tell better from worse instruction. Composition as a profession largely grew from the success of "the writing process" (Foster 149), essentially our first meaningful brand. Process was a market success, and it led to much good. But "process" was always a limited product. It turned out to be a simple message, easily adopted (and even more easily trivialized), and its advantages, while real, were not obvious or pronounced. These days, we would be about as likely to proclaim that we "teach process" as we would be to announce that we wear shoes. But nothing else has really taken its place, as we see highlighted by the rather lame and stale term "post-process." We now have a product; we're on the shelf; but what our colleges and universities mostly seem to be buying for their students is just a gussied-up, "post-process" version of "Course X," a version we could well call "Brand X"—sold in a shinier, perhaps bright yellow box, but still the same old generic.

What is Brand X composition in the eyes of its audiences? A still-resonant story illustrates it well. Followers of WPA-L, the active listserv for WPAs, may recall the flap in the spring of 2008 over the aptly named Professor X, the anonymous adjunct instructor whose regrets were published by the *Atlantic*. Above all, this narrative reveals the lack of hope that there could be anything better than the simplistic course it describes, one clearly

built on standard “Brand X” thinking rather than the best current research. It is work in which nobody can take any pride. As Professor X lamented:

There seems, as is often the case in colleges, to be a huge gulf between academia and reality. No one is thinking about the larger implications, let alone the morality, of admitting so many students to classes they cannot possibly pass.... No one has drawn up the flowchart and seen that, although more-widespread college admission is a bonanza for the colleges and nice for the students and makes the entire United States of America feel rather pleased with itself, there is one point of irreconcilable conflict in the system, and that is the moment when the adjunct instructor, who by the nature of his job teaches the worst students, must ink the F on that first writing assignment.... But my students and I are of a piece. I could not be aloof, even if I wanted to be. Our presence together in these evening classes is evidence that we all have screwed up. I’m working a second job; they’re trying desperately to get to a place where they don’t have to. All any of us wants is a free evening.

On the WPA-L listserv, posts lamented that the *Atlantic* would publish such a thing. How could its editors not know that Professor X’s lament, like his course, was not representative of our work? It brought home once again that composition has a serious image problem. Members of the listserv did a neat job of shooting the messenger, though only in fantasy. Out there in the world of our “customers,” teachers like Professor X roll on, very influential in projecting the collective image of the first-year writing course, and in fact most likely providing the actual product that many customers buy. Brand X, like Course X, remains largely a problem. When, as noted above, Stanley Fish published his critiques and proposals, the public largely missed the nuance; as their voluminous comments showed, what they largely wanted was more Brand X, just done harder.

Indeed, in these “post-process” times, the closest thing to a new brand identity for composition has been the sheer management ability of writing program administrators—part of why so many of our leading lights sublimate into upper administration and leave writing partly behind. We have gotten good at that. But most of our sense of mission and value comes from a faith that we can teach students to become effective, genre-sensitive agents in ever-changing rhetorical and information technology environments. If we want to sell composition as a life-changing rhetoric, genre, and media course, it needs to be more obvious that we mean to offer that, and not

“Brand X”—not the weak hodge-podge of leftover grammar correcting and hackneyed process stages (taught by “Professor X”) that has come to be the public image of composition among even relatively savvy audiences.

That is, again, we have a marketing problem. A public that largely sees composition as “Brand X” will see no reason to prefer a school that spends more on it than another. After all, the other question, often asked, is whether there really is any point in offering Brand X composition at all. It is clear enough that even we can be tempted by such “abolitionist” arguments.

If WPAs want to change anything about the image of writing courses to begin creating a better reality, we need a marketing plan, and I hope to show that the simplest, most honest of such plans would begin with branding an elite version of writing instruction for college composition courses. I am not referring to a simple renaming of the course, even if that might help, too. It makes no sense to slap new paint on composition and call it something else. No matter how well done, that effort would eventually collapse for a simple reason: there is still a lot of Brand X composition out there. But we do not have to change the whole field everywhere to make branding work for us. We can start by distinguishing and branding a better version, then making that brand a market leader that brings others along. Before there was Starbucks, most fast-food and convenience stores offered indifferent coffee. Now better coffee in wider varieties has become a strong part of marketing campaigns for even “bargain” vendors. We could “brand” a better version of writing instruction, then hope that it becomes the brand all stakeholders want for their own schools.

Furthermore, it may be that our only other choice is to continue to lose ground. Political, economic and market forces continue to supplant disciplinary traditions in determining what teachers teach. College teachers are being driven into what I call, only partly ironically, post-academic teaching. That is, higher education, with its traditions of tenure and academic freedom, once resisted market forces with systems built around the regulative academic ideal of seeking truth, justice, and beauty. Increasingly, academic decisions depend on increasing enrollment and retention without increasing costs even more. Meanwhile, as governments continue to reduce their funding of higher education, enrollments do not just bring access to resources; they bring the cash itself that runs our schools. Sophisticated explanations of this change have been available for some time now, from Readings’ *The University in Ruins* to Jameson’s reading of postmodernism as late capitalism—less an exciting time of intellectual fecundity than a thorough immersion in the commodification of everything. We have, and should question and contest those trends to commodify higher education;

but right now, we are deeply within them, and should understand them as of a piece with larger intellectual movements that many of us embrace.

I do mean to be critically engaged; this argument does not call for a complete embrace of the extreme (and highly postmodern) “branding” focus of late capitalism, in which message is all, and substance matters only to the extent that it supports the message. But I will argue that thinking of composition in terms of “branding” can help WPAs think about how best to negotiate present and future commercial and political currents. That is, we should aim to learn best that which we wish to “sell” ourselves as knowing, and work strategically to market ourselves as “selling” what we want to be. The best choices should lead to a merging of a strong writing instruction “brand” with the profession’s best-informed desires, and the best “owner” of the brand is the CWPA.

RE-BRANDING “BRANDING” FOR ACADEMIC MARKETING

Most faculty members have probably dealt with and been annoyed by branding efforts at their institutions, whether they know it or not. Such efforts are why officials at my favorite former school, Missouri Western State University, always call their school “Western” and ground every color scheme in the official shade of gold. You already know something about branding if you have bought or maybe especially if you have resisted buying products by the great branding success stories—Nike and Starbucks being something of the Derrida and Foucault of that realm. But let’s plant a reminder here: Derrida and Foucault are also branding success stories. At the raw bottom, “branding” is rhetoric: extreme rhetoric, perhaps, but effective rhetoric. A citation to Derrida has “capital” even among those who have never read his work. We do not need to ask whether it should to know that it does. Academics always already practice branding. We just hope to do it with integrity. As it turns out, so do some of the best practitioners of branding.

Practical marketing and branding are not worlds in which it is easy to do a confident, complete, and effective review of the literature, in that its main practitioners have a strong action orientation and do not necessarily track existing scholarship. So with apologies, I will soon simply cut to the chase much as trade books in the marketing field will do. Nevertheless, Zednik and Strebinger offer the curious reader an excellent broad discussion of branding and its taxonomies. Inskip provides a good, concise explanation of branding as a philosophy and process. Both sources, standing for scores more, emphasize that branding, contrary to common understanding and frequent practice, is perhaps the marketing approach least compat-

ible with cynically identifying weak consumers and preying upon them. Instead, as will be developed further below, branding at its best and most effective can be conceived in part as treating customers as stakeholders in a common enterprise with sellers—a vision clearly compatible with teaching writing.

Of the various practical treatments, Scott Bedbury's trade book *New Brand World* offers the most readily applicable version grounded in this deeper practice. Bedbury generally receives much credit for the Nike and Starbucks branding efforts. He gets equal billing on the business speaking circuit with other heavyweights like Tom Peters (*In Search of Excellence*), Ken Blanchard (*The One Minute Manager*), and Deepak Chopra. Maybe best of all, he thinks like a rhetorician, urging companies to aspire to the greater good, to serve higher needs, and to pay attention to ethical "brand karma." In essence, following Bedbury, by "branding" we can mean associating a brand symbol—like CWPA and its square logo—with the best essence of composition. Doing so entirely conforms with "branding" as well-informed practitioners understand it. That is, while branding does entail some market-driven thinking, it does not consist of having a nice symbol, a consistent color scheme, and lots of administratively enforced brand discipline. Instead, as Bedbury spells out, branding works best when you are what you sell and sell what you are.

In his book and related online postings, Bedbury sets out nine main rules of this more comprehensive "karmic" branding:

1. Do a "big dig." Look at the history of the brand. Find out why it has appeal. See where your brand converges and diverges from product or service as a commodity. Be clear about the differences.
2. Come up with a motto that distills the essence of the product or service. Bedbury harks back to Plato, not because Plato is the best philosopher but because, for a philosopher, he was a great marketer. Bedbury maintains that a definable, Platonic essence is at the heart of every great brand, and that it can be captured in a motto. Whatever such a motto is, in most cases people in the company already go around saying it, and people with different roles and perspectives will agree on it.
3. Connect with higher needs. As Bedbury says, "Brands need to connect on a deeper psychological level. They need to respect and acknowledge the customer's emotions—feelings such as the yearning to belong, the need to feel connected, the hope to transcend, and the desire to experience joy and fulfillment" ("Nine Ways").

4. Revise the brand continually. Conscious branders have to figure out how to transform and reinvent brands while staying true to the brand's basic principles.
5. Let the brand be fluid and collaborative. There are several parts to this concept:
 - a. co-brand with good partners;
 - b. extend the brand;
 - c. use new means of distribution;
 - d. make new product categories;
 - e. create sub-brands.
6. Be consistent and committed to your essence. Effective branders do not blow with the wind for short-term gain and give up what is essential to the quality of the brand. Strong brands never pander to the market. They make the market for their brand by connecting their essence to the higher need for self-actualization. Strong branding, contrary to common impression, does not ask first what people will buy and try to fit into that frame; it asks first what we can best sell and aims to create the best conditions for selling it.
7. Don't let the brand become a "commodity" (like "Brand X"). Offer a unique and clearly better product, but in a way that makes branders, as Bedbury says on his website, "protagonists for an entire category" of product ("Nine Ways")—heroes of the commodity. Strong branding companies create an experience around the brand that is consistent and rewarding, and that is consistent with the historical nature of the underlying commodity, but better. As Bedbury notes, Starbucks intentionally evokes the the historical coffeehouse. I know: We preferred the real thing. But Starbucks has created as much or maybe even more demand for traditional coffeehouses as it has replaced, and its concept of the "barrista" has improved the status of coffee-making as labor.
8. Always mind your brand karma. With all information becoming more porous, everything everybody in "the company" does reflects on the brand. Keep ethical discipline.
9. Do not look to be on the cutting edge at the expense of brand karma and brand essence. As Bedbury says, "Be careful not to worship cool. It's a false god" ("Nine Ways"). Revision of the brand should be revision: a new look at the same essence. Leave the fad-chasing to others.

I will add one final tenet to Bedbury's nine, given composition's unusual branding situation as a loose collective with no central "company." Somebody has to mind the store and "own" the brand for any of the above to happen.

If you are like me, you felt a tickle of familiarity on reading that list. If you are quicker than I am, you soon understood that Bedbury could essentially be talking metaphorically about an effective approach to a writing task. I will not belabor that comparison for a simple reason: it's no metaphor. We are simply talking about two different applications of rhetoric.

Most likely, the most difficult step ultimately becomes the one that I had to add: Who owns the brand? Provisionally, let us consider what it might look like if the CWPA did decide to claim and "brand" its own kind of composition.

First, we would do a big dig. There are reasons why first-year composition itself has long been required, but there are other reasons why CWPA has persisted and grown. We would want to be very clear about what both are, and then we would want to explore the strains of writing instruction that CWPA mostly supports. We have a great advantage in having our own journal, with years of applicable research. A CWPA research grant could sponsor a project that looked into this history. But we also have that history largely represented in the existing statements and positions adopted by the organization. We are an organization of big diggers. That would come easily.

By contrast, we are not by nature people of mottos, conceptually the important next step. Perhaps that is a problem. Ann Berthoff long ago entreated us to consider the value of "maxims," phrases that, "by assembling and formulating important concepts in a minimalist way ... encourage us to explore what is implied" (8-9). As rhetoricians and language craftspersons, we should challenge ourselves to come up with a motto that is a true maxim. We also have resources for starting this effort. Bedbury says organizations tend to find these mottos lying around rather than make them up. Whatever such a motto is, we already go around saying it, and people with different roles and perspectives will agree on it. If WPAs had to boil the Outcomes Statement down to one phrase, what would it be? My sense is that the result has something to do with the power of writing, even if "Power Writing" itself is (perhaps fortuitously) already taken. We should take this conscious step, and soon.

The next concerns focus on both generating and sustaining the brand. I hardly think I need to stress connecting with higher needs and continually revising the brand. These things themselves would be at the essence of better writing instruction. Most likely we can say the same about letting

the brand be fluid and cooperative, but it makes sense to articulate what that means more fully. Co-branding with good partners, part of that effort, means offering our value outside our own areas. We already do this quite a bit as to areas like literature, philosophy, and communications. Beyond the obvious partners in interest, we have vast opportunities to co-brand with any department that values and needs good writing, opportunities to develop hybrid writing and disciplinary courses and programs that take writing in the disciplines to a whole new level—as people within our ranks are already doing in innovative programs like the writing program within the Farmer School of Business at Oxford University of Ohio or in the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences at Brigham Young University. We already have robust efforts to extend the brand, then, but we would need to make sure these extensions visibly connect back to the “brand,” perhaps not something we do often enough in WAC initiatives. WPAs should get far more credit for inspiring and structuring WAC with our own “brand fundamentals.”

Keeping the brand fluid and flexible by using “new means of distribution” immediately suggests online teaching, but it entails more. What about wider public education? Why are there thousands of disciplinary books and scores of trade books about writing, and yet nearly the only crossover hit is Joseph Williams’ *Style*? Why is there virtually no talk about a CWPA brand version of “commercial composition”? The obvious answer: We can’t get tenured for it, especially in English departments. But it does exist. People are doing it. People who come to CWPA’s summer conference are doing it (Opipari). We should be learning a lot more about commercial composition and figuring out how to make exploring it part of our reward systems. We have been making new product categories for some time, like professional and technical writing, but there are more.

Perhaps the most interesting subcategory of brand flexibility is the last: creating subbrands. Here we might find a way to address something that will certainly emerge from the “big dig” as a brand hallmark: our generous inclusiveness and eager diversity. Writing will differentiate at different kinds of campuses. Perhaps we can find collective ways to talk about these differences and yet agree that they are identifiable subcategories of one brand. That is, we do not need to be merely “inclusive” and “diverse”; we could present our diversity as connected aspects of a main theme—a main brand—situated in unique contexts.

The reminder to be consistent and committed to our essence at first sounds like second nature. We probably think we do not pander to markets. But think about all the compromises we make with administrations, most of which dilute the essential quality of our courses. Consider all the discus-

sion we hear about national political trends affecting education, especially the trends toward uniform educational practices and outcomes (Priddy). I have made this point before at more length (“Marketing Composition”), but it bears repeating: When we compromise core values for small gains, others rationally decide that the values are not so core. Such short-term gains come with large long-term consequences. Of course, as isolated programs we rarely have better choices. But if our choices could be positioned as costing us the labeling of a valuable brand, at least we would have a new argument. Such consistency, for us, connects directly to avoiding letting the brand become a commodity and looking out for brand karma. Nobody has commitment to or pride in a commodity. Professor X has no pride in his product. Either we need to find a way to give him that pride and commitment, or we need to find a way to define his commodity, Brand X, as not our brand. Pride in the product and a desire to rise above being a commodity has to be a brand essential in our case, distinguishing who is in from who is out. To defend brand “karma,” it may be critical—and painful, given our love of inclusiveness—to find a way to define those who do not keep ethical discipline as Not Our Brand. We need to keep in mind that our brand could become a “hero” of the commodity, could offer a better way for all. If we do our work well, we may even come to the attention of Professor X, for whom it might eventually be balm for the soul.

The most difficult thing for us to adopt openly may be eschewing the cool, being cautious about being on the cutting edge at the expense of brand karma and brand essence. But then, perhaps not. The Outcomes Statement was no doubt years behind in incorporating its technology “plank” (an interestingly archaic word). I suspect that, no surprise to our students, on the whole our essence tends more to the nerdy than the cool. We are willing experimenters, but we might be cautious adopters. Perhaps our frequently evoked image as faddish free thinkers is one rather more often read onto us by people who do not yet understand our brand fundamentals than one we willingly, or even less often conscientiously, inhabit.

Finally, there is my own addendum. Somebody has to mind the store and own the brand. It’s foolish to talk of achieving any of the above as an affiliation, no matter how tight, of individuals in separate departments and institutions. Somebody, somewhere, has to be responsible for the effort and its success. This is truly the hardest part. I will continue to suggest that CWPA should take on that role, the reason why I have made this argument at its conference and in its journal, but before considering the alternatives, we will need to consider the nature of the effort and its compatibility with current processes.

A VITAL CONNECTION: BRANDING AS ACTIVISM

In a sense, branding may seem alien and distant, despite its roots in rhetoric. But I propose that we can make it more familiar by approaching it through another “alien” rhetorical practice that has already been brought into our discussions: the concept of “framing,” as presented by Linda Adler-Kassner’s *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writers and Writing*. *The Activist WPA* is a wonderful thing: a rhetorically expert treatment of applied rhetoric for rhetoricians. Adler-Kassner’s work is not only more fully grounded in our ways than Bedbury’s, it is clearly a more ambitious and solid scholarly work. I wish to travel on its coattails for the simple and obvious reasons: it’s better, better suited to us, and already underway. I think mainly that branding augments it in interesting ways.

I am going to give *The Activist WPA* short treatment here because I assume that, relative to branding books, more of us have ready access to it and ready desire to read it—and if not, you should. In very tight summary, *The Activist WPA* frames the work of writing administration with a theme, an essence: *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase that Adler-Kassner translates as “healing the world,” fully acknowledging that the phrase has considerably more meaning. Backed by scholarly research on public persuasion, Adler-Kassner examines the practices of public interest organizations to see how they change conversations to achieve greater public good. She discusses cogently their practice of “framing” these conversations—a practice that has obvious similarities to branding, but also obvious differences. When Adler-Kassner then turns her view back to composition, she finds that perceptions about WPAs and writing programs are “framed” in what she calls “the pragmatist jeremiad”—a generally progressive narrative rooted in pragmatist philosophy as espoused by John Dewey, in which education prepares citizens to participate in democracy.

That frame might not sound so bad to many of us. But those who oppose our efforts to make composition something more than “Brand X” have, according to Adler-Kassner, basically turned that frame against us, claiming that scholars and educators have abandoned the original pragmatist ideal for selfish and insular reasons. That is a complex point, to which I will not be able to do justice briefly. But in simple terms, we have bought into a larger frame somewhat like ours, easily accepting a shift from our felt sense of “healing the world” to “preparation for democracy.” But the “pragmatist Jeremiad” as a larger national narrative has elements that Dewey and other pragmatists were not exactly after, either. The resulting frame traps us in arguments that work askew to our intentions. For my own example, if you note that grammar lessons do not help writers succeed rhetorically,

you may be seen as urging that we should exclude less “literate” members of society from participating in democracy.

Adler-Kassner derives four main lessons for those who seek to re-frame the conversation and put compositionists more in control of their own narrative (79-80), all of which have obvious connections with Bedbury’s branding process:

1. Reframing “starts by laying groundwork that involves discovering and identifying principles and considering how those principles extend to specific elements of practice” (79).
2. Reframing “involves working with and involving lots of people” (79), in significant part to make sure the principles and the specific efforts are aligned.
3. Reframing involves forming alliances with other groups that can help (79-80).
4. Reframing work is focused. Reframing workers do not try to do everything that might be done, but stick to a carefully selected plan (80).

That is, in Bedbury’s terms, we should

1. Conduct a “big dig” and find our essence.
2. Practice enterprise-wide engagement consistent with our essence.
3. Seek fluid collaboration.
4. Stick with what advances perception of our essence.

Adler-Kassner does much more in her book, such as identifying models of organizing and constructing a detailed plan for taking public relations action. She explains very completely what good rhetoric looks like in public interest campaigning. All of that is intensely useful information that would serve any reframer or brander well.

I want to focus on where branding might extend Adler-Kassner’s model, however. There are natural limits in transferring lessons from public interest work on issues to our context, and in most cases, attending to branding actually balances the contexts. Public interest organizations are more like politicians than we are, and we are more like merchants than they are. We deal in the public good, but we do so in relation to a specific set of services that we produce using hard-won expertise and then sell in a competitive market, earning our livings from what we produce. We have a different stake in our “deliverables” than either Nike on the one hand or public inter-

est organizations like Wellstone Action on the other. We need to combine the expertise of both.

The concept of dealing in part with social capital and the doing of good as an “economy” is not a new or alien concept to marketers, after all (Arvidsson). As Arvidsson and others explain, “capital” is a fluid term, consisting of more than money. Of course, such “good will” is essentially a simple and obvious concept: businesses have long known that people tend to trade more with companies they like than companies they do not like. In some sense, intelligent branding seeks to bring back on a large scale a concept of “brand karma” that smaller, local businesses have always understood. Any company that does not have to respond primarily to distant, arbitrary stockholders has always been entitled to consider the doing of good, and even *tikkun olam*, as part of its own essence, and social capital as part of its earnings. They just cannot take that so far that they fail to profit, or they will no longer exist. Like such businesses and unlike social action organizations, composition professionals cannot without cost decide to pursue other issues, or to follow interesting possible shifts in frames that do other kinds of good but do not enhance writing instruction. We should note that at times we do indeed already have these tendencies, do invest heavily in efforts that do not help improve writing instruction; in some ways a market focus might help us see the problems with such moves. At times it may help to recall that we should beware the cool. It may seem simplistic, but ultimately we may have more to learn from how Wellstone Action markets itself to its clients than how it acts on behalf of its clients.

THE ARGUMENT FOR BRANDING

Whatever may be the advantages of branding in the abstract, the question remains whether it really is the right approach for us, right now. Mainly, we have few better choices. Brand X rules public consciousness. What we have been doing so far has not done much to change that. We should try something else.

We do not lack for good thinking and good materials, and I do not mean at all to disparage what we have done so far by raising this argument for further action. The Outcomes Statement gives WPAs a statement of identity. The consultant-evaluator system gives WPAs resources for expert evaluation. Thanks to Linda Adler-Kassner, Darsie Bowden and scores of others who contribute efforts to the Network for Media Action (NMA), a branch of CWPA, composition professionals have a start on good ready-reaction, damage control tactics (“WPA Network”). The NMA publishes several online “Message Frameworks” for response to common issues

related to the misunderstanding of our work. Various initialed initiatives—NCoW, NDoW, and NGoW (National Conversation, Day, and Gallery of/on Writing, respectively) put writing in a spotlight with informed spin. But, still, as far as most people know, composition is a “commodity,” in the sense in which Bedbury’s treatment of branding distinguishes between the commodity of athletic shoes and the brand of Nike. Professor X does us the favor of showing us Brand X composition in the raw: self-assessed failures washing out perceived failures-to-be. That’s not composition as informed WPAs know it. That’s not the CWPA’s brand. But it’s what most of our market thinks it is buying. Small wonder that too few schools want to cough up more full-time, fully-supported positions to teach it.

And yet we know that we have a good “product.” As a counter story to the Brand X story, we can already see that our brand “sells” once people understand it. The rise of WAC/WID, writing majors, and independent writing programs testifies directly to the good effect our message has on some administrators and other stakeholders. We don’t get as much credit or mileage for all that as we could, but we can clearly see the potential.

Furthermore, it is not selfish or unseemly for us to “market” better composition. Our ultimate capital is not exclusively money. Our ultimate capital remains good work, a serious part of our “brand essence” and social capital. That’s what writing instruction is, and the best branding practices will necessarily work with our own goals and aspirations. Even if we do become more financially successful, that will lead to greater good—more full-time, fully supported composition teachers and better writing classes.

Of course, a successful branding effort would not solve all ills. After a successful branding effort, Brand X composition would still exist. There is still lots of bad, cheap coffee. But nobody blames Starbucks for that. To the contrary, Starbucks has raised the average level of coffee quality by raising the competitive bar on coffee quality and increasing the desire for better coffee. A good writing brand should do the same for composition.

ESTABLISHING THE CWPA BRAND: A HYPOTHETICAL PRODUCT AND PROCESS

If CWPA were going to pursue better branding, what would be the best next step—besides begging Scott Bedbury to work on his own brand karma by offering us his services, cheap? Which, by the way, I consider worth a good try. We would do something new and unusual, and potentially interesting. We would carve a “brand” out of an amorphous mass and then call it a thing. Surely someone who could do that would cement his reputation as a brand guru, especially given that his reputation may have taken a hit by

association with the way the market has treated Starbucks, one of his great and continuing successes in terms of brand image, in recent times.

Nevertheless, I assume that we would have to “grow our own.” The process would have something in common with creating the Outcomes Statement, in that it would need to merge a broad range of individual visions into a shared one. We have experience with doing that kind of thing extremely well, with broad input and acceptance. Such a process could start in very general ways, pursuing Bedbury’s branding process to see where it leads, using whatever methods we have at hand to do it. All we need is a founding group. Of course, the effort would run most effectively if the CWPA would manage it from the start, with an assigned ad hoc committee. With this article, I am mainly trying to build support either for forming such a committee or putting marketing formally on the continuing agenda of the NMA. I hope mainly to encourage CWPA to see branding as a viable, practical, and ethical version of “media action,” compatible with goals we have already set and the ethical posture we wish to maintain.

We can start with modest action. We need a formal “big dig” and motto, and I must resist trying to skip that process by declaring here whatever I, personally, might think to be the right answers at the large scale. But every local and partial step along these lines moves the process forward. At Grand Valley State University, where I work now, Roger Gilles and Dan Royer used related rhetorical moves to “brand” Directed Self Placement (DSP), even if the idea that they were “branding” was not part of their talk. That brand identity helped “sell” the concept, even under other names. When we do good work locally, we should not just do it; we should market it. We should also seek affiliation with those who do work like ours, and unite under consistent titles. The CWPA’s official affiliate organization framework opens interesting possibilities. A number of independent writing programs have formed a CWPA affiliate that can become a gathering place for developing that line of innovations, as well as the source of an official title for the movement. We can also increase our focus on what Richard Haswell calls “RAD” research—replicable, aggregable, and data-supported inquiry, the kind that will help us more accurately form working models of the best writing instruction, developing strong answers to intractable questions about class size, teacher preparation, and teaching methods. We can make more concerted efforts to do that very difficult thing of defining and declaring what we believe, on evidence, to be better and worse writing instruction and giving our answers mottos and names. I confess to being skeptical that these local and partial tributaries will inevitably create a mighty new river, but any such efforts collect information, generate experience, and help us learn how to conduct a larger effort. Above all, we could

encourage membership and participation in CWPA, almost certainly the best home for any more ambitious project.

Nevertheless, I mainly have a more immodest proposal in mind. The most plausible method of branding inter-institutional courses is clearly accreditation. Accreditation permits an organization to “mind the store” at institutions where it has no direct control. It is the only way to affix a core CWPA brand of writing instruction to courses at a wide variety of programs. In that it could apply to a large number of institutions at once, it would have far broader impact than other potential efforts.

CWPA members have talked about accreditation for quite a while. Searches of the WPA-L archives will reveal such discussions from nearly the birth of the list. It has never been a very urgent conversation, except momentarily when WPAs consider, in rueful hindsight, how it might have helped avert some particular disaster. Yet accreditation has always seemed distinctly possible. CWPA has a consultant-evaluator process that has many accreditation-like processes. Of course, the consultant-evaluator process is uniquely tailored to the vision of the specific institution, with results held privately. Nevertheless, in this effort we have the seeds of establishing a CWPA brand of writing instruction.

Certainly, running an accreditation process presents daunting challenges. In addition to the sheer logistics, it requires an arduous shift in thought. We prefer to be helpful. But accreditation does not aim mainly for the direct good of the institution, though we assume it should help; it aims to improve the qualities it judges. Part of that work directly relates to maintaining the accreditor’s brand integrity. We would want CWPA’s brand identity to be strong and profound enough to make sense to every teacher and student. We would want that brand to be strong enough that every teacher in a certified program would know about the accreditation and would take pride in it. We would want the accreditation process itself to be both efficient and a model of our values. The accreditation itself would be CWPA’s own product, one that would “sell” only if both the writing teachers and the administrators on pertinent campuses found it valuable.

We strongly value warmth and inclusiveness. I can imagine that good WPAs who strive to do the right things might find their own programs failing to receive accreditation for reasons they cannot currently control. I can imagine great dismay on my own campus, where our unusually large class sizes might be a significant and perhaps insurmountable barrier to accreditation, despite our ability to demonstrate high quality in many important facets of program direction and writing instruction. I can imagine colleagues in the field having sympathy for our plight. But allegiance to our colleagues’ personal and institutional wellbeing could be dangerous. What

we should want is an accreditation that we cannot pass if our administrations insist on doing the wrong things—increasing class sizes, running Procrustean placements, staffing most classes with under-supported adjunct teachers, and other moves that do not adhere to CWPA values. What we should want is an accreditation system that gives us leverage to implement our core values—with flexibility, but without compromise. We would have to learn to exclude as well as include.

Finally, we would need to prove the value of the brand in some ways. Maybe this would be easy. Maybe it would just catch on. But it is likely, and it is likely to be valuable to the effort, to assess the results achieved by accredited schools and tie good results to our key brand practices. One large difficulty is that our brand practices have more to do with being recursive than with any particular feature. CWPA writing instruction would never be a stable thing like “grammar” or “process.” After all, “Nike” says nothing in particular about shoes or equipment but instead has become associated with a constantly evolving focus on performance. Similarly, “CWPA” writing instruction would be likely to say more about a commitment to ethics, evidence, and a faith in the largeness of writing, properly conceived, than about, say, rhetorical analysis and grammar in context. The details might change; the promise that it is the best available version of something vital would not. We would need to be ready to show that, at all times.

All that sounds like a great deal to manage for a small organization, but perhaps such an effort would be part of the reason to hire a CWPA executive director, one with branding background to drive the effort. A one-year collection of seed money could support a hire, with the first mission for the Director being figuring out how to fund the position. We do have other business that a CWPA executive director could handle, including quite a bit that we do not do, or do not do more often, because there is no way to handle it as strictly volunteer work. There would be no reason not to have such an executive director mind other parts of the “store” as well. Such a hire might be particularly plausible given the current location of the CWPA institutional home in the relatively low cost-of-living and high-education environment of Grand Rapids, Michigan. CWPA dues are currently small, and an executive director could supply value in many ways that could make slightly higher dues make sense—or perhaps grow the organization quickly enough to increase the volume of dues.

Such a director could solicit branding assistance in ways that fit the scholarly reward system—in particular, “big dig” and assessment efforts. CWPA could use an expansion of its awards process to shape results that we can use. For instance, the award and grant process could be used to generate published expertise on constructing assessments of effective program

results, enhancing chances of winning CWPA accreditation. With a hired director to drive the effort, we would also have a somewhat independent voice for the “essence” and the brand itself to counter the urge to compromise. I suspect that, according to our nature, we would come to include and welcome this person and want to do well by this person, further reinforcing our brand discipline. It takes only a little more ambition to consider that we might find a director who also understood something of public interest work and “framing” larger narratives as well, to help us with related public relations work. It’s even plausible that such a director, once in place, would come up with a better idea than accreditation.

It’s hard to accept such a large change, but we might first note that most organizations of our existing ambition and complexity do have professional staff. Rather, it might be even stranger to go without hired staff than to call for it. And what are the alternatives? We cannot expect CCCC to do anything like this, despite already having the infrastructure for it. As a subpart of NCTE, CCCC must be responsive to all teachers of writing in all circumstances. CWPA is a leaner, tighter organization with a high concentration of effective systems-level thinkers. It already has several effective initiatives in place that would feed naturally into branding efforts. When it comes to effective branding of better composition, CWPA is the clear, obvious choice to mind the store, build a discriminating brand, and find ways to preserve its essence.

Or, we can just keep Brand X inclusively for all, regardless of what we might deserve. Brand X has been durable. It has survived many a change in the composition landscape. Prophets of its doom have not tended to outlast it. But it has a nondescript place in the store. Unless we create a market that demands our higher value, we need to accept the idea that we belong on that bottom shelf. A market is just another kind of discourse community, and from its view, we are what we sell. I would rather aspire to sell what we are—the essence of branding at its best.

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