

Western rolls out new branding

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In some ways, it's back to the future for Western University.

Today, Western rolled out a new visual identity – and with it a 'new' name – top administrators say will project a more unified brand as well as better position the university on the global stage.

"Western is already a powerful brand. But without a common bond, we risk going in different directions and our overall reputation globally will not reflect who we are," Amit Chakma, Western president, said. "There is tremendous pride in our institution; we should be proud of our institution. We should see our institution recognized more for what is happening in all the hallways, all the labs, all the research centres and classrooms.

"This is a major step to ensure we present ourselves in a unified way."

Chief among the changes will be the adoption of Western University as the institution's widely used moniker. The university's official name remains The University of Western Ontario, and will continue to appear as such on diplomas and official documents. But for communication, marketing and web purposes, Western University – or, at times, simply Western – will be the name.

"In many areas, we are already there," Chakma said. "In Canada, when you say Western, people understand what you are talking about."

In fact, the president hopes we can one day drop the 'University' from the widely used name.

"Harvard isn't just Harvard," he said. "It's Harvard University. But you don't have to say university. How long will it take Western to get there, I don't know. Our goal is to become such a recognized brand that just Western means us."

The name reflects back to the institution's founding name, Western University of London Ontario, used until 1923. In a recent survey of the campus' global community of faculty, staff and alumni, 86 per cent of respondents referred to the institution as, simply, Western.

The university has secured westernu.ca as a new URL, and it is 'live' today as a redirect to uwo.ca. Full implementation of this new URL for both web and email will require a longer phase-in period.

Western's homepage has been tweaked to reflect the new visual identity. A full redesign of Western's website is scheduled to launch in April.

The 'new' name comes with a new look as Western drops the Tower Logo in favour of a more traditional shield, an element pulled from the university's crest. The new logo, coupled with a custom font, will be used to present the overall university as well as other appropriate areas (e.g. faculties, departments, libraries, etc.).

Purple also remains the institution's primary colour. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents and workshop participants made it clear that purple is Western's

most distinguishing colour. A slight shift – Pantone 266 to Pantone 268 – will create a deeper and richer purple.

In most cases, the new logo will supersede all others on campus, including those being used for faculties. Although some areas – and their logos – will remain, they will not be used as a standalone product.

The faculty exception, at this point, is the Richard Ivey School of Business. University administrators are continuing to work closely with Ivey Dean Carol Stephenson in a consultation process to ensure both brands further strengthen and enhance each other.

Chakma says the university's different logos and identities were watering down the reputation, and this common look and feel will provide a lift for all. "We found a formula of coming together," he said. "I am pleased we found a way of keeping our history, our roots and modernizing it."

Kevin Goldthorp, vice-president (external), agreed.

In his view, Western had "become mired in the trees that it never saw the forest."

He reflected on Western's "perennial frustration" that the teaching, research and service transpiring on this campus were not being recognized broadly enough. "We were not breaking through the clutter," he said.

"Competition has only gotten more intense. We offer something special and we were doing a disservice to ourselves to the extent we were at risk of putting ourselves out of business ultimately," he said. "All because we couldn't explain what was special about us.

"If you don't do that, people will make up their own story. And they were making up their own story and calling us a 'party school' and we weren't worthy, weren't of a quality of a Toronto, a UBC, a McGill or an Alberta. We are better than that. We are not an also-ran university. We are a major university that has much to offer the world and we need to start talking about ourselves that way, and showing ourselves that way. This brand ID is one part of that puzzle."

The process of creating this new look, Goldthorp admitted, was not handled in the usual way Western, or many universities, have traditionally operated.

"The idea of the type of process we have gone through was scary," he said. "Usually these things are done with a small group of staff, working with an external consultant, and the finding is unveiled with a big 'ta-da.'"

But Western wanted to expand the scope.

From June to December 2011, in cooperation with Hahn Smith Design, the Toronto-based design firm that spearheaded the project, the university involved faculty, staff, students, alumni and friends worldwide in a discussion about Western's visual identity. The university conducted online and in-person surveys, workshops and individual interviews with close to 5,000 alumni, donors and friends, more than 3,700 students and approximately 2,000 faculty and staff members.

The majority of the \$200,000 project budget was spent on the seven-month consultation process.

"We had to do this differently, and we took a big risk," Goldthorp said. "If we are asking the university to take a big leap of faith and believe in this new positioning, this articulation of our brand – and to understand it is not just a bunch of lights, colour and flash, and that it had real substance – then we needed to engage our community."

Because of this process, Goldthorp hoped every member of the university community sees themselves in the new identity.

Chakma also stressed the importance of the process to the success of the new brand.

“What we ended up with I could not have predicted. In fact, I didn’t think too much about what the end product was going to be. My only wish was that in everything we do, there is a common reference point,” he said. “Now, we have that reference point. I am happy about it.”

Goldthorp admitted the end design is not revolutionary, in fact, it could be considered downright traditional. “People might say, ‘That’s not so radical.’ And my answer is, ‘Absolutely not.’ It is not supposed to be radical; it is supposed to be coming back where you started and knowing yourself much better.”

Going forward, Chakma sees the common identity as key.

“I am excited about the change,” the president said. “I am happy because I believe it fundamentally fixes a problem that was becoming more and more acute as we were going in so many different ways. By being able to structurally fix it, and it will still take time to get there, I think we have done ourselves some good.

“We will see the benefit of that a decade from now in terms of name recognition.”

Goldthorp said the more things change, the more they stay the same.

“Individuals will still do what individuals do. They will conduct their research and have their independence,” he said. “But a unified brand will ensure when Professor X in Engineering achieves success, that spill-over will go to Professor Y in Music because the reputation, the renowned isn’t isolated by discipline.

“The world hears many things from many different points of view. But if we can have that one tag that says Western, the overall impression will be there are a lot of interesting, quality things happening there.”