

## Case Study

# Brand Evolution at the University of Reading



SUMS  
Consulting

### The challenge

The University of Reading appointed a new Vice-Chancellor with strong values and a clear strategic vision, committed to genuine consultation and collaboration with all sections of the University community. At the outset of the Vice-Chancellor's tenure a wide-reaching consultation took place with staff, students, alumni and external stakeholders to help the University define its new strategy. While this approach was enthusiastically embraced, it was recognised that it was a University community both fatigued by change, but wanting further change.

One of the key strands of feedback from the strategy consultation was that the existing brand proposition and assets did not resonate with the University community. There was a disconnect between the positioning and the people delivering and experiencing the brand. Evidence from the marketing and student recruitment teams also indicated that it had

diminishing market traction. In short, it was no longer fit for purpose.

Motivated by the outcomes of the strategy development work and this feedback, the University identified the need to define better, and more authentically, its brand proposition, with the aim to more clearly position Reading in a turbulent, uncertain and ever more competitive HE market.

The University sought SUMS' help to support a review of the University of Reading brand. The aims of the review were to distil or translate the new, emerging

strategy into a revised brand proposition framework, recognising that the strategy outlines the University's corporate aims (what they were trying to achieve) whereas the brand articulates who they are, what they stand for, and how they go about delivering the strategy.

### What happened?

A Brand Review Working Group was established, bringing together representatives from across the University community, including colleagues from Schools and Functions, from the Teaching and Learning and Research communities,

from the Students' Union and Student Services and from representative groups at the institution, such as the Staff Forum and Diversity and Inclusion Team. Academic experts from relevant disciplines, including Typography and the Henley Business School were also included.

The sessions were led by the University's Director of Marketing, Communications and Engagement, Fiona Blair, and facilitated by SUMS. SUMS brought a combination of a deep understanding of the University together with the objectivity of external eyes to the project, along with

**Working with SUMS on this project was invaluable both in providing unbiased co-leadership of the work and in providing challenge and supportive critique of thoughts and ideas. The community-led approach that SUMS helped to achieve led to great buy-in and has been cited internally as a model of engagement for future institution-wide change programmes.**



**FIONA BLAIR**  
Director of Marketing,  
Communication and Engagement,  
University of Reading



significant expertise in brand identity and planning.

The five workshops enabled deep discussion and co-creation around core themes including exploring the defining values that make the University of Reading unique and special; personality traits; tone-of-voice; along with a brand positioning statement or ‘essence’ that distilled the spirit of the University of Reading into a single phrase.

The work created by the group was then debated and tested for veracity, with proof-points used to evidence the authentic nature of the brand. Having been reviewed and revised, the new positioning was then brought to life in graphic design by the University’s marketing team, enabling the group to review whether it was an accurate reflection of the University positioning.

### The outcome

The workshop discussions were lively, passionate and wide-ranging, but consistent themes emerged from the outset and ran as a golden thread throughout the sessions – themes that make the University of Reading stand out

and genuinely motivate its staff and students to want to work and study there.

The brand framework created as part of the project represents just the beginning of the brand review journey. The Working Group defined the brand, but it is not static: work remains ongoing to keep uncovering and articulating the key

proof-points that are the substance on which the brand is founded.

On a practical level, an accessible and usable set of brand guidelines, tools and templates for colleagues to use in their everyday work has been created to help ensure consistency. However, more impactful to the growth of their brand than aligned words and images, is ensuring the

University of Reading community live up to the brand and, more importantly, are proud ambassadors of it. The Working Group continued their involvement beyond the project close, with members sharing and presenting it with their teams and networks. Through facilitated co-creation, the University now has an authentic brand positioning that staff are proud of, believe in, and strive to deliver its promise.

