Project Title:
ROBE: RIT Online Branding Encyclopedia Initiative

Applicant(s):

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex Bitterman</td>
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<td>Neil Hair</td>
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<td>Saunders College of Business</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1. Title and Summary of Project:

ROBE: RIT Online Branding Encyclopedia Initiative

The RIT Online Branding Encyclopedia (ROBE) is a proof-of-concept project that aims to ameliorate the cross-disciplinary professional alienation between marketers and designers, and to build further opportunities for multi-disciplinary understanding and learning at the pre-career stage for students. Simultaneously, ROBE provides faculty, scholars, and researchers (both within the RIT community and beyond) a framework for dissemination and discussion of topical and high-quality scholarly content related to branding in an open source format that facilitates real-time access, evaluation, and comment. In the future, ROBE will be made available to the general public, much in the same manner Wikipedia and other online reference sources.

The ultimate deliverable of the RIT Online Branding Encyclopedia Initiative is to create an online encyclopedia of brands, researched, written by, and updated by students in the RIT Saunders College of Business, Marketing, Management and International Business and School of Design programs. The encyclopedia will be unique in the sense that it is authored by emerging professionals, has a cross-disciplinary focus, and free for all to use. However, ROBE is also unique not only in terms of context, but also in terms of content. ROBE is the only comprehensive reference source that chronicles the evolution and backstory of both the ‘business’ side of the brand architecture (strategy, placement, positioning) as well as the ‘graphic/design’ side of the brand evolution (communication, concept, collateral).

Parallel to the initial development of ROBE, with support from EPSCOB and CIAS, Prof. Hair and Prof. Bitterman will offer a complimentary pilot course on branding -- Prof. Hair will offer his course through EPSCOB, Prof. Bitterman will offer his through CIAS. While the focus of each course will be the investigation of branding, Prof. Hair's course will focus on the strategy, history, positioning and current case study of branding (i.e., the 'story behind the graphic'), Prof. Bitterman's course will focus on the historical evolution of the graphics used to represent those brands. Students from each course will collaborate, and the final project will further populate ROBE.

It is important to note that very few universities have opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaboration that RIT does -- a leading college of business, and a world-renowned school of design. This initiative capitalizes on the strengths of both, and uses this inertia to strengthen the course offerings and long-term reputation of both.

Figure 1. Screenshot sketch of example entry in ROBE.
2. Targeted Learners

ROBE encompasses two main learning centers:

1. In situ—in the classroom—which benefits RIT students very directly at the pre-professional development stages of their career. In this initial phase, students from the F07 Graduate Design Issues course, taught by Prof. Bitterman (approximately 53 students) and the students from the Internet Marketing and Business to Business E-Marketing courses, taught by Dr. Hair (approximately 80 students) will participate in populating the initial database, as part of a series of small research projects, that have been authored, and will be integrated into the existing course curricula.

2. Academic Faculty, Scholars, and Researchers. This learning community is cultivated online, and benefits a wider—potentially global—audience. Because the ROBE system is open source, student research will be published and made available online, in real time, for professional and academic comment. This online community will give RIT students immediate access to feedback and input from a broad and international cross-section of academics, scholars, and professionals in the various design disciplines, as well as those in marketing, advertising, branding, and planning.

These two distinct but complimentary learning environments create a dynamic, synergistic, and cross-disciplinary learning environment that in time will become self perpetuating. It will also undoubtedly help to build an increasingly more acute, responsive, and immediate resource for both the RIT community and the general public.

3. Is this for a current course or a new course?

The ROBE project will impact both existing courses and a new course which is also being proposed by the applicants.

4. Anticipated impact on teaching and or learning

The project is expected to impact teaching in the following manner:

1. Evidence of the role of interdisciplinary collaboration in designing more effective learning experiences for our students.
2. The provision of a resource (ROBE) that can impact our existing classes in both design and marketing.

The project is expected to have impact learning in the following manner:

1. Evidence of the effectiveness of interdisciplinary collaboration in students perceptions of positive learning situations.
2. The provision of a unique resource (ROBE) in assisting students understanding of Brands and the roles that both marketers and designers play in their success.

5. Impacting student success

ROBE is expected to impact students understanding of the importance of linking marketers with designers in the development of effective brands. By encouraging cross disciplinary collaboration it is expected that students will have a more effective understanding of the roles played by both disciplines making them more effective in the work place and enhancing their competitiveness as they begin their careers in these areas. There are also networking opportunities represented by
the unique collaborative nature of ROBE in bringing together students, faculty and most importantly those from industry. The potentially high profile nature of ROBE is also likely to raise RIT’s profile as a career oriented Institute that acts as a perfect nexus between student learning and real world application.

6. Measuring impact, and dissemination

Evaluation of ROBE is straightforward and three-pronged:

1. Primary evaluation will derive from special student evaluations in each class where ROBE data is developed. Prof. Hair and Dr. Bitterman will consult with Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning Services, Dr. Wild, to develop an evaluation method that is appropriate for the project. It is proposed that this might take the form of a more qualitative approach using personal construct theory interviews (PCI) which explore the meanings attributed by students to the overall success of the learning process.

2. Similarly, after 6 months time, an online questionnaire will be posted for users of ROBE. This questionnaire will help to evaluate the usability of the site, the perceived quality of its content, and overall success of the initiative.

3. In addition, nearly immediate evaluation will be provided by visitors to the ROBE site. Because ROBE is fully interactive, students will have the opportunity to track changes and updates to their work, and to receive immediate feedback from professionals in the field. This mode of evaluation is unique in that it connects emerging professionals, (i.e., RIT students) with established professionals in a cross-disciplinary arena. Too, this mode of evaluation is nearly instantaneous, and because it fosters an ongoing dialogue between students and professionals, it is quite rare.

Results from each will be will be reported in a 8-month formative and 16-month summative report that will be provided to Academic Affairs.

The dissemination process will involve multiple outlets:

1. Primary dissemination of ROBE will occur electronically. Because ROBE will be available online, it will be indexed and searchable by major search sites such as Google, Yahoo!, Alta Vista, and others. In addition, announcements will be posted on heavily-trafficked design, marketing, and branding mailing lists and LISTSERVs.

2. Separately, a targeted mailing will be sent to more than 500 advertising, marketing, and design professionals in New York, Toronto, and London, which will highlight the interactivity and accessibility of ROBE. Individuals from industry will also be directly involved in the evaluation of the ROBE by reporting electronically on its effectiveness as a concept.

3. Also, in conjunction with university news, periodic press releases will be created and disseminated via the university news wire and subscription services to local and trade media.

4. Further to this peer assessed publication is planned on the success of the project in a number of journals including the Journal of Interactive Marketing.

7. Rationale

Branding has become a particularly relevant aspect of contemporary society. The practice of branding is changing the way we live, work, and play. Brands influence the choices we make, and convey who we are, and what we believe in. It has been said that if religion is the opiate of the masses, that brands are the caffeine of society. Brands have evolved from simple marks of differentiation to a trans-national language used to signal preferences, enable choices, and express both conformity and individuality. Though omnipresence, brands draw a great deal of
criticism, and critics argue that brands enable corporate irresponsibility. As the discourse surrounding the practice of branding begins to swell, the absence of opportunities for brand managers to interact with brand designers becomes increasingly more evident. This divide is particularly evident among students as a result of even fewer opportunities for cross-disciplinary interaction between emerging professionals and students in these historically unrelated fields.

Though brands are influencing lifestyle, the nature of branding is itself changing, so quickly in fact, that has become challenging to find up-to-the minute case studies from which students can learn. Over the duration of the academic year, companies merge and fail, and as such, the associated brands as well as the research about them, is dated by the following academic year. In addition, finding locally-based professionals that are up-to-date on branding trends and projects continues to become increasingly more difficult. ROBE will ameliorate both of these challenges, by creating a real-time research vehicle for students and scholars to benefit from.

The digital project of the ROBE will use open source Wiki-based software to create an online encyclopedia of branding. Taking a cue from the resounding success of MIT open courseware, the ROBE will initially be populated (i.e., “stocked”) through student research. After ROBE is released to the public (via the Internet), both RIT students as well as the general public will have access to the site, and may comment, update, edit, and add information. Faculty teaching complementary classes will have open access to this resource. This is expected to include Schools of Design, Communication, Computing and departments within Business.

Initially, a series of small research projects, that have been authored by Prof. Bitterman and Dr. Hair are planned to be integrated into the existing course curricula in the F07 Graduate Design Issues course, taught by Prof. Bitterman, and the students from the Internet Marketing and Business to Business E-Marketing courses, taught by Dr. Hair. These assignments will be completed digitally, and will provide the initial content for ROBE.

The credentials of the applications are ideally suited to this project: Alex Bitterman is an Assistant Professor in the School of Design in the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences and an expert on universal design, the social responsibility of the designer, advertising, branding and identity programs (from a communication design perspective), graphic design, and place branding. Neil Hair is an Assistant Professor in the Saunders College of Business and is an expert on personal branding, internet marketing and Web 2.0 user generated content.

8. Timetable

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<th>Issue</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student development of ROBE</td>
<td>End of Fall quarter 20071</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mail shot of Advertising / Design professional community</td>
<td>End of Winter quarter 20072</td>
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<td>8 month formative report</td>
<td>End of Spring Quarter 20073</td>
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<td>16 month summative report</td>
<td>End of Summer Quarter 20074</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of a Branding course</td>
<td>Fall quarter 20081</td>
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