

Marketing and Branding Implications of a Corporate Service Program: The Case of Women's Group Mentoring

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Abstract

Corporate programs are often voluntary and sometimes struggle to attract sufficient participants. Mentoring programs tend to follow a mentor-mentee format. However, one Australian university offers female staff a group-mentoring model. Despite the positive ratings of this mentoring model, there appeared to be negative perceptions of the program. To understand why these perceptions were negative, exploratory research was undertaken. Quantitative and qualitative research was triangulated to improve understanding of the data. Ultimately, recommendations for branding of the product were developed. Numerous incorrect perceptions existed, and one of the biggest hindrances for participation in the program was a perceived lack of time and confusion about the nature of the program.

Key Words: Mentoring; Branding; Perception; Internal Marketing

Introduction

Customer perceptions of a product are more important than how the organisation promotes a product because customers make decisions on what they believe, rather than what is communicated to them. Despite the abundance of branding literature, little research exists about employee perceptions of corporate programs. This paper seeks to contribute to knowledge in this area by describing an empirical study of staff perceptions of a corporate program.

The objective of this paper is to understand consumer perceptions of a specific corporate product in relation to the actual results of the program - in this case, a group mentoring program run in a corporate setting. Mentoring is widely recognized as a valuable strategy for professional development and support, although it receives varied levels of recognition in organisational settings. Group mentoring provides a forum where members bond as a group, exchange information and ideas, and provide mutual support and guidance. While group mentoring is a specific product category, parallels could be drawn to any corporate programs, such as corporate training, orientation programs or one-on-one mentoring. Furthermore, while this program was conducted in a university environment, this type of program, and approaches to branding and promoting such a service, could be utilised in any corporate or institutional setting.

This paper will look at three research questions:

1. What are staff perceptions of women's group mentoring?
2. How do these perceptions relate to the promotion of the product?
3. What are the implications for branding?

Background

The Women's Group Mentoring Program (WGMP) was developed in 1999 at an Australian university to assist women in advancing their careers, developing skills and confidence to operate in

current and potential positions. Each year new mentoring groups are created to work together for the calendar year with facilitators appointed and trained to assist in the groups' development. The need for the facilitation role declines over time and each member of the group may take on the 'expert' role at any time depending on the current needs and strengths of participants. The WGMP caters to all female staff within the university, but take-up of the program has historically been much stronger among non-academic than academic staff. We were particularly interested, therefore, in focusing on perceptions of the program among academics.

Taking an action research perspective, the authors of this paper participated together in the program. Without this program they would not have met and they found it was very successful in developing skills and networks, and meeting professional goals.

In general, mentoring involves the relationship between someone of greater expertise in a given setting, working with someone of lesser experience (Walkington, Vanderheide & Hughes, 2008). The most common approach is a one-to-one relationship and is focused on assisting the 'novice' to grow and learn as a professional (Walkington, 2005), and research tends to focus on this type of mentoring model. However, there is increasing research on group mentoring (Mitchell, 1999; Angelique, H., Kyle, K. and Taylor, E., 2002; McCormack, 2006; Level and Mach, 2005; Osgood Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stanutz' Russett and Rankin, 2001; Wasburn, 2007), which the literature suggests can operate as support for promotion and tenure through the development of a network of relationships and the use of peers as mentors (Walkington, Vanderheide & Hughes, 2008; Osgood Smith, Whitman, Grant, Stanutz' Russett & Rankin, 2001).

Research indicates strong support for a relationship between mentoring and career advancement (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2004) and in the higher education sector it has been demonstrated to be an especially effective strategy for promoting the careers of women – addressing areas such as research, teaching, working towards tenure and striking a balance between work and life (Kram, 1988; McCormack, 2006; Eliasson, Berggren and Bondestam, 2000; Aniftos, 2002; Baker, 2002; Gibson, 2004 and Gardiner, 1999).

In business as well as education settings, organisational benefits of mentoring include increases in productivity, improved retention efforts, motivation of senior staff and enhancement of services offered by the organisation (Ehrich, Hansford & Tennent, 2004). While retaining the benefits of one-on-one mentoring, the group mentoring model removes many of the hindrances of the more traditional mentoring model, including unsuccessful mentor matching, lack of expertise, the exploitative potential of the unequal mentor/mentee relationship and the production of homogeneity in the organisation (Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor, 2002; Wasburn, 2007; West, 2004).

In relation to women's group mentoring programs in higher education, empirical research is sparse, although a small number of recent studies serve to dispel the initial perceptions of many workplace supervisors that group mentoring is "just a woman's chit chat session" (Level & Mach, 2005; West & McCormack, 2003; Quinlan, 1999). However, the success of any mentoring program is only evident if the program is adopted. Despite positive outcomes for members of the program being studied here, take up of the program was low among academic staff and casual corridor conversations suggested that the image (or brand) of the program was often negative, at least among academic staff, suggesting a need to focus on program branding.

The 'brand' allows marketers to differentiate their offering from competitors (Rowley, 1997). The concept of the brand has changed over the years, from a name given to suggest product benefits, simplify choice, imply quality and reduce risk (Rowley, 1997; Keller, and Lehmann, 2006), to that of a relationship engendering trust (Dall'Olmo Riley and de Chernatony, 2000), serving as a self-expressive function for consumers (Krishnan and Hartline, 2001).

Over recent years, branding of services has become a more important focus in the literature, with an emphasis on the need to overcome problems of service intangibility in order to build strong brand recognition (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001; Hermansson & Larsson, 2005). However, literature on how to create a strong service brand is relatively sparse, although various authors have noted the importance of issues such as the 'service encounter' (and thus the behaviour of front-line staff) and the need for employees to fulfil the 'service's promise' (Dall'Olmo Riley & de Chernatony, 2000; Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994). The difficulty of achieving brand consistency in services is also noted (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003).

Brooks (1998) suggests that strong brands for goods or services can be developed through a largely similar process: by setting clear brand objectives, defining a clear positioning and through the selection of appropriate values. The role of the consumer in service branding is also emphasised in the literature, with a focus on defining the role of consumers, recruiting, educating and rewarding customers and managing the consumer mix so as to ensure strong and positive brand perceptions (Brooks, 1998). McDonald, Chernatony & Harris (2001) further propose 'tangibilising' the corporate service brand – that is, providing well-defined reference points to the consumer, such as through physical symbols and representations.

Cunningham's research (2006) on the branding of learning and development demonstrates the use of branding strategies when the service is internal to the organisation. He emphasises the need for branding strategies to include an understanding of the service component, and notes that in the case of workplace training, the competition is the employee's time as well as their perception of the importance of learning (Cunningham, 2006).

The literature indicates that proper branding can reduce perceived risk, increase adoption and ultimately satisfaction. In order to understand how customer perceptions of the corporate program being studied here reflect how branding has been utilised in this case, and how it could be better targeted, an empirical study was undertaken. The methodology for this study will now be discussed.

Methodology

Our approach to answering the research questions involved both a quantitative and qualitative component. An online survey (hosted on www.questionpro.com) explored perceptions of the WGMP among academic staff, and motivations for and barriers to participation. We gave participants the opportunity to give open-ended responses to some questions. We then undertook a series of targeted, semi-structured interviews to further enrich our understanding of the issues raised in the survey.

With a view to our overall aims of ascertaining issues around the need for re-branding of the WGMP, our survey focused on two broad issues. First, we sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of consumer knowledge of and beliefs about the program, with a particular focus on trying to ascertain the extent to which service intangibility (Krishnan & Hartline, 2001; Hermansson & Larsson, 2005) might be a problem in branding of the WGMP. Second, we wanted to develop an idea about the extent to which the program's 'competition' might be affecting program take-up among academic women. Drawing on Cunningham (2006) we defined 'competition' here as the employee's time use and their perception of the importance of mentoring. In other words, not participating could be considered competition to a voluntary corporate program.

A set of 21 items was developed for inclusion in the questionnaire, based on material covered in previous literature, as well as the authors' own experiences of the program, and their

informal discussions with program participants, participants' supervisors and program organizers. These items fell into 5 broad domains:

- Demographics
- Awareness of the program
- Beliefs about program's aims and structure
- Barriers to participation/recommending others to participate
- Additional questions about respondents' beliefs about academic women's career paths

An ethics committee review, consultation with an Information Technology expert and a pilot test of the initial questionnaire with academic staff from one of the authors' work areas resulted in further clarification and adjustment of some items. Once finalised, all full-time and part-time academic staff at the university were emailed an invitation to participate (n=349), excluding for ethical reasons those who worked in the research unit employing one of the authors, with an opening statement which included encouragement for both men and women to participate. As involvement in a staff development program is frequently dependent on the support of supervisors, and as the general views of internal corporate programs within organisations are important indicators of successful branding efforts, we felt it was important to invite participation from both men and women. We gave respondents the opportunity to provide contact details in order to be able to participate in subsequent interviews.

The initial email was sent in March 2008, with a reminder email sent two weeks later. In total, 33 completed responses were received and initial analysis of our data (described in more detail in the section below) found that this included a range of academic levels and disciplines, and a substantial minority of male respondents. As participation in the survey was voluntary, we were unable to avoid the likely bias arising from this; particularly that staff that already had an interest in the program would be more likely to complete the survey. These issues of sample bias, and how they affect interpretation of our results, are discussed below.

The relatively small (approximately 10 per cent) response rate is unsurprising for an online survey of this type. We believe it may also be influenced by the fact that the site university fairly frequently surveys staff online about a range of issues, and while this promotes staff familiarity with online questionnaires, it may have affected the willingness of staff to complete our survey.

The sample for the qualitative interviews (n=11) was collected using the snowball sampling method, commencing with approaches to those survey respondents who had provided their contact details, and then asking respondents to suggest other suitable interviewees. Our aim in choosing respondents for interview was to cover as far as possible the range of views around the program that were represented in the results of the survey, and to make sure that respondents came from as many different academic backgrounds and demographic groups as possible. Many of those contacted agreed to participate, with the main reason for refusal being lack of time.

Survey responses were examined for missing data, and this was re-coded where appropriate to reflect skip patterns in the questionnaire. SAS software was used to manage and analyse the quantitative data. Interviews were recorded with permission by the interviewee, and transcribed by a research assistant. The qualitative data was then analysed both manually and through the use of Leximancer computer software. As the combination of quantitative and qualitative data contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the results, these results are discussed below together, rather than sequentially.

Results

Participation

Our survey results showed that 90 per cent of our respondents were aware of the WGMP prior to completing the survey. This high level of awareness is likely to be the result of a bias in our sample, with academics who were already aware of the program being much more likely to complete an online survey on this subject than those who were unaware of the program. However, qualitative data (discussed later) suggests a level of confusion about the nature of the program which may have led some survey respondents to incorrectly report being aware of the program.

Table 1 provides some basic data about our survey respondents. As can be seen from the table, of our 33 respondents, just over 50 per cent were at Academic Level B (approximately the equivalent of an assistant professor in the United States), with the other respondents fairly evenly distributed across other academic levels, and almost all sample members worked full-time. Given the fairly large proportion of the sample at relatively junior levels, we might have expected a somewhat younger sample age structure, but in fact found that the majority of our respondents fell into the 35 – 54 age group. As noted in the methodology section, our invitation to participate in the survey explicitly invited participation from men, and while the majority of our sample was female (almost 70 per cent), we did have a substantial minority of male respondents. Unfortunately, our sample size was too small to be able to make meaningful quantitative comparisons between responses for men and women, although some interesting patterns emerged in the qualitative data, as described below. Similar demographics were apparent in the eleven semi-structured interviews undertaken.

Variable	Proportion of sample
Female	69.7
Aged less than 35	6.1
Aged 35 - 54	63.6
Aged 55 or more	30.3
Married or partnered	84.9
Main caregiver of a child	42.4
Employed full time	87.5
Worked at study university =>3 years	48.5
Highest qualification doctorate	45.5
Highest qualification masters	24.2
Academic Level A	12.12
Academic Level B	51.52
Academic Level C	18.18
Academic Level D or E	18.18

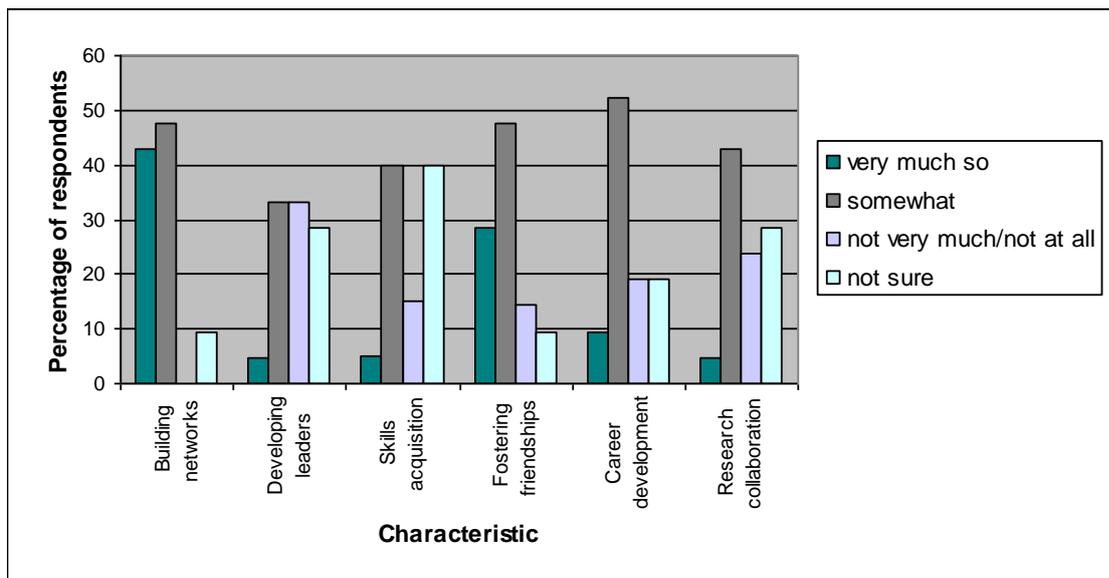
Data source: online survey

Table 1 - Sample characteristics

Perceptions of the program.

Despite the high level of awareness of the program's existence, understanding of the program's purpose and structure was frequently lacking, as demonstrated by our analysis of survey responses asking participants to rate the extent to which a list of characteristics described the program. Analysing the perceptions of only those respondents who had reported previous participation in the program, we found substantial uncertainty and

misunderstanding about the key program goals. These results (Figure 1) demonstrate that while some of the program goals (network building, fostering of friendships) were widely viewed by respondents as important characteristics of the program, perceptions of a number of other aspects of the program were not nearly so clear. For example, well under 10 per cent of the sample identified leader development, skills acquisition and career development as key program characteristics, and many of the program features shown in Figure 1 were seen as 'not very much' or 'not at all' descriptive of the program by around half of all the respondents.



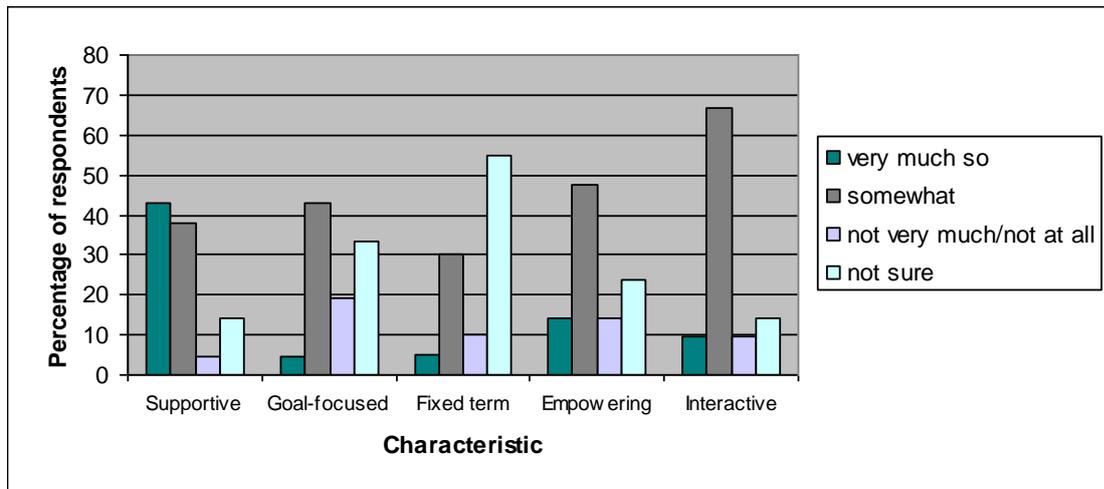
Note:

n=21 (sample limited to respondents who had not reported previously participating in program)

Data source: online survey

Figure 1 - Perceptions of WGMP goals by respondents who were not previous program participants.

Structural features of the program were also widely misunderstood by respondents (Figure 2). While most respondents correctly identified the program as supportive, and at least somewhat interactive and empowering, a majority of respondents were unaware that the program ran for a fixed term (important knowledge in terms of time management and scheduling for potential participants). In addition, very few respondents saw the program as very goal-focused, and many were unaware of this as a key part of the program.



Note: n=21 (sample limited to respondents who had not reported previously participating in program)
Data source: online survey

Figure 2 - Perceptions of WGMP structure by respondents who were not previous program participants.

The qualitative interviews indicated that perceptions were developed largely through experience, or lack of experience, either directly or through informal ‘corridor talk’. One interviewee had undertaken the survey, and responded negatively about the program, but changed her opinion about the program prior to the interview. Although she had not participated in the program herself, her response to why she changed her view was due to a change in experience. *“My initial response to it was hugely negative because I had seen the way it had been implemented in one faculty and I’ve now had the advantage of seeing it implemented across the uni, and it’s a very different thing in different places....”*

It was interesting to note that in the interviews, some people felt they’d participated in the WGMP, but this turned out to be simply an informal mentor-mentee program, unrelated to the WGMP. Another participant initially felt that she had some knowledge of the program’s timing and structure, but as the interview continued it became clear that she was not in fact familiar with the program. Other interviewees had been under the impression that the program was aimed more at non-academic staff.

There was a strong sense in the interviews that participants were generally unaware of any concerted effort by program organisers to disseminate information or recruit participants, with several respondents stating that they didn’t receive information about the program, and only heard about it through participant discussion. One male was frustrated that so many parts of the university operate on their own. He believed the WGMP was one way of improving communication across various parts, and the sense of one of the program’s main strengths being its ability to create bridges between different faculties and disciplines was a recurrent theme through the interviews.

Open-ended survey responses and some initial interviews suggested a feeling that the program might be seen in some way as exclusive, having the appearance of ‘secret women’s business’ and known to and accepted by only a small number of people:

I think we have a group of people who didn't know it existed, and who certainly seem disinterested in it. I think there is also a strong group of people who are involved, and would recognize the importance of its role.

And:

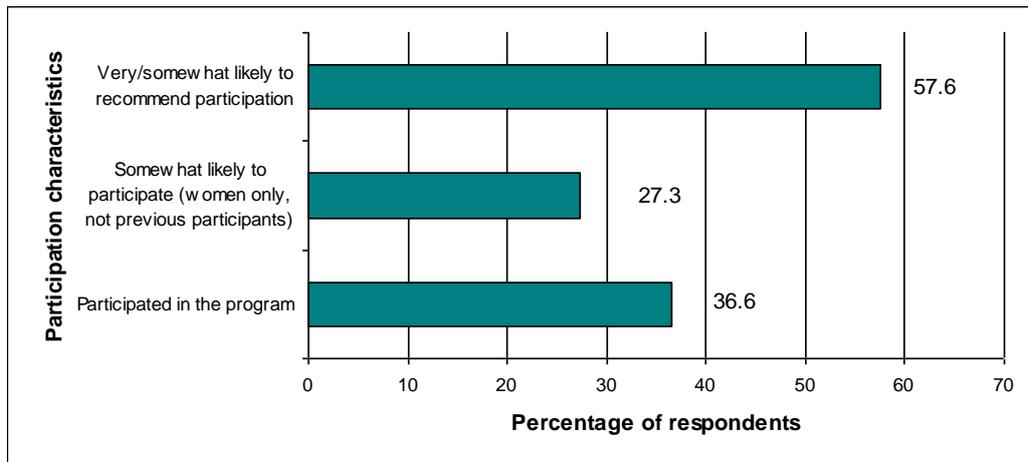
I think there is probably a bit of suspicion from other women but more so males perhaps as a secret women's group and that destroys the purpose of it, what they're trying to do and so I'd like to see an effective marketing campaign.

Further exploration of this issue in interviews tended to suggest that this was not a major problem with program branding - while there was one interviewee who considered the program 'sexist', a more common theme was an expressed need by both male and female participants for similar programs for men as well as women. Very few felt the programs should be mixed, with women saying they would feel less confident undertaking a program with males in it, and that males would tend to "take over".

An important recurrent theme in relation to program perceptions was a sense of communication about the program being weak and scattergun, with a sense that former participants do not communicate back to other staff members the benefits of the program, perhaps due to discomfort about the program's image, or the difficulty of articulating somewhat intangible outcomes. Either way, several interviewees commented on the way the program was not promoted by participants, and that "branding" should be improved.

WGMP Participation

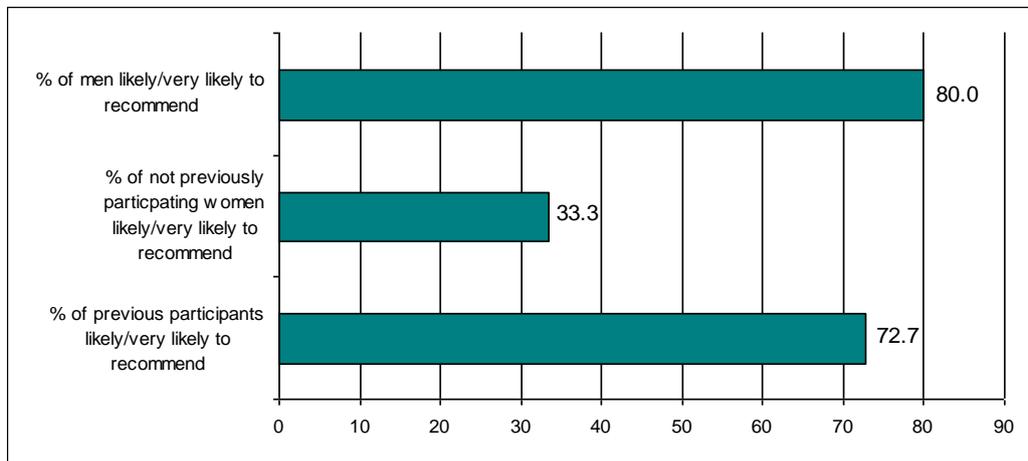
The relatively limited understanding of the program's goals and structure discussed above might be connected with the modest percentage of survey respondents who rated themselves as very or somewhat likely to participate in the program themselves, or who would be likely to recommend participation to a staff member or colleague. These results are shown in Figure 3. Just over one-third of our respondents reported being previous program participants (representing just over half of our female respondents – results not shown). Of those female respondents who reported not previously completing the program, however, none rated themselves as very likely to participate in the program in the future, and only a third considered themselves somewhat likely to do so.



Note: n=33 for previous participation, likelihood of recommending participation; n=11 for likelihood of participation;
Data source: online survey

Figure 3 - WGMP participation characteristics

The likelihood of participants (male and female, regardless of previous participation) to recommend the program to a staff member or colleague was somewhat higher, but was still less than two-thirds of respondents. We investigated this result further (see Figure 4) and found that the vast majority previous program participants and of male respondents rated themselves as very likely or somewhat likely to recommend the program to others. However, only one-third of female respondents who had not previously participated in the program rated their views in this way.



Note: n=10 for men; n=11 for previous participants; n=9 for female non-participants.
Data source: online survey

Figure 4 - Likelihood of recommending WGMP to staff/colleagues

One possible disincentive to undertaking or recommending the program that emerged from the qualitative data was the sense that the program was not sufficiently different from or better than informal mentoring opportunities to justify the extra time and effort perceived as being needed for attendance. After discussing issues of timing, one respondent added: *“In my area there are many good mentors, most female”*. Other

interviewees felt that the possible benefits offered by the program were not sufficient to outweigh the benefits of other activities: *“I’m also interested in using any spare time I have to prepare better lectures and ... with writing research.”* Others expressed reservations about the program’s overall utility: *“The program has some good uses but [in order to recommend it] components need to be much more goal directed. Given the immense pressures facing the University, research and academic leadership should be top priorities.”*

What then, are perceived as incentives for participation, either for respondents themselves or for their staff or colleagues? Some initial answers to these questions were provided in the survey. Using a list of possible program characteristics (some of which described the WGMP and others which did not), we asked respondents to rate each feature in regard to whether or not the feature would encourage them to attend and/or recommend the program (with an additional option allowing respondents to indicate that they did not consider a feature to be applicable to the program). These results are shown in Table 2 and suggest that existing program characteristics (although participants are not necessarily aware of them) appeal to the academics who completed our survey, with particularly strong endorsement of the support, goal-focus, network-building and career development features. An exception to this was our responses for the ‘fixed-term’ characteristic – only just over one third of respondents considered this an incentive to participate or recommend participation, with the remaining responses evenly divided between ‘would not encourage me’ and ‘not applicable’ (results not shown).

Program feature	Would encourage attendance/recommendation
	%
Supportive	86.2
Goal-focused	82.8
Focused on building networks	82.8
Focused on developing leaders	73.3
Fixed term	34.5
Skills acquisition	73.3
Empowering	73.3
Interactive	75
Political	10.3
Fostering friendships	72.4
Career development	87.1
Research collaboration	80

Note: a small number of respondents skipped one or more of these characteristics, so sample sizes for this set of questions range between 28 and 31

Data source: online survey

Table 2 - Characteristics likely to encourage attendance or recommendation for others to attend

Open-ended and interview responses were useful in assessing incentives for (and barriers to) participation and practical issues – related to time and meeting scheduling –

were also prominent themes: *“While I’m sure the program is valuable and a great opportunity, I’m not sure I would have time in my current position and with commitments outside work to participate properly.”*

Negative views of the program by colleagues and supervisors rated as much less important in terms of deterrents, and supervisors tended to report positively on the program. One female supervisor, however, did comment that their team got a lot out of the program, but it did not feed back into work performance: *“My only real concern is that currently people develop and grow but this is not fed back into their workplace performance properly.”*

Another supervisor was surprised that one of his staff members, who was undertaking the program, had not returned to him with her views, drawing a link to perhaps more skill based activities:

Yes, I’m surprised that [staff member] didn’t come in and say oh thanks for sending me away on that, that was great or whatever, because [staff member] would normally do that if I send her away on a... PowerPoint ... workshop or something. She would normally say oh this was really good and I think I can use this skill.

Implications and limitations

While the small sample obtained for both the quantitative and qualitative components of this research represents a limitation of this research, there was a strong diversity of views on the perceptions of the program among respondents, and we were able to glean much rich data relevant to program branding. In addition, as noted earlier, our sample is likely to have been biased towards academics with an existing interest in or knowledge of the WGMP. We also had a gender bias in our sample, although this was less prominent than we had expected at the outset of the project. These sample issues should be kept in mind, however, when interpreting our results. In addition, while we argue that the recommendations we discuss may be relevant to any voluntary corporate program, they were developed in the context of a specific project, and further research would be needed to be able to generalise these results.

Our results demonstrate that perceptions of the program were often incorrect, or at least diverse. While some respondents felt the program was unstructured, with no concrete goals; others felt it was too goal-orientated and planned. There was also some sense that it did not feed back into the workplace, and therefore the time commitment was not worthwhile. The perception that the program lacked concrete goals, or was of doubtful utility compared with informal mentoring already available in the workplace, meant that people did not see it warranted the devotion of time. This reinforces Cunningham’s (2006) discussion of the impact of time commitment on desire to participate in corporate training. While time constraints, questions of program worth and a general lack of understanding of key program features were the strongest themes emerging from our results, the female focus and a perceived lack of openness about the program were noted by some research participants in negative ways. Again, this is another perception which could be altered by

effectively promoting the product, and perhaps opening mentoring up to other staff members.

The promotion of the program has been relatively lacking in recent years, and designed by administrative, rather than academic staff. Many of the promotional flyers indicate that the program assists people in getting to know others across the university, undertake group goals and so on. It also focuses on the “time off” given by faculties, which makes sense for general staff, but is not really applicable in an academic career. Because the program is effectively “designed” each year by participants, promotion of the program has tended to imply the sky is the limit. This could easily be interpreted as a lack of focus. Therefore the perceptions of the program probably do relate to the promotion.

It was evident that the brand was not strong within the academic community of the university, creating confusion and a lack of loyalty – for example, several respondents confused the WGMP with other staff development and training programs. It is also hard to recommend the program without knowledge, creating a program that is technically open to everyone in the academic staff, but with very little understanding of the program’s benefits, and substantial gaps in even fundamental awareness of the program’s existence.

The research has several practical implications for program branding:

1. Timing
2. Academic staff involvement in design of program promotion
3. Proper positioning of the program to be established prior to the development of promotional materials

In line with Cunningham’s (2006) findings, it was evident through our research that time commitment was a strong barrier for commitment to our corporate program. Most respondents were not aware that approaches to time constraints were developed each year by the participants themselves. Therefore, it is essential that this be made clear in promotion. Organisers must also recognise that a big time commitment is a problem and could greatly impact on academic involvement.

The results indicate that the program is being poorly targeted at academic staff. The concrete outcomes of the program are not being articulated to academic staff and with high requirements for involvement, academics do not see the point in committing their time. It is recommended that the promotion of the program targeting academics be designed by academics or at least that consultation with and input from academic staff members is incorporated into promotion.

As mentioned previously, proper branding needs to start with good objectives and positioning (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2003). Furthermore, participants for corporate programs need to be properly recruited and educated in order for them to be involved (McDonald, Chernatony & Harris, 2001). It is therefore recommended that the organisers go back to basics and reconsider the positioning of the program, and re-design all promotion from the website to flyers and even basic emails notifying staff about the program. All promotional elements need to send a consistent message about the program and target academics in a way that demonstrates understanding about their work requirements.

Understanding the target market is essential and often lacking when branding a voluntary corporate service program.

This paper has discussed findings from quantitative and qualitative research in order to develop an understanding of perceptions of a specific corporate program. We believe the findings can be utilised in any corporate setting and have implications for practice. Staff are reluctant to give up time for something which they perceive to have no concrete outcomes and this needs to be considered in all promotional efforts for staff development programs. Further research is required to make considerable implications for theory; however this paper makes a contribution toward the application of branding theory. Further research could provide a comparison of group mentoring and one-to-one mentoring.

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