

Cass Bayes Business School: Rebranding Due to Slavery Links

Interview with Caroline Wiertz, Professor of Marketing and Deputy Dean, Bayes Business School

The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in June of 2020 led to an outcry in the U.S. and across Europe and put the spotlight on brands with any history of racial injustice. One of these brands was Cass Business School, part of City, University of London, and named after the Sir John Cass's Foundation when it made a gift in 2002. It turns out that the Foundation's, and thus the school's namesake, Sir John Cass was a 17th-century merchant and a major proponent of the slave trade. He was involved in the Royal Africa Company and had direct contact with slave agents in Africa and the Caribbean. A high-profile debate ensued, pitting those who considered the name change a moral imperative against others who feared the change would dilute the school's brand value. The university's Council ultimately decided to drop the name, and the school is now rebranding as Bayes Business School, named after Thomas Bayes and his famous theorem. In this interview, Caroline Wiertz, Professor of Marketing and leader of the name change project group, gives an insider view of how Cass used an open innovation process to manage the highly complex task of rebranding a premier institution.



Daniel ✕ *When you read in the news that Sir John Cass was an active participant in the slave trade, did you realize instantly that your business school might be in trouble?*

Caroline ✕ The fact was news for most of us. Sir John Cass, until then, had simply been a philanthropist and the namesake of the Sir John Cass Foundation which had been founded based on his will. As a marketing professor, I had the immediate feeling that we would need to react and might have to change our name.

How important was the name of Cass for your brand?

Luckily, Sir John Cass wasn't our founding father or otherwise central to our history. We became the Cass Business School only around 2000, after we received a donation of £5 million from the Sir John Cass Foundation for a new building. At that time, it was decided to build a brand for the Business School apart from the University, and the school was renamed from City University Business School to Cass Business School. The foundation is actually doing great work supporting the education of young people in London, and we are cooperating very well.



← CAROLINE WIERTZ

ABOUT BAYES BUSINESS SCHOOL (FORMERLY CASS BUSINESS SCHOOL)

The business school was established by City, University of London in 1966. It is one of only around 100 schools globally to be triple accredited by the three largest and most influential business school accreditation organizations and is consistently one of the top-ranking business schools in the United Kingdom. The campus is located on the edge of the City of London and Shoreditch – the financial and tech centers of London. It has more than 4,000 students and more than 40,000 alumni from all over the world.

In 2002, following a donation from the Sir John Cass Foundation, the school moved to new premises and changed its name to Cass Business School, making the 17th-century merchant its namesake. Differentiating the business school from the rest of the university was part of a branding strategy to compete as an international business school in a market dominated by U.S. universities.

When it came to light that Sir John Cass was a proponent of slavery, the school removed Cass from its name and in 2021 renamed itself as Bayes Business School after Thomas Bayes, a non-conformist theologian and mathematician best known for his foundational work on conditional probability.

www.bayes.city.ac.uk

ABOUT CAROLINE WIERTZ

Caroline Wiertz is Professor of Marketing and Deputy Dean at Bayes Business School and was the leader of the task force that managed the rebranding of the Business School after it dropped the Cass name. Her main research interests lie in the areas of consumer research and new media marketing. In her former role as Associate Dean for Entrepreneurship, she looked after City Ventures, the umbrella organization that develops and delivers all of the university's entrepreneurship activities.

THE INTERVIEWER

Daniel Korschun, Associate Professor and Marketing Department Head at Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA, conducted the interview in June 2021.



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Which options were available to disentangle the business school from any association with the slave business?

As you can imagine, this was a widely and emotionally discussed topic. From a marketing perspective, there were several options to deal with this: We could have argued that Cass had become a brand by itself, beyond the person, and that we did not have to change our name. Or we could have turned CASS into an acronym for something else. Both of these options would have been based on the argument that it might be wiser to spend money on equity, diversity and inclusion projects, instead of rebranding. However, this was really a moral issue about what we believe as an institution, and changing the name was an important signal about our values.

What did you know then about the feelings of other stakeholders on a name change?

To get a better picture of the sentiments, we asked a sample of students and alumni, and all our members of staff, for their opinion. The results from this brief consultation were very mixed: Staff were overwhelmingly in favor, current students were mostly in favor, and alumni were mostly against a name change. It was clear from the very beginning that we had a situation where it would be impossible to make everyone happy. It was also clear that it wouldn't be possible to simply have a vote on an issue that is about our core values and that affects minorities' rights.

How was the decision made to change the name?

This was a reputation issue and decisions related to reputation are made by the Council of City, University of London, which is our parent university. Our Dean recommended that Cass should go for the name change to safeguard the moral identity and fabric of the school, and that is what the Council decided on July 6th. The decision was publicly communicated on July 9th. Of course, when you drop a name, you need a new name and you need to be prepared for all kinds of questions and controversy. For handling these matters, the Business School then installed a task force.

So, the decision to change the name of the business school was made a month after the slavery link of Sir John Cass had surfaced in the media. How did you end up in charge of the delicate issue of rebranding Cass Business School?

As one of the longer-serving marketing professors, I had expected to be involved to some extent, but I was on sabbatical at the time. After the announcement to change the name, it was obvious that coordinated effort was urgently needed and towards the end of July, I ultimately agreed to take stewardship and got officially involved.

When it comes to corporate activism like this, there's always the concern that you're not doing enough to address the issue, that it feels like window-dressing. Is changing the name enough to prove moral integrity?

No, definitely not. A name change alone would be just virtue signaling. It was obvious from the very beginning that the name change would only be an important symbolic gesture, and that we must do a lot more to actually address racial inequality. And this is why we added the motto "changing more than a name" below our old name and logo, which we had to keep until we have a new name, because, legally, you need a name.

This means that the school really had two projects going: "changing the name" and "changing more than a name"?

Yes, to me, the name change is mostly a conduit to be able to address other things and to keep the pressure on that we actually do these other things. It is a very useful way to keep the focus on the really important work needed, and that is actually happening now. So, it was clear that it can't just be window dressing.

So, the discovery of the history of Cass changed the ways the school addresses racial inequality and justice?

Yes, in a big way! Immediately in the summer, we conducted a staff consultation and highlighted problems within the school. We now have two co-directors for race equity and

inclusion who are part of the senior leadership team. They work on a whole range of initiatives for both staff and students, and in the future also alumni, to support a more diverse environment. Like in most business schools in the UK, our leadership is still predominantly male and predominantly White. Beyond that, we are reviewing our entire curriculum. We are a global Business School with students from all over the world, and that needs to be reflected in what we teach, who we hold up as examples, and so on.

What about the donation you received from the Sir John Cass Foundation? Did nobody request that you give back the 5 million pounds?

That was one of the biggest questions we got from the very beginning. It came up because people were angry and said, unless you give back the money, it's all pointless. But returning the money to the foundation wouldn't have helped anybody. After all, the foundation wasn't the problem because it does really great work for the right kind of people. The real issue was that we were celebrating a slave trader by giving him the honor of our name. With the blessing of the foundation, we decided to repurpose the money into a scholarship fund for Black UK-domiciled students from less privileged backgrounds. We committed to fund ten undergraduate scholarships per year.

So, the program is funded with the symbolic money that was brought in by the Foundation?

Yes, and we not only fund tuition fees, but also living costs through a stipend and offer a wraparound support program for the students. Plus, we also engage in an outreach program into local schools to identify and encourage the right kinds of students to apply. In this way, the scholarships are specifically aimed at people who would have been affected by the legacy of Sir John Cass, which are basically Black UK-domiciled students.

Let's return to the name change. I heard that there has been quite a bit of resistance to the dropping of the name. What forms did it take?

A group of alumni started a petition against the name change on the change.org platform, and around 4000 people signed this petition: students and alumni and possibly also others. Alumni were probably the biggest group of opposers.

Did you dig deeper into their motives?

Yes. We wanted 100% transparency for the process and communicated very proactively in newsletters etc. In response, we got hundreds of emails on the name change. We also engaged in social media listening. All these data served as a basis for a stakeholder position analysis. Basically, we looked at people who are in favor and against the change and then classified their positions to identify areas where alignment could be found. We also tried to respond to each and every "serious" email to offer more explanation.

I assume the effect of the name change on brand value was a hot topic.

Some said that it would dilute brand value and diminish the value of their hard-earned and expensive degree. For some people, the UK's colonial history seemed far away, and they did not see much importance in the topic of racial justice, especially because they did not experience discrimination



while studying with us. That is of course a good thing, but it doesn't mean that their experience is universal and that racism doesn't exist. Some people saw attempts to cancel culture and history. Others said that they did not want a degree with a slave trader's name and that they had paid for the education and not for a degree. So, all these different positions on brand value and other topics helped us figure out how to deal with the name change.

How did you go about finding the new name?

It was clear that people were upset that they hadn't been consulted more extensively before the name change was decided, and, therefore, we wanted to involve them as much as possible in finding the new name. And from a marketing perspective it also makes a lot of sense to engage all stakeholders. We don't own our brand; all our stakeholders do. And we need to make sure that they continue to be our brand ambassadors later, especially our 40,000 alumni all over the world.

That's why you decided to crowd-source the search for a new name?

Yes, open innovation produces really good results and people are even more likely to accept the outcome, even if it isn't their preferred one, when they have been involved. So, we set up the Naming Project Group who would do the actual work in a highly participatory process. And we established a Naming Steering Committee of all stakeholder groups – students, alumni, staff, employers and from City University to guide the process and decide which name to recommend to the University Council who would make the final decision.

How did you organize the crowd sourcing and who was invited to participate?

Between August and December, we had over 30 meetings with different groups where we prepared the ground for the crowdsourcing exercise. We talked about the history of Sir John Cass and why the name change was important. At the same time, we built a custom naming portal. The portal was open to all our alumni, all our staff and all our students. For seven weeks in December and January, they could register and make naming suggestion and like the naming suggestions of others. For the names, we had certain guidelines: Cass was not allowed, for example.

Could you give us some figures on the output?

Sure. Over 2,200 people registered and we got over 500 naming submissions – actually much more than we had thought – and of these, 155 were unique names that complied with the naming guidelines. Separately, we also worked with a branding agency to have a different type of input and got even more names. In total, we evaluated 211 names.

How did you narrow them down?

First, we worked with trademark lawyers who already eliminated a whole bunch of names, because of trademark issues. Then, we had an evaluation committee who independently evaluated every name on how credible, compelling or distinctive it was, using a nine-item scale. We proceeded with a list of the 35 top-scoring names and then looked at international translations, did more checks, like on race equity and inclusion, and more trademark checks on an international level. And for person names, of course, we had to do due diligence checks to make sure their background was clean. Thirteen names got the green light and made it to the long list which was then further reduced to a short list of four by the Naming Steering Committee.

And finally, you selected Bayes Business School.

Yes, we went through another major consultation. We created a questionnaire that described the rational and brand story for each of the four shortlisted names and then asked for evaluations. This questionnaire was sent to our 40,000 stakeholders (alumni, staff, students and prospective students) and we got about 8,300 replies. We then analyzed these responses and Bayes turned out to be most popular choice across stakeholder groups, regions, gender, study programs, national backgrounds and ethnicities. The full report with all the data can be downloaded from our website.

What qualifies Bayes as namesake? Why does it fit with the brand?

The name was independently suggested by seven people through the naming portal – actually by staff, alumni and students. It was one of the most "liked" names, too, so it was a popular option from the beginning. The secret connection is that Thomas Bayes is buried on a beautiful, old cemetery next to the Business School. And people know this, and it's



quite common to make a bit of a pilgrimage there. But the real resonance is with Bayes' theorem, which tells us that we should update our beliefs in proportion to the weight of new evidence. This message encapsulates our name change and seems in general important in today's world full of entrenched and partisan views. In addition, our school is very strong in Finance and Actuarial Science, so the mathematician Bayes is really quite close to our community.

Finally, you had a consensus! Congratulations, Caroline, what a great initiative! Do you have any advice for marketers that confront these types of rebranding issues?

My first advice would be to consult with stakeholders and to do a proper stakeholder position analysis. You need to be aware of the different positions that people have, because only then can you actually develop a strategy. Secondly, I would suggest not just good communication but 100% transparency. There will never be complete consensus, but it helps if all the steps and outcomes are broadly accessible.

That's a great piece of advice. And, by the way, I really like the frequently asked questions on your website. I think they are among the best ones I've come across. It's the first time I've encountered FAQs that I was truly curious about.

That's very kind. It is the outcome of our listening and we did a lot of listening. It gives you the insight into what kind of year we had.

Thanks so much for sharing this experience with us. Your last year must have been extremely challenging with the pandemic and the name change project on top of that. I wish you some time to relax and a bright future for the successfully renamed Bayes Business School. ✕