



Challenging Thinking

The words we use

Research has shown that one particular challenge faced by many universities is the stereotypes and perceptions of business: They may see the public sector as bureaucratic, inflexible, not customer focused and difficult to deal with. Despite many great examples of successful university-industry exchange and collaboration, those universities that have actively engaged in establishing a professional and strategic approach to commercialisation and partnering may still find it difficult to change the perceptions of business to an image of professionalism, collaboration and mutuality. The lack of a traditional professional identity of a commercialisation manager may further add to this dilemma. At the same time, many commercial arms of universities are not yet fully embraced even by their internal customers, the researchers. Given the rapid changes of academic requirements and roles, many researchers may not yet be accustomed to external input into their research endeavours or the commercial use of their research and expertise.

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While shifting a perception or image held by people in relation to universities and their commercial arms on the whole is likely to be a long-term effort, innovative collaborative actors may start to differentiate themselves from others by using fresh terminology associated with the idea and identity they want to portray.

For example, the term ‘technology transfer office’ is well known and commonly used. Looking at the terminology, however, what does the term tell us? First, it deals with the transfer of technology. The word ‘transfer’ indicates a one-sided approach. Commonly used definitions of technology transfer, e.g. “the process of moving innovations from their origin to their point of operation” (Guerin, 1999, p. 443) also reflect the very traditional order of events: research is conducted within the university, leading to a technology that is subsequently offered to industry in form of licenses, patents or consulting services or utilised in spin-off companies. ‘Technology transfer office’ also includes the word office, focusing on the place and thus taking the focus off the people who make it happen.

If a commercial arm recognizes the essential nature of early stage partnerships between various parties in the innovation and knowledge exchange context, why is it described by words that indicate transfer rather than exchange, institution rather than people?

Words traditionally used in this context neither capture the dynamic role of commercialisation and partnership managers nor the complex web of interactions they have to deal with. As researchers pointed out in the services-dominant logic theory of marketing, human thinking is restricted by the terminology used and the vision we have learned to associate with a term (Kohli in Rust et al. 2006). Using old terminology for new ideas is thus inherently flawed and likely to limit the understanding and application of new ideas.

We thus hope to continue and broaden our discussion of the right terminology we can use in promoting a new, innovative and partnering-focused breed of universities and commercial arms. Could it be a partnering team, a commercialisation partner, partner in creating value or others?

It is important to note, however, that fresh and appropriate terminology will only succeed in promoting our professionalism and collaboration efforts if relevant actions follow. Only consistency in professionalism and partnering will establish the desired image.