

What is Branding?

A Tutorial for Nonprofit Organizations

by Nancy E. Schwartz

A. Introduction

Branding is the art of creating a consistent, recognizable, and clear unified voice or personality that conveys your organization's uniqueness, focus, and values.

The public sees your message every day – through communicating with your employees, looking at your Web site, reviewing your print material, and even reviewing a fundraising appeal. Your brand creates a **unique position for your organization in your audiences' minds, making it possible to differentiate your offerings. It is the most efficient means of communicating organizational values to all of your audiences.** Your brand and image should be clear, and every communication should build upon the foundation of your mission.

Branding has been evolved from humble beginnings as an extension of consumer product packaging to its current status as a key component of organizational strategy. Now brands are being developed deliberately by nonprofits, rather than as a by-product of other activities (e.g., Girl Scout cookies). In doing so, organizations are forming the basis of enduring relationships.

- The first step is to understand the key characteristics of a brand.
 - A Brand is more than a logo, packaging, or design.
 - A Brand constitutes the essence and values of an organization's work, product, or service. The organization's image and Brand Equity are developed by how its personality is perceived.

A Brand is the sum total of key ideas, emotions, physical attributes, and perceptions that are communicated to your stakeholders (actually think base and partners—donors, volunteers, members, the media, clients, and more), and associated with your organization's work. A brand can help your organization bridge changes over time (e.g., changes in services offered) as it keeps audiences plugged into more enduring values and benefits.

- A Brand is the shorthand for the identifying characteristics its audience retains and recalls when they think about the experience provided by your organization and its products or services. It is your organization's organizational commitment to deliver products (goods, services, or programs) that are consistent with the brand positioning. This is the brand promise.

A successful branding strategy:

- Defines the core identity of the brand
- Positions the brand in the most meaningful and profitable space (can't just create, have to plan how to implement it and do it)
- Communicates the value and unique selling proposition of the brand

- Measures brand performance and identifies criteria for continuous improvement

Branding determines:

- How your services and products are differentiated from competitors?
- How your organization promises to deliver quality and consistency?
- How your organization interacts with its public at every point of contact?
- How your organization builds brand equity and generates brand value?
- Your organization's voice.

What is brand identity or positioning?

Developing a brand identity or positioning statement helps you assess the attributes of your brand that differentiate it from competitors and create ties of loyalty with customers.

In doing so, and adding "look and fee" and voice, you'll build the brand equity that will expand your brand's impact in this competitive nonprofit marketplace. This improved performance can increase organizational success.

What is brand promise or value?

A strong brand has integrity of identity and lasting value to its customers. Strong brands help orgs to forge and maintain long-term relationships with key audiences based on knowledge and trust. Prerequisites are:

- Knowledge of the customer through communications and interactivity.
- Trust of the brand based on consistency of quality and fulfilled brand promise.

This competitive advantage is known as Brand Value. Brand Value is achieved through the value proposition of functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provide value to the customer and supply the reasons for the continued choice of one organization over another.

B. Why is Branding a Must for Nonprofit Organizations?

There are a growing number of nonprofits seeking to secure a piece of the limited amount of charitable contributions, prospective volunteer or board hours, customers for products or services. As a result, there is now, as you know, heated competition within the nonprofit sector. Branding makes it possible for organizations to convey a consistent overall positioning while tailoring offerings for multiple publics.

With the rise of the Web, branding is more important than ever. Since information can be provided cheaply to any location, traditional advantages of size and location lose importance and brands—the values, skills, and differentiators of an organization—become more important than ever.

In addition, for all types of organizations, including for-profits, the marketplace has changed. Our customers will talk about us whether we like it or not. It's time that

nonprofits join the conversation. Developing a brand is a proactive strategy. For example, a well-established brand can help your organization to carve out a unique position for itself in the public mindset, preventing negative images of other organizations (in the case of a Red Cross or United Way scandal) from spilling over to their own causer.

Brands provide the following benefits for users:

1. A simple and effective vehicle to convey the benefits offered by organizations and the goods and services they offer.
2. Second, brands offer an assurance of quality and consistency.

At the same time, brands provide these benefits for nonprofits, the providers of goods and services:

1. Enable organizations to differentiate their offerings in the mind of the consumer. This differentiation forms the basis of enduring relationships with customers.

As a byproduct of brand development, nonprofits often increase their interest in protecting the reputation of the brand (brand equity) with the public mindset. In a situation such as post-September 11, a strong brand helped many nonprofit agencies to prevent negative images of other organizations (e.g., the Red Cross) from spilling over to their own cause.

HOWEVER, for a brand to provide these benefits, it must offer more than a recognizable name and image. There must be a corresponding organizational commitment to deliver products (goods, services, or programs) that are consistent with the brand's positioning.

C. Why *not* nonprofit brands?

There are those who will argue against the idea of branding, usually based on one or more of the following concepts:

- Make nonprofits seem "commercial." (PBS increasingly drawing on corporate support. Is it still different than commercial stations?)
- Magnify the impact of negative information about a nonprofit, highlighting connections between different divisions, programs, locations that might otherwise not be apparent. (United Way scandal. National office scandal affected local affiliates, despite the fact that each affiliate is completely independent).
- Serve as a rallying point for those who object to the causes and issues supported by the nonprofit. A target. (NRA is an example. Widely recognized as an advocate for the right to bear arms but name is also used as a reason for arms-related crime etc. The NRA is a focal point for frustration on firearms policy).

D. Getting Started

Who are you? What do you stand for? What are your mission, services, and products?
Who are your stakeholders? Where is your opportunity? How do you create value?
Where are you going? How do you plan to get there?

All of these questions are necessary for you to answer to develop strong branding.

It's All About Understanding: The First Three Steps

While developing a brand takes time, energy, and patience, it doesn't necessarily take a pot of gold to finance. But, before you can begin a branding campaign, you need to lay the strategic groundwork in three key steps:

1. Understand your organization and its present brand position (it probably has one, even if you haven't explicitly developed and launched a brand):
 - Who you are (mission, philosophy)?
 - What business are you in (issues, campaigns, products, services)?
 - Against whom do you compete?
2. Understand your entire customer segments (may require audience research—surveys, focus groups, meetings). **The brand will be an efficient means of communicating organizational values to each of these groups.**
 - Who are your constituencies? Usually, audiences include clients, donors, volunteers, and the government, among others.
 - What's needed by the customers you serve?
 - How do they currently perceive your organization?

Your brand will impact various audience segments in different ways:

- For donor audiences, brands help convey the spirit of what the nonprofit seeks to achieve.
- For volunteers and staff, a brand enables nonprofits to communicate the benefits of working for them.
- For client audiences, the benefits of brands are more conventional—a warranty of quality and a statement of the philosophy that underlies the products and services being offered.

The brand must be tailored, since each audience will have different needs. On the other hand, there must be some overall consistency, so that your nonprofit doesn't seem to embrace different values for different groups.

3. Understand Your Organization's Products and Services
 - What are all of your products and services and how do they relate to each other?
 - What's different about your business (relative weaknesses and strengths)?
 - What unique about the way you do business?

Next Steps: Developing Your Brand

Brand building is a process that establishes and, over time, solidifies a relationship between your organization and your audience. For success, your organization must

1. **Allocate resources to maintain and evolve the brand to respond to changes in social attitudes, as well as to create it.**
 2. **Build the right brand team—including staff, board members, outside consultants, and other stakeholders.**
- Establish who in the organization is the brand manager or evangelist.**

Developing your positioning statement is next. This statement must clearly and concisely define your target audience, the frame of reference you would like your brand to create, and the user benefit your brand provides (otherwise known as your "competitive advantage" or "point of differentiation"). Remember—this is not your mission statement (which is more internally oriented).

Effective positioning requires:

- Understanding your present position
- Building on your present strengths
- Searching for a niche.
- Repositioning the competition (e.g. a hospital that emphasizes high-touch personal treatment could develop a positioning strategy that implies competitors are sterile and unfriendly.)

After you develop your branding/ positioning statement, your organization's branding team need to develop somewhat loose key messages, a graphic "look and feel," and a voice that convey your organization's brand to your audiences. All the language used in your communications and marketing materials needs to reflect this brand identity that defines your organization.

These are the next steps:

- Decide on your branding/positioning statement.
- Develop key messages.
- Determine the "voice" of the organization (which should be human, not canned), as well as the graphic "feel" and "look."
- Establish internal communication and interview protocols.

When You Just Aren't Enough

Branding can be an enormous job, especially for organizations with small professional staffs, but there are many outside resources that can help. From individual communication consultants to public relations/ marketing communications agencies, you can work with external specialists in any or all of five ways:

- To help establish your branding foundation
- To help think through strategy
- To plan tactics
- To execute
- To evaluate.

External expertise can be brought in for a one-day retreat on brand and external marketing strategy, to facilitate your work, or to produce a brief action plan for you to

follow. Or it can be used to create a comprehensive, detailed branding strategy and to implement that plan.

You can pay on an à la carte basis for each piece of work, or you can establish a monthly retainer-based budget and develop a plan for what activities will be undertaken each month to build your brand.

Collaboration between your organization and external communications experts allows you to draw on a fresh perspective and a broad pool of knowledge regarding your branding strategies, tactics, and goals.

Brand Delivery

Developing a brand is just the beginning. It must also be **nourished and maintained**.

Next steps are:

1. Create the necessary creative communications.
2. Make sure everyone buys in. Train staff and other stakeholders who are brand messengers.
3. Make sure there is an integrated strategy.
4. Pretest the brand, and related communications, as much as possible.
5. Monitor and revise as necessary to changing social attitudes.

In order to be effective, everyone in the organization, from the executive director to the mailroom personnel, must know what the organization - and the message campaign that surrounds it - stands for. Read the Cluetrain Manifesto (<http://www.cluetrain.com/>) for more on this topic.

If your organization's executive director is the "pitch person" for your outgoing communications, but your board chair is "spokesperson" for media opportunities and interviews, they both must articulate the same message, using the same language and key messages. If you are designing and sending materials to your members, potential members, and other audiences, the "look" of all your materials, including such elements as your logo and color scheme, must be consistent throughout all your materials.

There must also be a clear strategic understanding of protocol for media requests and interviews. For branding and consistency purposes, your organization should use one person as the main spokesperson (frequently the organization's president) and then "brand" additional spokespeople from within the organization by their areas of expertise, making them available for specific topic interviews when appropriate. You also need to have an internal plan as to what happens if, for example, the organization's main

spokesperson is not available for an interview or to comment on a breaking news story that needs your organization's input.

E. Getting the Word Out

Building a brand doesn't necessarily take an expensive, flashy ad campaign, but it does require an integrated marketing communications (IMC) effort, which uses a variety of tactics that can include:

- Public and media relations
- Events and speaking opportunities
- Corporate sponsorships/partnerships
- Using volunteers to support the brand

To build a branding campaign, you need to determine the proper mix of these tools, the sequence in which they will be rolled out, and how much you will spend on each tool.

Public and media relations: Feeding the media a steady diet of useful news and being the primary provider of new market information about your issue arena is the key here. Barraging the media with facts and information that don't fit into a beat the reporter covers can do more harm than good. When pitching the media information on your industry or organization, provide only things that fit their editorial needs.

Developing good metrics about your industry's market can often serve a dual purpose. You can use these numbers in marketing materials to recruit potential members, but they can also be very useful to journalists looking for information and statistics about your industry or organization. Such information is kept on file by journalists and may be used in stories about the organization itself or in larger "context" pieces about the industry. You also should be ready to react to studies distributed about your industry by others, including academics, other organizations, and government agencies.

You also should keep the media abreast of your organization's events and activities that might be of interest to them. By providing media with an advance calendar and detailed program of your activities, you increase the possibility that they might be able to attend or cover your event or activity.

In preparation for working with the media, you should have a media kit available, with information on your organization, leadership, and industry in general. If you have a Web site, make sure that you have a pressroom section where all the materials are available to the press. Paper media kits are still important to have, but journalists increasingly are turning to the Web for their initial research (e.g., statistics, people to speak with, and fact checking).

In media relations, "availability" is the word to live by. For your relationship with the media to work, they need to know you are available to help them at any time. Just because your organization office closes for business at 5:30 doesn't mean that a

reporter won't need you at 6:30 for that last piece of vital story information. Make sure the press knows how to contact you at any time.

Events and speaking opportunities: Leverage events to highlight mission-critical information relevant to your target audience. Tying events to news, anniversaries, or other observances, and using local celebrities whenever possible, can give your event an advantage over the "manufactured" news of press conferences, ribbon cuttings, and other happenings that fight for the attention of journalists and their audience.

Maximizing speaking opportunities at third-party trade shows and conferences is a great way to raise the awareness of your organization. Positioning your organization and its leadership as the "experts" in the industry tends to encourage people to turn to your organization when they need information about the industry or are looking to join an organization.

Corporate sponsorships or partnerships: While this tactic may not be for every organization, and may even be controversial within your organization, it can greatly raise the awareness of your organization and corporate partner. When partnering with a corporation, look both at your resources and theirs to create programs or events that serve both of your interests while leveraging each of your strengths. For many organizations, this means trading your access to volunteer manpower for a company's market reach and name recognition.

The key to success here is to help companies fulfill a real community need while blending their products or services naturally into your program. Make sure your partner gets plenty of visual identification with the issue in front of the media by including them in press announcements, photo opportunities, and other publicity opportunities.

Using volunteers to support your brand: Your volunteers are your most valuable resources. Getting your target users involved in your branding campaign can help build both a breadth of awareness and a depth of goodwill.

Your volunteers are your best spokespeople when it comes to talking about your organization, because they believe in your organization and the services that you provide. Volunteers also add another level of expertise to your organization by bringing their industry experience and knowledge to the table. By using your volunteers in press activities, speaking opportunities, and other activities you bring another level of expertise and credibility to your brand.

F. Monitor, Measure, and Revise Your Branding

One of the keys to branding success is the constant measurement of the effectiveness of your efforts - which is often a forgotten part of the campaign.

Two different kinds of measurements can be used: output measures, which are the amount of activity you are performing to garner exposure for your brand and the

likelihood of having reached specific targets; and outgrowth measures, which gauge message reception, whether or not your target audience actually received the message directed at them, and whether they paid attention to, understood, and retained your messages.

Measurement is a very important component of a branding campaign; you don't want to find out halfway through your branding campaign that your messages aren't resonating with your audience.

You must also evolve your brand to match changes in social attitude, such as post-9/11 or now, in the midst of war.

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