

Brand Identity for Nonprofits?

Focused intently on the services they provide, non-profit organizations are often unaware of the substantial asset they have in their brand identity. Not just a function of retailing consumer products, brand identity can offer reinforcement of mission, operating stability, and increased revenue, tying together diverse elements of strategy to produce real and lasting results.

Free associate with the word *brand* and you'll likely come up with Coke, BMW, Starbucks, and some apparel maker who fits your demographic. We all understand that retail brand identity is a force that can drive sales far beyond the level achievable through quality and value alone, and that businesses invest enormous resources in creating and maintaining brands.

The benefits of brand identity are not specific to consumer business enterprises; we make that connection because their branding work is a major, highly visible industry of its own. Non-profit organizations often overlook the value of attending to their brand presence (by the definition below, every organization *has* a brand)—or even cringe at the superficiality and slickness of it all. Non-profit executives usually think more effectively about the content of their programs and services than about their marketing—either to potential users or to donors. And non-profits have generally been less than aggressive in making use of the brands that they have actually established.

There are, of course, gigantic exceptions, such as the Red Cross, the United Way, and the Salvation Army, but an argument can be made that while the first two have promoted their brands brilliantly, even the Salvation Army actually has not made full use of the enormous good will of its brand. The universally familiar logo of the Salvation Army typically calls to mind a limited image of Christmas bell ringers, soup kitchens and religious charity, without building fully upon the quiet efficiency of an organization that offers a great variety of services and the lowest overhead cost of any large charity.

“We’re not selling a commercial product. What does brand identity have to do with non-profits?”

Defining brand identity

The term *identity* can sound like professional jargon when used to describe an institution. The more such an impression is stripped away, the more accurate (and useful) the idea. An institution's identity is a lot like an individual's. It refers to who you are in your entirety. As such, it is difficult to grasp or represent, but it is nonetheless essential.

- The **identity** of an institution is its essential nature, the sum of its actions, achievements, values, and goals.
- **Brand identity** (or *brand*) is this essence viewed from the outside. The brand is the expression of an institution's identity (and mission) in the language of the marketplace. It is an organization's most public face.

Both identity and brand are often reduced to their use by graphic designers, to mean the last (and least) stage in developing brand identity, the logo, signage, and other packaging. Even for consumer products, brand identity is about more than the cereal box or the candy wrapper—it is the summary term for all that distinguishes one product from another, real or imagined.

The challenge for an institution is to take control of its identity (often through strategic planning) and represent it, internally and externally, for various vital purposes: fundraising, sales (in the form of memberships, volunteers, ticket sales, admissions, or other measures of engagement), public relations, and staff recruitment and morale.

A well-articulated identity and brand offer:

- evidence of commitment to mission
- a foundation for institutional strategy
- increased revenues (through such means as programs, grants, public support, and fundraising)
- cost-efficiencies
- sustainability

The more robustly one defines brand identity to encompass, represent, and communicate vision, mission, values, programs, and services, the more the idea can be used to unify and advance institutional strategy in a meaningful and powerful way. The notion of brand identity can help an institution to focus on the most important issues in context, keeping in sight the broad strategic directions that all actions and messages should support.

Assessing brand identity

Once the value of brand identity in the realm of non-profit organizations is accepted, the question arises of how to assess, develop, and maintain it. Over time an institution accumulates layers of isolated, individually sensible decisions that gradually begin to erode the clarity of its brand identity.

Distracting “opportunities” are seized, programs grow piece by piece, and the illogic of happenstance organization is no longer noticed internally. Publications and programs establish their own brands, without adequate support for the umbrella brand of the organization as a whole. Buildings get renovated and re-renovated until they are a hodge-podge. From time to time any institution must step back and re-evaluate its identity, and refresh and renew its brand.

The fundamental issues involved in developing an institutional brand identity are strategic. No successful brand identity program can be developed without a clear understanding of the vision, mission, values, and strategy of the institution —its identity. If the institution’s identity is unclear, there may be much deeper strategic problems to address before branding.

If this seems too obvious, try an experiment. Ask trustees and senior staff members to write down the vision of the institution. Have them then list the values, strengths and weaknesses of the institution, its primary offerings, and how they wish various constituencies and external audiences to understand the institution. Finally, have them list the impediments to success. If you get clarity and consensus, you can move directly to examining the existing brand identity. If not, you’ll need to take a step back to build a solid foundation in strategic thinking coupled with staff and board development.

Only after you establish your identity (i.e. exactly what you’re trying to communicate with the institutional brand) does it make sense to consider its implementation.

Establishing brand identity

Brand identity can be understood, and in turn reinforced, by rigorously examining the organization from the point of view of the customer. What are the full needs of the people who take advantage of your services? Is there a way to build on your existing respect in the community to deliver more of what your users need?

Fundamentally, development of an institutional brand involves

- articulating precisely the vision, mission, values and uniqueness of the institution and capturing this self-knowledge in the form of a clear and concise statement of identity. This may well require stakeholder surveys to determine current perceptions, and some form of inclusive, participatory strategic planning to connect identity to action.
- creating a brand identity concept, a compelling set of underlying messages to convey the identity
- developing a branding plan, a framework of policies, procedures, guidelines, and standards for systematizing the expression of the institution’s identity through programs, staff attitudes, communications (spoken, electronic, print and signage), and facilities
- vigilance: maintaining focus requires ongoing attention

In implementation, brand identity is not just a communications, or even an advancement issue alone, but it can be the lever that Institutional Advancement needs to guide an institution through the thoughtful, strategic processes required for successful communications and fundraising.

The threat of complacency

Attention to brand identity should come with a caveat. The purpose of brand identity is to focus and convey the essential message of an institution outward to the public. Internally—among governing board and staff—it is as important to be clear about weaknesses, vulnerabilities and changes in external conditions as about strengths.

If administrators and governing board are uncritical in receiving their own message, a strong brand identity can, like a pain-killer, get in the way of a clear diagnosis of a problem if and when one arises. If an institution is not maintaining a clear strategic vision, and taking actions accordingly, an established brand identity may keep constituencies and contributions coming in ever-diminishing numbers for years. Management or the governing board may not realize that a major overhaul is needed until the lifeline of the brand identity is squandered, too, and revival becomes enormously more difficult.

The biggest enemy of any institution is complacency. It is human nature to achieve morale through comparative categorical hyperbole: We have the best of this, the most individualized of that, the most opportunity for the other. This is not bad, the first time it's said; with repetition, it becomes a catechism more than an assertion of tested fact. It substitutes for critical thinking and thus interferes with good governance and management.

Brand identity is a powerful tool—but it can only be effective when developed, applied, and maintained with vigilant self awareness.

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Discourse and Brand Identity

Very few issues create as much friction in a nonprofit board as the split between mission-driven and market-driven orientations.

Market:

The primary responsibility of board and management is to assure that expenses do not exceed revenues in a way that threatens the viability of the organization; violate this principle and the organization's ability to serve its mission will disappear with the organization itself.

Mission:

If the mission is the entire purpose of the organization, then decisions should be made with the mission as the primary factor, not business considerations.

There is, of course, no meaningful choice between purpose and sustainability—both are essential, and ongoing tension between them is, in reality, both inevitable and positive. Any organization must find at any given moment the right balance between them, and a vigorous discussion between advocates of each is a sign of organizational health.

An understanding of identity and branding can be used to frame the discussion, test the dynamic balance, and ultimately, offer shared ground for understanding business and mission as interdependent considerations.

For more on the value and management of dynamic polarities in nonprofit governance and management, see a forthcoming number of Critical Issues.

More resources

- CI 1: *Why Plan?* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci01>)
- CI 2: *The Secret Life of Surveys* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci02>)
- CI 4: *On Boards* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci04>)
- CI 5: *The Structure of Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci05>)
- CI 6: *Financial Modeling* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci06>)
- CI 7: *On Mission* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci07>)
- CI 8: *The Measure of Success* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci08>)
- CI 10: *Mind Your RFPs & Qs* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci10>)
- CI 11: *Integrated Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci11>)
- CI 12: *Business Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci12>)
- CI 13: *Facility Planning* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci13>)
- CI 14: *Managing Change* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci14>)
- CI 15: *Strategic Action* (<http://bit.ly/SyPci15>)