

Brand Identity

... for Non-Profit Organizations?

By Samuel B. Frank

Free associate with the word *brand* and you'll likely get responses like Coke, BMW, the Gap and Starbucks.

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

Retail brand identity can drive sales far beyond the level achievable through quality and value alone, and enormous resources are brought to bear on creating and maintaining brands. However, as Intel has shown, you don't even need to have retail customers or meaningful competition to find value in establishing mind-share through brand identity.

Non-profit organizations often overlook the value of creating a brand presence. 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 could 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. Experience suggests that the universally

familiar logo of the Salvation Army calls to the public 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.

The museum brand

The value of brand identity is by no means limited to national and international organizations. For museums a strong brand identity can be a major asset, drawing in—regardless of a special exhibition—local residents looking for a weekend activity and tourists visiting the most obvious attractions of the city. It is not just the best collections or the most ingenious display that shapes the draw, but the positioning of the institutional brand. This can be especially true for a new museum trying to establish itself with an unusual subject matter. The underlying positioning and promotion of the brand identity can be one of a handful of critical activities required to connect those interested in the subject matter to the vehicle of this specific museum.

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.

The public library brand

As the most public and most familiar of institutions, public libraries might seem to have little need for attention to brand identity. Yet the 21st-century public library is a far more complex institution than the one elected officials and prospective donors have in mind from their childhoods. Children, young adults and elders can be unaware of the programs and services available to them. Clear and compelling information captured in an identity program can focus the public's attention on the impact and value of their public library, and make users and advocates out of them.

The education brand

In a rather different realm, everyone involved in higher education and independent schools understands brand identity. A prestigious name offers advantages in attracting applicants partially because of its brand value on college or graduate school applications and on alumni résumés. However, the full value

of brand identity goes well beyond the cachet of admissions and diplomas.

Schools compete not only for student applicants, and for faculty, but also for trustees, for the giving priorities of alumni and other donors, and for various kinds of attention from the public (summer programs,

community offerings and support).

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Brand identity creates “mind share”: in a world with myriad causes and distractions, a well-crafted brand identity creates and sustains awareness of and enthusiasm for an institution and gives it priority over less effectively positioned ones. It conveys a robust sense of programs, campus life and alumni vitality; attracts attention to communications, campus and website; and creates positive momentum for all initiatives.

For example, schools and colleges offer programs to at least parts of their pool of prospective applicants, with pre-college programs (or for independent schools, summer camps) featuring the special strengths of the institution, or addressing the characteristic needs of its desired applicant pool. This creates new summer revenue (that can help to pay for program and facility enhancements) and establishes direct interaction with prospective applicants. Promotion of these programs increases visibility in the marketplace (brand awareness), encouraging increased and more appropriate applicants

In creating non-tuition revenue programs, the pre-established reputation of a school can allow it to enter new markets with immediate success. That is to say that the school can apply its recognized brand equity to a related enterprise. By understanding name and reputation as a brand asset, a school can take steps that create a virtuous cycle of brand promotion, revenue creation, increased applications, increased selectivity, and improvements in quality.

Brand identity consolidates the assets of institutional name recognition, faculty reputation, athletic successes, alumni achievements, and facility resources, highlighting a school's strengths and allowing it to broaden them and build on them. Independent schools need to define their mission and objectives clearly for the purposes of planning, consensus-building, and education (establish their identity) and shape how they are communicated to and perceived by their diverse audiences (establish their brand).

Defining identity, image and brand identity

The term *identity* often sounds like professional jargon when used to describe institutions. 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 expressed through actions, achievements, values, and goals. The challenge for an institution is to take this identity and represent it, internally and externally, for various vital purposes (admissions, faculty recruitment, fundraising, public relations, staff morale), and to convey it through strategies, messages, interactions, communications, and facilities.

Frequently confused with identity, image (the popular, surface perception of an institution) is one of the reflections of identity and its representation. Other outcomes of a well-articulated identity—somewhat more substantive—are a clear basis for institutional strategy, a more effective understanding of the achievability of the institution's mission, increased revenues (through such means as programs, grants, public support, and fundraising), possibly cost-efficiencies, and a more secure future.

Brand identity, like *identity*, is often reduced to its 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.

Why are these distinctions important?

Identity is the essential nature of the institution; brand identity is this essence viewed as a product to be marketed. Brand identity for non-profits offers a framework to communicate vision, mission, programs, and services. It is, essentially, the expression of an institution's mission in the language of the marketplace. The more robustly one defines brand identity to encompass institutional character, values, unique assets, and all of the messages to be conveyed by all of the means available to convey them, the more the idea can be used to tie together much of institutional strategy in a meaningful and powerful way. It 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.

The hospital brand

Hospitals, too, draw heavily upon brand assets. While some of the most mobile health care consumers may do careful, substantive research in a crisis, the major regional, national and international medical centers rely heavily on brand identity. Beyond mere patient volume, an established reputation (among consumers and/or primary care physicians) will draw in patients not limited by insurance restrictions and those able to express gratitude with major donations.

This attraction will likely be based in the core realities of medical staff, research achievements, and treatment options, but it would be wise to assume that much of the impression of those core realities is communicated through brand identity rather than through painstaking research. (Even for primary and secondary health care providers, choices are made that have much to do with the way an institution presents itself, establishing its brand through such disparate vehicles as patient-centered facilities, captivating fund raising events, and the attitude of staff.) As an additional benefit in the highly strained atmosphere of health care delivery, the creation of a patient-friendly brand identity can also contribute positively to staff morale.

Establishing brand identity

Once the value of brand identity in the realm of non-profit organizations is accepted, the question arises of how to establish 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.

Buildings get renovated and re-renovated until they are a hodge-podge. 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.) 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, consensus, and sufficient aspiration 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.

Developing the underlying identity

Brand identity can be used, 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 will likely require some form of inclusive, participatory strategic analysis or planning);
- creating a brand identity concept, a compelling set of underlying messages to convey the identity through program development, staff attitudes,

communications (electronic, printed and spoken), facilities, and signage;

- developing a branding plan, a framework of policies, procedures, guidelines, and standards for systematizing the expression of the institution's identity in programs, communications, facilities, signage, and all other manifestations; and
- vigilance.

Implementing the Brand: Two Examples

For meaningful impact, an institution must approach the issue of branding from a multi-disciplinary perspective. Understanding how diverse brand manifestations are linked through development and implementation of brand identity can transform the perception of an isolated good idea into part of a powerful and promising program of institutional advancement.

Website

The communications issues for websites are not at odds with those of older vehicles, but the medium is dramatically different, and some new thinking is required. Websites offer enormous power of brand promotion to all direct constituencies, as well as to the public at large. The presentation and ease of use of the site speak volumes to the greater world (fairly or not) about the nature of the institution that lies behind the site.

Beyond first impressions, customized communications to different constituencies, including links to various advancement functions, can save time and budget while increasing the presence the institution can maintain in the lives of its constituencies. Expanded Web capabilities offer luster to the institution's brand as well as their direct functions.

A random sampling of non-profit Websites produces a typical set of missed opportunities: they lack basic information about the institution, offer outdated information, fail to communicate an institutional identity (accurate or not), and are disorganized and difficult to navigate. Some offer distracting technical features that are used because they are possible, not

because they add to the effectiveness of the site.

Websites should not be handed off to technical people—or even communications staff—before senior administrators establish a clear strategic program for them. The strategic program needs to include clarity of purpose, identification of the critical internal and external audiences, statement of the brand identity concept and the branding plan, and a user-centered site map that encourages the inclusion of useful content (benefits) rather than merely available content (features).

While the demands of a premier Website can be daunting, there are manageable and affordable approaches for any institution to enhance its brand while also using the Web as a powerful interactive communications tool for diverse constituencies.

Facilities

There is a reason for the collegiate gothic, classical courthouse, and Tudor mansion of yore, and for the McDonald's arches and corporate campuses of more recent times. Through its facilities an institution unavoidably presents a set of messages to prospective customers, donors and the public.

Given the considerable investment made in facilities, it is remarkable how rarely institutions take the initiative to add real value in tailoring them to support and reinforce their identity. As with websites, it is critical to have a strategy before hiring a professional to execute it. Non-profits often know far too little about their specific needs and objectives before moving into the design of physical facilities. Often they identify some relatively general issues and expect an architect to figure out the details. If architects are given clear and precisely articulated goals, they may be able to reflect the substantive objectives of their clients in striking ways.

And not necessarily at any greater cost. Left to their own devices, architects will

necessarily invent forms and functions that represent only a limited insight into the wisdom of their client.

A prudent institution will prepare an architectural program (articulation of the intentions, including a complete list of rooms or spaces, with their purposes, sizes and specific requirements) and a project budget before selecting an architect. Beyond these quantitative parameters, it can be especially effective to develop a qualitative program, as well. This qualitative description should incorporate the characteristics of work spaces, values of the organization, and messages about it to be communicated to the public. By articulating carefully issues of function, expression and meaning, the qualitative program can mold the facilities of an institution closely to its mission, identity, and marketing objectives.

What messages should an institution convey with its buildings: nurturing, energetic, forward-looking, traditional, fresh, conservative, innovative? It does take more effort to define and convey these messages, but the benefits include a powerful physical expression of brand identity, and a morale- and consensus-building process of articulating what the organization is and what it stands for.

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 thoughtful, strategic processes of quite diverse natures... many of which will eventually require fundraising for successful implementation.

The threat of complacency

However, 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 historical 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 has become enormously more difficult. Similarly, staff and governing boards at all too many institutions talk about their institutions in zealous terms more suitable to a sports rivalry than to effective responsiveness to the always changing conditions of societal conditions and professional and academic disciplines.

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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