



Should You Use Your Full Name or an Acronym?

The answer may be more critical than you think.

Q:

Organizations with long names often refer to themselves with an acronym rather than the full name. Although an acronym is shorter, it sometimes causes confusion about what the organization actually does. An example is the organization where I work, the Christian Appalachian Project. We have the same acronym (CAP) as the Civil Air Patrol and the Community Action Programs. Our management now has advised us to use the entire name of our organization to cut down the confusion. Do you agree? When should an organization switch from its full name to an acronym—and vice versa?

A:

The way people refer to an organization is a vital matter. Any change should be undertaken only after a great deal of reflection.

In the case of your organization, which has a long history and is well known, I concur with the advice to use your entire name when communicating with those outside your organization. But my reasons for this advice go beyond the importance of distinguishing yours from other organizations with the same acronym.

An organization's name is its "brand name." Commercial companies build brand awareness through promotion, good products, and time. Their brand names have commercial value and reflect the reputation of the company. For these reasons, firms protect their legal right to these names and have attorneys who take action when the firm thinks their brand name is being misused or infringed upon.

Your organization's full name, the Christian Appalachian Project, communicates a lot about the scope of the organization's mission—its religious inspiration and its service to the people of Appalachia. This information would be lost if you relied on the acronym.

I notice that on your organization's Web site (www.chrisapp.org), the full name is used on the "front page," and the acronym CAP is used almost everywhere else "inside" the site. That makes sense, since many "outsiders" are likely to visit the front page, while the rest of the site is more geared to "insiders." Comments in your Web site guestbook suggest many people have a long-term association with your organization, making the acronym more appropriate.

While it makes sense for you to switch from an acronym to your organization's full name with outsiders, the opposite is sometimes true. Some nonprofits should consider switching to acronyms, especially when their names reflect past historical circumstances and long-

superceded missions. Such an organization may also consider shortening its name or creating a completely new name to clarify its current mission. For example, the XYZ Orphanage changed its name to the XYZ Children's Home and later to XYZ of Jonesville. The name change was necessary to reflect the organization's new mission—providing short-term therapeutic treatment. Note that the name no longer gives specifics so that children living there won't feel stigmatized.

Another option is to add a "tag line" to a name or acronym to communicate what the organization does. For example, one slogan at OICW, a job-skills training program, is "OICW Works!"

If a nonprofit decides, after reflection, that a name change is needed, the communications people should plan a multistage process of introducing the new name. Such publicity should explain the reasons for the name change in light of the organization's mission and new initiatives.

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Note: For steps to changing a name and communicating that change to the public, see these Nonprofit World articles: "Just the Right Name" (Vol. 11, No. 1), "Achieving an Admired Organization" (Vol. 11, No. 1), and "Success Starts with Your Name" (Vol. 22, No. 2). You'll find these articles at www.snpo.org or on the Nonprofit World CD-ROM (to order, call 734-451-3582).