



I've Been Thinking about...Branding

What's in a name? Under what circumstances should a nonprofit, especially one with a rich history, consider a name change?

By Martha Golensky

Whether coincidence or the start of a trend, several well-known nonprofits have adopted new names in the past few years. The American Association for Retired Persons is now simply AARP, because it serves individuals over 50 whether they're still working or not. Last summer, the Y.M.C.A. shortened its name to "the Y"; according to a spokesperson, the switch was meant to be more welcoming. Similarly, National Public Radio has notified staff to refer to it as NPR.

Branding is the process used by both for-profits and nonprofits to position products and services in the best way to appeal to their stakeholders. The emphasis is on establishing a clear identity for the organization, whereas *marketing* focuses more on the message.

Often a key step in branding is a name change if the current name fails to represent the organization's purpose or audience, causes confusion with similar nonprofits, is too hard to spell or pronounce, conveys a negative impression, or doesn't allow for program expansion.

It's not, however, an action to take lightly. For example, Elderhostel wanted to attract a younger audience without alienating its loyal core. Unfortunately, the new name it chose, Exploritas, was confusing, and it now goes by Road Scholar. Having participated in their programs, I'm not sure the latest name is a great improvement. When describing an upcoming trip to those unfamiliar with the organization, I've had to clarify I'm not a Rhodes Scholar!

The right name can be one of your most powerful tools.

Another pitfall to avoid is an acronym that sends an unintended message. The National Association for Retarded Citizens freely uses "NARC" in all promotional material. If I didn't know the organization, this acronym might well give me a skewed idea of its mission.

Some years ago, as executive director of a youth agency, I had direct experience with a name change. As we approached our sixtieth anniversary, it seemed an appropriate time to consider a new name that would more truly describe our services and clients. Experts recommend being inclusive in planning for such a change; in our case, we contacted key supporters for their input and used our newsletter to announce a contest for the best new name, open to all readers.

In the end, the name we selected ticked all the boxes noted earlier: it was catchy without being kitschy, and it clearly stated the organizational mission while distinguishing us from a similar nonprofit in our area. The decision was announced with much hoopla, including a newly designed logo. Even though it appeared we had done everything possible to make the transition easy, and no one had raised concerns about the planned change, we did lose some longtime donors, who may have been more attached to the original name than they let on. But overall, the outcome was deemed successful.

If you're considering changing your name, accept that the process will take longer than anticipated,

and make sure no one else already claims the name you've picked. Be prepared for snags along the way.

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Names trigger an emotional response. Particularly for long-established organizations, some resistance is inevitable even when the reasons for the change are compelling. When the going gets rough, hold fast to why you decided to take this step. Remain focused. Juliet may have told Romeo that a name is simply an artificial construct, but in organizational branding, the right name can be one of your most powerful tools for attracting and keeping clients and donors. ■

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RESOURCES

Available at www.snpo.org/ members

- **The Nonprofit Branding Exercise** (Vol 26, No. 1)
- **Just the Right Name: How One Nonprofit Solved an Identity Crisis** (Vol. 11, No. 1)
- **How to Transform Your Brand** (Vol. 28, No. 5)