

It may be your best investment in your organization's success.

By Elizabeth V. Brown

Every day, thousands of messages compete for people's attention—and their dollars. The marketplace is increasingly crowded, with a corresponding increase in donor fatigue. To compete, you must find ways to break through the communication clutter and deliver your messages clearly and simply.

Responding to these realities, a growing number of nonprofits are building strong brands. They recognize that brand stewardship is critical to the success of their missions.

Your brand infuses everything you say and do.

Behold the Power of Branding

What exactly is a brand? First, let's consider what a brand *is not*:

- A brand isn't simply a logo or graphic design — although a strong graphic identity contributes to brand awareness and recognition.
- A brand isn't just a clever

tagline — although a clear, memorable expression of what makes your organization different and special is an important part of brand-building.

Instead, your brand is the encapsulation of *everything* that makes your organization what it is — and what it can be. It's your essence. And, when wielded skillfully, that brand infuses everything you say and do.

Consider the following analogy: Imagine that you, yourself, are

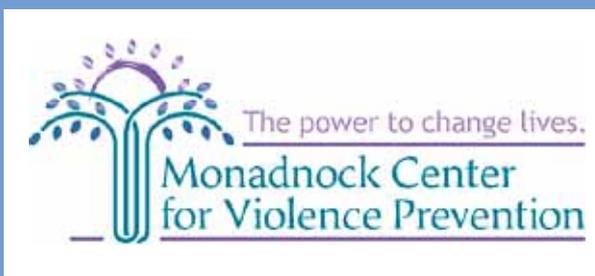
continued on page 12



Liz Sayre, the Center's executive director (left), approves the new logo unveiled by Elizabeth Brown of the communications firm Church & Main (right)



The original logo of the Women's Crisis Services



The new name and graphic identity for Women's Crisis Services

It doesn't do any good to have a "friendly" brand if people don't answer the phone in a friendly way.

a "product." You have a whole collection of personal attributes — your name, physical appearance, wardrobe, mannerisms, talents and skills, dreams and ambitions. It's not any *one* of these attributes, but *all of them combined*, that make up your unique "trademark" personality. People who pay attention to such things — including politicians, actors, and pop stars — are masters at integrating all these personality elements to create a cohesive, consistent, and memorable image: their brand.

To push the analogy a step further, think about how you evaluate other people's individual "brands." Would you rather associate with people who:

- possess a strong sense of who they are — or seem muddled and confused?
- have ideals that resonate with your own — or principles that don't align with yours?
- display a sense of strength, clarity, and forward motion — or give the impression of just plodding along?

Most people seek out the former and avoid the latter — especially when it comes to giving away their time, money, or personal contacts. When personalities click, people's normal defenses drop — and doors to new relationships and opportunities open.

So it is with organizations that have done their branding homework. The true power of branding is that — like a winning personality — it can help an organization achieve success out of all proportion to its size, resources, or experience. A strong brand is one of the best investments an organization can make in its long-term success.

Consistency is as important as the creativity behind it.

Nonprofit Branding in Action

So how does an organization take on the challenge of building brand? Consider the case of Women's Crisis Services, a nonprofit agency serving the Monadnock region of southern New Hampshire. The agency has provided critical support, advocacy, and information services to victims of domestic and sexual violence since 1978. Over the years, the agency has helped thousands of local residents — and steadily expanded its services to include legal advocacy, support groups, and education.

As it approached its 25th anniversary, Women's Crisis Services recognized it had reached a crossroads. While crisis intervention was still central to its mission, the agency had expanded its commitment to education and outreach. The emphasis had broadened to encompass pro-active efforts to change awareness of and attitudes toward domestic and sexual violence



When personalities click,
people's normal defenses drop.

throughout the community. The agency had grown and evolved, yet its brand hadn't kept pace.

With a consultant's help, the agency's leaders started with in-depth primary research: interviews with staff, administrators, and board members to probe the organization's strengths and weaknesses and frank discussions with referral sources, including law enforcement personnel, to gain an external perspective. Evaluating the results of these discussions, they concluded that the agency's gender-specific name acted as a barrier to reaching men — effectively shutting out half the community. In addition, the "crisis" focus of its brand didn't reflect the agency's broadened commitment to social change.

Based on these findings, they created an entirely new positioning for the organization, transforming *Women's Crisis Services* into the *Monadnock Center for Violence Prevention* (www.mcvprevention.org). Their goal: to create a new identity that conveys an aspirational image, clearly communicates its commitment to the local community, and embraces all audiences — female and male, young and old. They then translated this new identity into a graphical signature that is both attractive and inclusive.

Since its unveiling, the new brand identity has acted as a bridge to new constituencies, without alienating the agency's traditional support base — a critical concern. Indeed, a legal advocate formerly associated with the agency reinstated his relationship, crediting the new, gender-inclusive identity.

Financially, the brand opens doors to new funding sources and grant opportunities. Emotionally, the new brand has sparked an infusion of renewed energy among agency staff. In addition to these short-term responses, the agency's new brand provides a solid platform for its next stage of development from a "provider of services" to a pro-active force for positive change.

How to Build a Brand: The 4 Cs

How do you examine, strengthen, and reshape your organization's brand? Any successful brand effort must address these 4 Cs:

1. Clarity: Is it clear what you're trying to convey to your audiences? Many organizations spend a lot of time thinking about their organization's identity and end up trying to be all things to all people. If it doesn't translate into clear, focused messages, your brand will merely confuse people. Having the perspective to look at your organization through your constituents' eyes will go a long way toward achieving this clarity.

2. Congruence: Ensure that everything your organization does reinforces the expectations that the brand creates. It doesn't do any good to have a "friendly" brand if people don't answer the phone in a friendly way.

3. Consistency: Create an organization-wide commitment to using the brand. Building brand identity takes time and the discipline to use it consistently everywhere. Consistency is as important as the creativity behind it.

4. Coverage: Perhaps you can't afford to make your brand a household name nationwide. But by using the brand in a disciplined, targeted way, you can make it memorable for the audiences that matter to you. Leverage your partnerships with other organizations and the public relations value inherent in nonprofit work. (In the case study noted above, the Monadnock Center for Violence Prevention highlighted its new brand by unveiling it at its 25th anniversary celebration, which was covered by the local press.)

Make the Brand Investment

In today's overloaded information landscape, branding should be viewed as a strategic investment. The process of formulating your organization's brand can have benefits internally, as well as externally, rallying everyone around a core message.

No matter how you go about strengthening your organization's brand, don't put it off. Brand-building is an ongoing, pervasive activity that can take time to pay dividends. The sooner you begin, the sooner you'll reap the benefits. ■

Resources

Lauer, Larry, "Achieving an Admired Organization," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 11, No. 6.

Murley, Kevin, "Success Starts with Your Name," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 2.

Shenkman, Michael, "Defining Your Leader Brand," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 25, No. 2.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.



Elizabeth Brown is the president and co-owner of the strategic communications firm Church & Main, Inc. (9 Church Street, Keene, New Hampshire 03431, ebrown@churchandmain.com, www.churchandmain.com), with more than 25 years of experience in marketing communications. For more information on the Monadnock Center for Violence Prevention, visit www.mcvprevention.org.