

The Nonprofit Branding Exercise

Here's a concrete way to put branding to work for your organization.

By Joel S. Zimmerman

When you hear an organization's name, see its logo, or read its tag line, you instantly make a host of associations. For most people, "The Walt Disney Company" raises memories of Mickey Mouse ears, cartoon characters, simpler times, and family entertainment. The name might be enough to generate happy emotions and bring a smile to your face. In the marketing world, we call this stereotypical reaction the organization's "brand."

In the world of nonprofits, a strong brand is key to successful fundraising. In the United States alone, over a million nonprofit organizations are competing for the attention and support of individuals, companies, foundations, and government grants. Nearly every nonprofit competes with others whose mission is similar. For many, it's their brand that makes their appeal for attention and funds successful.

You've probably read many articles explaining why a brand is so important. Few articles, however, explain how to engineer a brand into what you want it to be. That's the purpose of this article.

Every Organization Has a Brand

When people hear your name or see your logo, they react to it. They might react positively ("Wow, they're a terrific charity!"), negatively ("They're a bunch of crooks"), or with a total lack of recognition ("Gee, never heard of them"). It's human nature to squeeze organizations into convenient pigeonholes and make snap judgments. Your brand is the container that packages those assumptions for people.

How did your organization get the brand you have? Many organizations are branded in a *passive* way. That is, the public forms opinions about them almost by accident. People learn about a nonprofit in stories they hear from those who have volunteered for the organization or received its services. TV and newspaper stories give information that reporters think will interest their audience, which, by the nature of news, is frequently disparaging. If media are the main source of information, your branding may be just what your nonprofit does *not* want.

Rather than being branded passively, you should *actively* engineer your brand. To do so, you must



define what you want your brand to be, ensure that your activities support that brand, and implement an active branding process.

It's easy to agree with this as an abstract idea. But how do you do it?

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FIGURE 1

BRAND DEVELOPMENT TEMPLATE

Copy this template, and fill out a separate one for each branding concept (you will likely have two to six different concepts).

1. Branding concept: _____
2. The audience that values this: _____
3. The need being fulfilled: _____
4. What your organization does (produces) to deserve this brand: _____
5. The evidence for this response:
Facts: _____
Anecdotes: _____
Processes: _____
6. The organization's main message about this branding concept: _____
7. Secondary messages: _____
8. The organization's positioning statement (where we are relative to those we compete with; what makes us special; how we want to be characterized and identified): _____
9. Collateral materials (Where should this message be? Proposals, brochures, logo, byline, ads, banners, Web pages, vision statement, stationery, etc.): _____
10. The media for delivering this messaging (broadcast, word of mouth, conferences, customer reports, brochures, journal ads, etc.): _____
11. Strategies for strengthening this brand: _____

If your brand and contributions don't jibe, your brand will take on unwanted attributes such as phony, unbelievable, unreliable, and overblown.

The 11 Branding Items

Figure 1 is a template to use for a branding exercise. Let's take a quick tour through the 11 items on the template.

1. The branding concept. An organization has a core of two to six branding concepts that define what it does and how it distinguishes itself from others. Some examples:

- the most influential disaster-recovery agency in the world
- an important contributor to the national debate on social-security reform
- America's watchdog for minority civil rights.

Make copies of the template page in Figure 1, and fill out a separate one for each branding concept related to your organization.

2. The audience that values this. Just like commercial enterprises, nonprofits exist within a marketplace — an environment in which parties trade commodities that have value. Volunteers give their time; donors give money. In return, they expect nonprofits to give something of value to society: meals for the hungry, shelter to the homeless, opportunities for education, or other such goods and services. To work successfully in a marketplace, you need to know what types of people see value in your core branding concepts. Knowing this, you'll understand how to reach those who are motivated to "trade" with you in your marketplace.

3. The need being fulfilled. Nonprofit marketing is complicated because the *recipients* of the group's services often aren't the service's

purchasers. If you feed the poor, then it's hungry poor people who value this service, and their need is straightforward—nourishment. The people who support your nonprofit with donations of time and money, however, probably aren't hungry. They value your service because you fill such needs as conscience, altruism, personal involvement, and religious conviction. If your branding concept is important in attracting hungry people to your organization, the answer for item 3 is one set of needs. But if your branding concept is important for bringing in donors and volunteers, item 3's answer will likely be very different. Thus, you'll want a different branding concept to appeal to each of these groups.

4. What your organization does to deserve this brand. Ultimately, a brand must be based on the reality of what you contribute to the world. Your credibility depends on achievements people can see, hear, read about, and experience. If your brand and contributions don't jibe, your brand will take on unwanted attributes such as phony, unbelievable, unreliable, and overblown.

5. Evidence for this response. Your answers for item 5 support your answer to item 4. For example, if your response to item 4 is "We have the largest feed-the-poor program in the United States," item 5 should give proof to support that claim.

Item 5 calls for three types of evidence. The first is facts and figures — verifiable statistics about your organization. The second has to do with stories told about your organization. These can be at the level of lore — well-known anecdotes about your organization's role during a disaster, in getting a bill through Congress, or as a catalyst to a medical breakthrough. Finally, evidence can be in the form of organizational processes. For example, if your branding concept is facilitating veterans' benefits, do you have accessible application forms, 800 numbers, counseling hours, and other such mechanisms in place for veterans to use?

6 and 7. The organization's main and secondary messages about this branding concept. Your organization communicates various messages to reinforce each branding concept. If your concept is "the most effective animal protection organization in the world," how will you show that you're effective — through the number of animals protected, animals helped per dollar donated, number of bills passed because of your influence? To deliver this concept, you need a primary message and several secondary messages, all crafted to convince people that this brand is really you.

8. The organization's positioning statement. Your positioning statement expresses how you want your nonprofit placed in the public's consciousness relative to the rest of the world, especially in relation to organizations directly competing with you. This statement provides the answer you should give if someone asks, "Why should I donate time or money to you instead of to some other organization?"

Test to see whether the messages received were the same as the messages sent.

9. Collateral materials. All your messages must be delivered in some physical format — brochures, annual reports, Web pages, video disks, scrapbooks, billboards, product samples, documentaries, news clips, op-ed articles, white papers, scholarly publications, catalogs, and so on. The messages in all these materials should be consistent with each other and support your organization's core branding concepts.

10. Media to deliver this messaging. Your messages need to reach the audiences they're intended to influence. How do you get brochures to people who will benefit from reading them? How

will scholarly papers get to the scholars? In which periodicals will your op-ed pieces appear? Other media for delivering messages include public service announcements, professional conferences, public events, giveaways at public places, posters on subway trains, and 10-second appearances in motion pictures.

11. Strategies for strengthening this brand. Now, how do you use all this information to engineer the result you want? Do you need to reinvent your Web site? Should you advertise and, if so, with what media? Should you train staff and volunteers how to answer questions from constituents and the public? Do you need to make your programs fit your brand more closely?

be more prescriptive than descriptive. These will become suggestions for activities you can undertake to support your desired brand.

Items 6 through 11 should be considered tentative best guesses for a new organization. Messages need to be worded and delivered, and people's reactions must be tested to see whether the messages received were the same as the messages sent. Strategies for brand development need to be monitored to see whether they have the desired effects.

Audit the brand for an existing organization. It's often useful to evaluate how well an organization is doing what it intended to do. The branding exercise can help you check whether your perception of your brand matches the

Branding must be a verb, not just a noun.

Items 4 and 5 require you to list the programs, services, and products that relate to your branding concept. For example, if your organization is branding itself as the "leading voice for women's rights in the United States," you need to show what the organization is doing to live up to this branding position. Can you show that your organization is indeed a voice for women's rights, that it somehow "leads" in this role, and that its domain is truly country-wide in scope?

In an audit, you should similarly cast items 6 through 11 in terms of what you're doing, rather than what you might wish for the future. Look at the materials you uncovered in items 4 and 5 to summarize what messages you send, the materials and media through which you send them, and what strategies you use to promote your brand.

Modify a brand. The third use for the branding exercise is a mixture of the first two. You may decide to modify your brand if you feel the current brand is obsolete or ineffective. In this situation, your answers need to separate what is currently the case from what you believe should be the case. The exercise is harder because of the need to distinguish between substance and process. In other words, if a brand isn't successful, is it because the branding concept is inherently flawed or because the concept is weakly defined and poorly communicated? This is a critical distinction to make before deciding what modifications are needed.

How You Do the Branding Exercise

Collect information. Before going into the branding exercise, do research to understand the environment in which your nonprofit operates. What other organizations are in your work space? What are their brands? What media are they using? Only with this information

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<div style="text-align: center;">FIGURE 2</div> <div style="text-align: center;">Three Ways You Can Use the Branding Exercise</div>	
Use the branding exercise to...	It answers the question...
Brand a new organization.	What should we do in the future?
Audit the organization's brand.	Are we doing what we should be doing?
Modify the organization's brand.	What should we be doing differently?

Ways the Exercise Can Be Used

Now that you've reviewed the tool, let's consider the different ways it can be used. As Figure 2 shows, a branding exercise can help your organization in three ways:

Brand a new organization. If your organization is relatively new, your purpose in the exercise will be to figure out the brand you wish to create. The exercise will be oriented toward the future.

You'll probably need a half day or so to identify the branding concepts for item 1 on the template. After generating a list of possible concepts, prioritize them, and limit them to no more than six.

For a new organization, answers to items 4 and 5 (evidence about what your organization does) will

image your organization is, in fact, creating. In this case, you can use your existing materials (Web site pages, brochures, publications, operational records, program evaluations, articles about your nonprofit, transcripts of comments made on the air or at conferences, results from focus-group research, and other such data) to provide the wording of branding concepts for item 1 in the template. While it may take time to agree on which branding elements are most important, relatively little effort should be needed on "wordsmithing" to express these concepts.

Items 2 and 3, identifying the audience and its needs, should also be straightforward. Because this is an audit of an existing brand, you should be highly aware of the audiences to which your branding concepts are directed and the needs you fulfill.

can you decide how to position your organization in relation to others with which you'll be competing. If your purpose is to audit or modify your brand, you'll also need to gather materials (publications, Web pages, and so on) that explain what your brand is.

Assemble the right people. Recruit two groups to participate. The first group will work through the template questions. This grouping should include the CEO, key board members, and other senior leaders. The second group will act as reviewers. These people should be stakeholders in the organization: board members, volunteers, staff, clients, concerned members of the public, and perhaps a few representatives from your most important funding sources. Choose people who are smart, outspoken, and dedicated to your cause. When you finish the exercise, you'll send the results to them for review. Based on their reactions, you'll make changes to sharpen and improve your thinking.

Get a facilitator. Your chances of being successful are much higher if you have an experienced facilitator guiding you through this exercise. You need a facilitator for several reasons. First, someone must move the exercise along, keeping people from slowing your progress or taking you off topic. Generally, an insider can't do this effectively – especially if the insider is participating in the exercise. Second, someone needs to draw out participants who are quiet. A good facilitator knows how to spot these people, encourage their participation, and integrate their ideas into the group's deliberation. Finally, you need someone who is more concerned about the process of developing the brand than in the brand itself. This usually requires someone from outside the organization.

Do the exercise. The exercise calls for filling out "answers" in the brand development template. Figuring out the brand concepts (item 1 on the template) is probably most crucial. This step can also be the most difficult. Once you've completed item 1, you can

expect the rest of the exercise to go quite smoothly. To save time, you can divide people into teams, with each team filling out items 2 to 11 for a different branding concept. Another possibility is for the group to work on all the branding concepts together, covering items 2 to 5. Then individual teams can break out to work on items 6 to 11.

Edit, review, and edit again. Type up the template results, and distribute them to everyone who participated in the exercise. These people should review the results and send their comments to a person designated as the authority for each branding concept. Each concept authority should then make final edits and send the resulting template to a single person whose job is to integrate all the pieces into one packet.

This packet should then be sent to the review group (the group of people who didn't participate in the exercise). Their comments should be returned to the integrator and then routed to the designated branding-concept authorities.

What's left to do depends on the reviewers' remarks. If their comments are generally positive, a final edit is all that's needed. If reviewers raise serious issues, it may be worthwhile to bring the exercise group together to make modifications.

What to Do with the Results

Apply the strategies. The last item on each of your templates asks for strategies to strengthen this aspect of your brand. Turn these strategies into plans, and activate them.

Orient your board, leaders, staff, and volunteers. Branding won't work unless all the significant people working for your organization support it. Use meetings to explain the branding concepts and your strategies for bringing them to life. Distribute handouts that summarize major message statements. Help people understand how the new branding will affect what they do in their organizational roles.

Institutionalize your branding messages. To succeed with your

brand, you must use it consistently. Start with the basics. Is your brand consistent with your mission, vision, and values? Is it compatible with the way you spend your resources and devote your staff's time? Does it fit with your logo and all the information you disseminate?

Communicate your brand assertively. The most important point to remember is that you must actively promote your brand. You can't wait for others to find information about you, pick what they want, and distribute that to the rest of the world. Branding must be a verb, not just a noun. Do your brand. Make your branding concepts come alive in the marketplace, in exactly the ways you want them to. ■

Get in the Marketing Mode

For background on marketing and branding, read these articles from earlier issues of *Nonprofit World*, available at www.snpo.org/members:

- **Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do** (Vol. 20, No. 1)
- **Are You Following the 4 Cs of Branding?** (Vol. 25, No. 3)
- **Where Can you Find the Marketing Resources You Need?** (Vol. 23, No. 2)
- **How to Choose and Work with a Consultant** (Vol. 10, No. 2)
- **How to Use a Total Marketing Approach to Renew Your Organization and Make an Impact** (Vol. 13, No. 3)
- **Defining Your Leader Brand** (Vol. 25, No. 2)

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