

Branding: It's not a dirty word

By Elizabeth Richter

Many nonprofit practitioners think "brand" is a dirty word – "We don't sell peanut butter, we serve the community!" To some the word "branding" has a commercial and even manipulative quality that conjures up Madison Avenue selling cereal, soap or cigarettes. Understood in its broadest sense, however, branding is just as important to a nonprofit organization as a for-profit enterprise.

In fact, some of the best known brands are those of nonprofit organizations: the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. You'll recognize their logos, but of more importance is your understanding of what the organization stands for and delivers. The Red Cross delivers disaster relief around the world and the Salvation Army helps those least able to care for themselves.

A logo – like the red cross, the Salvation Army shield or the familiar Nike "swoosh" - is often thought to be the brand itself, but a brand is much more just a logo. A brand is in fact the sum total of all the feelings, understandings, experiences, and impressions that the consumer, client or customer has about a product – or an organization.

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An organization may design a logo, create messages that express the brand and mount programs to support the brand, but a brand has

no meaning or power without its interaction with its target audience. "Brand managers" are so-named because they must nurture the brand and ensure that customers develop and maintain an emotional attachment to the product. For that reason, a brand is actually created not by the company itself, but in the *minds* of its target audience.

A consumer driven company like Nike wants its customers to believe its shoes are the ones that they need because they are "just do it" kind of people, just as a nonprofit wants its audience to have confidence that its programs and mission are what they need. While Nike has customers, nonprofits have stakeholders—like clients who need services, audiences who enjoy performances, funders who provide financial support, members or volunteer who join to support the mission, staff who execute the mission, community groups who rely on its services and board members who advocate for it.

Without millions to spend on advertising, how does a nonprofit develop and nurture a brand? The first step is understanding its own brand architecture. Brand architecture is the lens through which every activity of an organization is viewed to insure consistency of purpose and message. Developing a brand architecture means having a clear mission statement and vision, a well-defined brand promise made to its target audiences, viable positioning in the community, universally understood brand personality and a set of clear messages that resonate throughout the organization.

With brand architecture in place, the well-branded nonprofit ensures that every aspect of its daily activities reflects the brand. Which of the following twelve items, for example, should be evaluated in the context of branding?

1. Collateral materials
2. Office design
3. Logo
4. Tagline
5. Phone answering copy
6. Hours of operation
7. Strategic plan
8. Print ads
9. Web design
10. Program schedule
11. Board composition
12. Holiday card

Perhaps the answer is obvious. ***All of the above.*** If an organization delivers on its mission across all platforms, activities large and small, materials and personnel, it will present a consistent brand that engages its audiences, hence increasing its reach and impact on the community. And that's a lot more important than a good pair of sneakers!



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