

A Guide to Nonprofit Branding



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Branding is the process of developing a unique public identity that can be easily shared. As a concept, it is closely tied to marketing, and commercial businesses take great care to build and nurture brand identities. Branding is the reason why company logos are instantly recognizable, and it informs every decision made by a marketing team. Consumers recognize and trust these brands thanks to years of effort on behalf of the company's marketing strategies.

Although branding has traditionally been viewed as the territory of for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations have begun to recognize and appreciate the power of branding. When done correctly, nonprofit branding helps an organization gain supporters while unifying its members toward the organization's cause.

A brand provides a sort of shorthand that sums up an organization and its mission. Individuals who encounter a brand for the first time should be able to grasp immediately what the organization is about. Moreover, branding underlines every interaction that organization has with the community.

Branding goes beyond the obvious elements of logos, names and slogans. An organization's brand is its essence or persona, and it takes advantage of psychological associations to convey its message. By distilling the purpose and passion of a nonprofit organization into a

simple and evocative brand identity, the organization can develop a strong foundation for fundraising and community action.

Perhaps more importantly, a strong brand also helps an organization attract and retain employees, volunteers and partners. It also helps build cohesion within the organization's existing staff. Branding helps to inspire passion for a cause, and it helps to unify an organization. In effect, branding helps every member of a nonprofit group to become part of a "team" or group identity.

The Necessity of Branding in the Nonprofit Sector

Branding accomplishes several goals for a nonprofit organization:

-- It helps the nonprofit organization obtain funding and other resources. Branded organizations have clout and engender trust in the people who interact with them. In the same way that consumers value their favorite commercial brands, donors and partners have an easier time affiliating with a nonprofit whose brand they can easily identify. For example, people are more likely to make a donation to a well-known charity than one they have never heard of. Recognizing an organization's brand allows a potential donor to know that money sent there will be well-spent.

-- Branding helps to galvanize an organization's social mission. In a sense, an organization's brand is like its mission statement. Groups that can fully understand and communicate their ideals experience more cohesion, and branding helps when training new members or otherwise expanding the organization's message throughout the organization itself. A group that does not know exactly what its purpose is cannot passionately work toward a goal. Having a clear and emotionally evocative brand can keep the organization on track.

-- Because branding makes an organization recognizable, it keeps it in the public eye and helps spread the organization's message. Branded groups are more visible than those without a strong brand. Branding makes it easier to stand out from other nonprofits, which ultimately drives greater success toward the group. It also engenders cooperation with other groups. Smaller organizations may gravitate toward well-branded entities, which can foster alliances and open channels of communication between organizations.

Although the benefits of branding are far-reaching, many in the non-profit sector are nervous about the execution of branding strategies. The language of branding is still largely couched in commercialized terms, and some groups feel that branding may cheapen the message of an organization or make them appear too much like a business.

Fortunately, a well-executed branding strategy avoids this pitfall while strengthening the nonprofit's own identity. In other words, proper nonprofit branding should underscore the message of the organization, not dismantle it.

The Specific Concerns of Nonprofit Branding

Creating a brand identity is a challenge for any organization or business, and nonprofit groups have some unique challenges beyond those encountered by corporate entities and other for-profit groups. For this reason, careful consideration must be made before embarking on any branding strategy.

The first challenge of any branding attempt is to create a visually recognizable and psychologically effective identity. Corporate entities put substantial thought into things like logo design and slogans because these will become the face of the company in every interaction. With nonprofit organizations, these items become even more important. A commercial brand must only serve a single purpose: generating sales. A nonprofit's brand, on the other hand, must accurately reflect its ideals and mission.

It becomes important to consider the mission at every step of the branding process. While some brands may be effective, they can also slip away from the mission of the organization. This becomes

especially problematic when the branding is tied to a specific cause or event sponsored by the organization. If this specialized brand is allowed to overshadow the organization's identity, the branding may have a negative effect on the organization in general.

It also becomes imperative to consider the emotional impact of the nonprofit's brand. Nonprofit organizations are characterized by their passion, and this passion should come through in the group's brand identity. The emotional content of the branded message, however, must be chosen carefully. Brands that rely on negative emotional responses can be alienating and exploitative. On the other hand, a brand that seems too lighthearted may undermine the seriousness of the issues addressed by the organization. Achieving the appropriate tone is crucial when establishing and maintaining a nonprofit brand.

While organizations must strive to create brands that reflect the group's ideology and mission, some nonprofits have a difficult time escaping a myopic or strictly literal mindset. A good brand should be inspired by the organization's mission statement, but it should not merely regurgitate that message. By digging beyond the most obvious aspects of the group's mission, an organization can discover the true essence of the nonprofit.

Finally, special consideration should be given to branding for organizations with an

international focus. Cultural and linguistic differences may cause a branded message to falter overseas. Depending on the situation, it may be best to build the brand around the organization's mission and values while leaving the specifics of brand execution flexible enough for them to be reinterpreted for use in other countries.

Nonprofit Brand Implementation

Harvard's Hauser Center posed a valuable set of guidelines for nonprofits looking to develop and maintain a brand identity. Using the acronym IDEA, these guidelines provide a map for organizations looking to reap the benefits of branding without sacrificing ideology to a more consumer model:

-- Integrity refers to the structural integrity of a brand's design. A brand with high integrity is one whose message succinctly explains to both internal and external audiences what the organization's mission is and why it matters.

-- Democracy allows an organization to trust its various members with the task of building and maintaining a brand identity rather than exerting tight control over the organization's brand.

-- Ethics refers both to the behavior of the organization itself as well as the brand's adherence to the nonprofit's ethical standards. In other words, ethical brands are those that advocate the organization's

message rather than undermining it.

-- Affinity allows a nonprofit organization to work cooperatively with others in its sector without overshadowing them. A group with good brand affinity will attract partners and foster collaboration.

By considering each aspect of IDEA and implementing it in a practical manner, nonprofit organizations can develop a brand that will advance the goals of the organization while staying true to its focus and passions.

Putting It All Together: Branding Strategies for Nonprofits

Creating a well-designed and thoughtful branding strategy is only the first step toward successful branding in the nonprofit sector. In order to benefit from these well-designed brands, nonprofit organizations must make an effort to promote brand awareness. Without an ample advertising budget, this may seem difficult, but a few simple strategies can help:

-- Ensure that all correspondence is branded. From newsletters to emails, every word published by an organization should reflect its brand. The organization's logo should appear in its letterhead, and the tone of the correspondence should be consistent with the brand's overall image.

-- Design events around a brand identity. When designing fundraisers and other

events, it helps to consider how these events can reflect and promote the organization's brand. If the message of an event is inconsistent with that delivered by the brand, neither will be fully effective.

-- Embrace social media. In no sphere is branding as important as in social media. Nonprofit organizations benefit tremendously from the personalized nature of social media marketing, and effective branding can help engender trust during these interactions.

An organization's reputation will build over time and contribute organically to the development of the brand's identity, so maintaining a nonprofit brand becomes a cooperative experience between the organization and its audience. As long as the brand design is well thought-out and reflects the values of the organization it represents, these strategies should help support the nonprofit group and increase its visibility in the public eye without sacrificing the organization's ideals.

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