

Notes

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CHAPTER SIX

IDENTITY AND BRANDING

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What are the promises your association makes to its members or the public? What can stakeholders expect from your association, and how do they distinguish you from your competitors? What is the idea—the mission and foundation of your association—that you and your staff can commit to and build upon? These questions touch upon the intangible essence of branding. Fundamentally, branding is a feeling about your organization based on experience.

If branding is about someone's experience with you and your organization, then *every touch point* related to your organization reflects and contributes to your brand. Everything from advertising, messaging, public relations, presentations, product and service availability and quality, education programming, certification processes, emails, and governance to how the phone is answered influence the perception of your brand. Like the discipline of marketing, the evolution of branding is customer- or audience-centric, not "sender" centric. Often confused with each other, branding and marketing (covered in more detail later in this book) are not the same thing; nor should branding be relegated to simply a design function or logo.

Branding and marketing are closely intertwined and depend upon each other, but the disciplines are distinct. Marketer and entrepreneur

Seu Codrin's approach to branding paints a broader picture more relevant to today's sensibilities:

"A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories, and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another. If the consumer (whether it's a business, a buyer, a voter or a donor) doesn't pay a premium, make a selection or spread the word, then no brand value exists for that consumer."

"A brand used to be something else. It used to be a logo or a design or a wrapper. Today, that's a shadow of the brand, something that might mark the brand's existence. If you've never heard of it, if you wouldn't choose it, if you don't recommend it, then there is no brand, at least not for you."

"Design is essential, but design is not brand."¹

Think of branding as what goes into your choice of store or service—as well as the feeling after you've made your purchase—and marketing as all the activities that help you narrow your decision to the point of purchase. In the association world, one can make the case that associations define marketing as the acquisition and retention of "members." Being responsible for the happiness of a market is far bigger than member acquisition and retention. Arguably, so much focus on attracting and retaining members is a bit like a store focusing on the point of purchase—the cash register or the online checkout—instead of focusing on the offerings and experiences that entice the purchase in the first place. To summarize, branding is how you and your organization connect emotionally with customers. Marketing is a disciplined array of activities putting buyers (the market) and sellers together.

While everyone in your organization has an influence on its brand, senior managers—particularly the chief staff executive—are primarily responsible for building and cultivating a loyal, enthusiastic following. At a minimum, this means having

- A coherent identity that stands for your organization's value
- Brand standards to ensure that clear identity, and that define the benefits, features, and value offered by your association
- An ability to integrate the brand across all association programs, services, and activities
- A means to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses—the effectiveness—of your brand

Ultimately, you should be able to clearly answer the questions "What do we do?" and "Why would anyone want to do it with us now or in the future?"

The CSE's Role in Branding

If sound strategy sets a company apart and puts it in a unique position, and if developing unique positioning is a branding function, then branding, by definition, is a strategic function. Taking this idea a step further, if one of the roles of the CSE is to work with the board to chart strategy—along with securing relationships and resources to enable the organization's mission—then the role of the CSE is to support branding as strategy. Along these lines, publications, professional development (education, credentialing, or both), information technology, finances, the physical office space, the telephone system—*everything*—communicates in some way about the association and has a role in strategy.

If these things are all true, then the CSE has a responsibility to ensure that staff are aligned with the culture of the organization to focus and communicate the organization's messages, to guarantee that the organization has the capacity and desire to listen to stakeholders, and to prevent branding activities—or any other function—from becoming a silo.

The CSE is ultimately on the hook to the board for this success, and the CSE is only as good as the staff. Microsoft's Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer, United/Continental's Jeff Smisek, Apple's Steve Jobs, GE's Jack Welch, and any U.S. president are all examples—for better or worse. However, many companies are famous for their performance and culture without a very famous chief executive officer as figurehead. Nordstrom, REI, Google, Edward Jones, Zappos, and Inuit come to mind as shining examples of this strategy. While the CSE has an obligation and ability to shape and support culture to the benefit of the organization and its stakeholders, it's everyone's job to deliver.

Branding Is Dead

Branding has been dying a very slow death because traditional strategies are no longer viable. Gone are the days when a brand was tightly controlled by advertisers and distributed one way via your local paper and a handful of television and radio outlets, and potentially supplemented with a handful of direct mail pieces.

Earlier in the chapter we noted that branding and marketing are intertwined, and perhaps no more closely than the evolution of branding and

marketing. Marketing once was—and in some companies still is—product focused. Much like radio and television broadcasting in the mid- to late twentieth century, marketing theory embraced one-way communication on the premise of developing products with the broadest possible appeal at the lowest price. Branding, in this era, was developed to provide a common identity to support this activity. In this regard, branding was a subset of marketing.

Branding concepts broadened to include customer-centric ideas. Lifestyle marketing took hold in the 1960s when markets began responding to consumer demands. Target and segmentation marketing, positioning, and services marketing evolved in the 1970s, with increasing focus on the customer leading the way to experiential marketing, cause marketing, and sponsorship marketing through the 1990s.³ The common denominator during this time is that, despite improvements in technology and market research, the customer is still viewed as passive. The increased use of lifestyle factors and causes to differentiate companies is the beginning of a broader definition and application of branding.

What's the result of more of the same as companies split out increasing numbers of messages, easily developed and broadcast through ever-growing numbers of channels to oversaturated audiences?

- Organizations are creating shiny new tactics of the day rather than pursuing strategy. For example, just as companies in the 1990s created websites without really knowing why they wanted or needed one, so too are companies doing the same thing with social media platforms, mistakenly believing social media are simply another form of static, web-based content.
- In the frenzy to keep up, organizations are failing to identify metrics to help measure the success or failure of branding implementation. Can your organization identify the behaviors of customers or members? What is your reputation, on the basis of news and user-generated content? How does this compare to your competitors? What are they talking about? What is the likelihood someone will recommend your product or service?
- Dull and uninspiring creative content lists features rather than focusing on the *value* of the offering; anyone can offer resources, continuing education, information, discounts, and networking. Will what you offer give me a competitive edge or make me more successful? Will I get a raise or be a better human being by taking your education and certification offerings? Can you save me money? Many associations use the

generic "You have access to an array of programs that allow you to enjoy group discounts," as opposed to "Our your equipment costs through members-only offers from dozens of association suppliers you won't find anywhere else."

Glum things indeed, and what's a brand manager to do? For many associations, it would seem that products and services often seem to sell despite our best branding and marketing, not because of it.

Long Live Branding

If branding is "the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another,"⁴ then modern views of competitive strategy should be music to an association executive's ears. Harvard business professor Michael Porter asserts three strategic principles that apply perfectly to branding:

1. It's not just a matter of being better at what you do, it's a matter of being *different* at what you do.
2. Good strategy differentiates your company and positions it as unique.
3. It's not good enough to be different; you have to trade off with other ways of being different (another way of saying you can't be all things to all people).⁵

Associations may struggle to adopt this approach because it means they have to make choices—something they generally are not good at, especially if it means disappointing a member. Further, this philosophy subtly presumes one-way communication, from producer to customer, removing important feedback aimed at enabling members to feel their voice is heard and depriving the organization of information about its performance.

Seize the Opportunities

How can we benefit from these new trends? Consumers' behavior and expectations of their relationship with a brand has changed. These days, customers trust one another more than the brand itself. Customers are increasingly engaged, informed, and communicative about their consumer experiences. Peer-to-peer referrals and relationships, even those online, are more trusted than brand messages.⁶ As a result, organizations

"no longer have full control over their brands" because they are now competing with the collective power of consumers." In other words, you no longer own the channels of communication. Ignore this at your own peril. Instead, it's important to create environments to encourage user-generated content and to recognize that individuals will communicate with each other about your organization *outside* those channels, whether you like it or not. For example, social media enables opportunities to take your products and services, share video about your products and services, talk about your initiatives, and tell stories about interacting with your brand.

Recognize that customers co-create their experience with the brand. This goes beyond the idea of self-service. It may be a given that customers have always defined value for themselves. Now, customers define deeper relationships—which is one reason why Starbucks is piloting tea-only stores where customers can develop personalized blends of teas,⁷ why purveyors of kitchenware are offering cooking classes, and why Porsche offers free driving improvement classes.

Authenticity rules, jokers lose. Authenticity is based primarily on whether or not your organization delivers on what it says it will deliver. But almost as important, authenticity is about communicating in ways that come across as real and honest. Far too often, we really do have great things to offer our members and talk about them in ways that come across as utterly inauthentic. Although most of us have grown up hearing a near constant stream of it, no real human speaks "marketing speak." And, increasingly, no one believes it. Are we communicating in ways that are compelling? Or are we using the bland, less-than-compelling language of business? Here's an example:

"Why come to our event? Because professionals need access to high-quality information, professional networking, and professional development resources that only fellow members can provide."

Does that sound like an authentic, compelling message that promises a unique experience that you cannot do without? I don't think so either. Instead, try making a topic like ceramics engineering interesting:

Every day, materials professionals use ceramics to pioneer energy solutions, advance medicine, improve the environment, support manufacturing innovations, and make life better.

Often hidden, ceramic components are critical in nearly everything that makes modern life possible—from computers, cell phones, jet engines and armor, to skis, tennis rackets, and hip replacements.⁸

Or how about trees?

What do we do? We plant trees.

Why? Every time a tree is planted, our environment improves. American Forests works to spread the word about the many benefits that forests provide for the health and well-being of the entire planet. With a greater understanding of what forests do for us all, we can encourage greater support to protect and restore these valuable resources.⁹

Or becoming a ski or snowboard instructor?

What we do: We get people excited about skiing and snowboarding.

Our culture: Connecting to people and ideas in unexpected ways and places.

Our direction: To be the first place people come for information about skiing and snowboarding, teaching, and the industry.

The value of membership: Access to people, resources, and more of the mountain environment that infuse excitement about skiing and snowboarding.

In other words, do your messages help paint a compelling picture and spark conversation about what you do, or do they merely emit "white noise"? Do they sound like the way a real person would talk about what you offer?

Authenticity is also based primarily on whether or not your organization delivers on what it says it will deliver. It's one thing to paint a compelling picture, and it's another to actually follow through. If you promise to plant trees, be ready to prove it. If the promise is to get the public and members more excited about skiing and snowboarding, then the experience had better do so. Customers will quickly judge whether or not your brand is authentic.¹⁰ Tell a compelling, authentic story, engage your audience, and keep your promises—it's a simple, but effective combination.

Somewhat related to the issue of authenticity is uniqueness. Taking Michael Porter's comment about being different a step further, what

makes your organization *indispensable* to the marketplace? Do you offer a certification, research analysis, or a service to a population that no one can match? If not, chances increase every day that some other group or free service will successfully compete against you.

Being indispensable is another way of saying the utility your brand offers is unique, and you are known for providing high value and removing friction and pain points in ways that people will support by paying for what you offer. Authentic value is not simply a question of dollar cost, especially when we have shifted from people spending time to save money to spending money to save time.¹¹ "Actually giving consumers something valuable seems counterintuitive to most marketing departments because they equate 'value' with 'cost,' and the last thing a marketer wants to do is give something that costs them more money to fewer people than they are reaching with their traditional advertising. The truth is that great utilitarianism marketing doesn't have to cost more. It just has to be useful."¹²

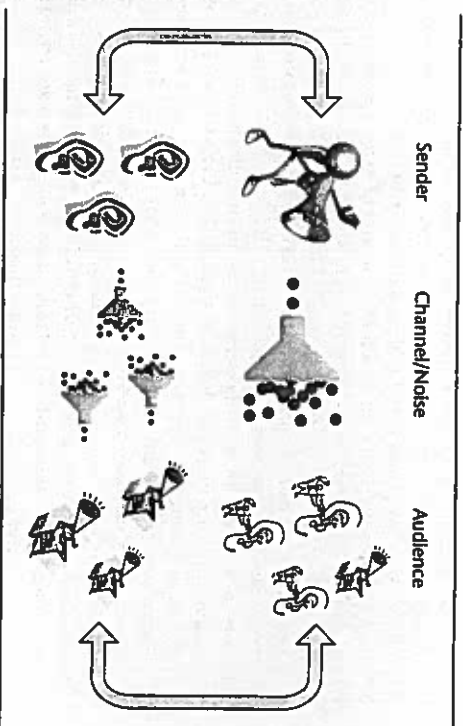
Acknowledge that social responsibility is becoming a given within more and more market segments. This takes authenticity one step further. As increasing numbers of consumers educate themselves about what companies do beyond increasing value to shareholders, organizations that want to be more successful than their competitors must demonstrate they are stewards of their community and environment, not just the balance sheet. It isn't new that for-profit entities have tried to emulate the behavior or appearance of non-profits. Some are genuinely committed to social responsibility, others less genuinely so.

Technology Changes the Playing Field

Many of the trends cited in the previous section are the result of rapid technological evolution, or revolution, if you prefer. We've moved from having the ultimate reference library at our fingertips—in which we are challenged with the task of organizing and consuming vast amounts of information pulled from or pushed to us—to a virtual world that is more expressive and collaborative.¹³ People, not just institutions that employ them, generate news, information, ideas, and entertainment in unprecedented volume. And this content appears to be created with the purpose of sharing experiences, many of which include the experience one has with a brand. Under the cautionary note of "be careful what you wish for," word-of-mouth advertising has exploded, thanks to technology.

In one sense, we're moving toward that economic idea in which the market has perfect information available to customers whenever they want it (minus the perfect part, of course). As best-selling author

FIGURE 6.1. HUMAN COMMUNICATION.



Daniel Pink notes in his book *To Sell Is Human*, it used to be true that sellers owned most of the information relevant to negotiation.¹⁴ Now the information gap between buyers and sellers is about dead even. Increases in the exchange of information create a more level playing field as the flow of goods moves more seamlessly across borders due to lessening transportation and information costs.¹⁵

Communication Defines the Relationship

One can make the argument that branding is another view of human communication. An image of human communication may look like this: a message is sent by someone such as you (the Sender) through a Channel (verbal, physical gestures and expressions, written, electronic, and so on) (see figure 6.1). Your message is interfered with or distorted by Noise (as in irrelevant or meaningless data accompanying the desired information). The message may or may not be received by someone (the Audience). The audience may or may not send feedback, subject to more noise, to the sender, who may stop the loop or adjust the message and resend. As feedback is sent and received, a communication loop ensues, which, with any luck, will continue.

For the record, this communication model is as applicable in education, credentialing, marketing, mass communications, and branding as it

is in the study of one-to-one communications. And it would be a mistake to define "sender" as limited to your organization or marketing effort. Your customers, members, and other stakeholders are senders (as well as individuals with their own specific ideas and concerns).

The stereotypical view of branding is that of broadcasting to a passive audience—the communication version of yelling supply to demand mentioned earlier in this chapter. That's more of yelling loudly one way, and not really a communication loop. In database terms, this would be a one-to-many relationship. During the late 1990s and early 2000s one-to-one relationships between companies and customers came into vogue and organizations learned a great deal about how different customer segments behave and interact with products and services. Thus began loyalty programs. Changes in technology facilitated the next change by enabling many-to-many relationships to become increasingly common. Many-to-many relationships provide new opportunities for the organization's employees, advocates, and detractors to be in touch with many customers simultaneously—and the many customers can communicate back to the organization in the same manner.

If the essence of branding is to predispose an audience or stakeholders to a certain relationship with an organization, then the roots of that relationship are in your organization's communication at every level—right down to how the phone is answered—and the proof of the relationship is in the audience's reaction to that communication. In other words, the audience, not you, ultimately defines the brand relationship.

Speaking of Engagement...

Brand relationships run the spectrum of engagement, with the spectrum defined by Forrester Research as "involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence."¹⁶ As one might expect, the qualitative elements of engagement change as one moves from involvement (for example, tracking site visits, page views, search, logins) through to influence (for example, Net Promoter Score, content sharing, blog posts). Understanding these forms of engagement and identifying the extent to which customers and stakeholders are actively or passively engaged with your brand is critical to developing insight about your markets. Forrester relates this understanding to four potential branding objectives: creating awareness, driving transactions, building brand preference, and increasing loyalty and a host of broader implications.

Simply assigning points for engagement is not enough. You need to meet customers where they are. And simply following the channels you

create—an old-school notion—isn't sufficient. Why? Because 70 percent of Baby Boomers and 84 percent of Millennials say that user-generated content influences a purchase decision, with at least one in five saying this influences their decision "a lot."¹⁷ And 51 percent of Americans trust user-generated content of information over that from a company website (16 percent) or news articles about the company (14 percent).¹⁸ The point is, branding depends on factors outside your control as much, if not more, than those factors within your control.

Assessing Brand Effectiveness and Equity

Financial resources are critical to sustaining organizational activity, no matter how big or how small, which brings to mind the association adage "no margin, no mission." Volunteer efforts and in-kind contributions can be included as important financial resources as well. Measuring and reporting association progress toward achieving the mission along with stakeholder support toward—and their experiences with you in—achieving the mission is a key branding concept.

Examples of these measures may include the following:

- Financial measures
 - Changes in dues and renewals
 - Nondues revenue from all sources, including events, advertising, sponsorship, grants, and donations
 - Purchase behavior
- Nonfinancial measures
 - Likelihood of a stakeholder to recommend your organization to others (Net Promoter Score)¹⁹
 - Your brand's standing and importance compared to direct and indirect competitors
 - Use of and satisfaction with association print and electronic publications
 - Acceptance of, utility of, and satisfaction with certification programs
 - Unique products and services compared to formal and informal competitors
 - Identification and measurement of media content (social media and otherwise) about your industry or organization
 - Understanding of why members leave or stakeholders speak poorly of your organization

- Identifying brand attributes²⁰
- Prestigious
- Loyal
- Trustworthy
- Credible
- Effective
- Scholarly
- Innovative
- Useful
- Important
- Practical

Ultimately, these and other measures contribute to brand equity. Multichannel marketing expert and author Akin Arıkan offers a concept of brand equity that relates nicely to the definition of branding: "potential energy that has been stored in buyer's minds and that still needs to transform into actual purchases and increased shareholder value."²¹

Predictors of Behavior

Philip Kotler, as noted earlier, says that "(executives) today no longer have full control over their brands because they are now competing with the collective power of consumers."²² He goes on to suggest that organizations that embrace this paradox, among others, will ultimately derive more revenue as the organization engages consumer emotions, which is the essence of contemporary branding. Profitability will increase as the cost of reaching more consumers decreases because the influence and importance of word of mouth—or perhaps word of keyboard—becomes more prominent. As a key influencer in your association, your role is critical in helping to identify stakeholder behaviors, identify factors that influence them, and answer the critical underlying question of "Why?" behind the results and behaviors. Too often, managers rely on frequency distributions and cross-tabulations to assert predictors of behavior rather than using the array of data available through their association's database, combined with more sophisticated analysis to identify the variables that are relevant and important.

Branding Is Everyone's Responsibility

Too often all responsibility for branding is kicked over to the marketing department. While someone has to shepherd an organization's

messages, images, and customer experiences, this creates a tricky set of organizational issues.

If an organization has a chief marketing officer or chief relationship officer, does that let the rest of the organization off the hook for attracting and maintaining customer relationships? Of course not, but where does the responsibility lie? With everyone, because meaningful customer relationships and experiences are, and should be, part of the organization's culture. Left to a silo, the care and feeding of these critical activities becomes someone else's job. Therefore, an association executive's role, particularly the CSE and anyone in marketing, becomes one of staying in touch with and influencing the organizational culture. It's also the brand advocate's role to work with colleagues to ensure the association captures relevant, timely information about marketplace behavior, enables the organization to adapt to changes in that behavior, and helps the organization to remain true and authentic within the markets it serves.

The Rules

Consistency Still Matters

The importance of consistency as it relates to branding is contained within the definitions of integrated marketing communications (IMC), wherein IMC "is the development of marketing strategies and creative campaigns that weave together multiple marketing disciplines (paid advertising, earned media/PR, promotion, owned assets and social media) that are executed across a variety of media, and selected to suit the particular goals of the brand."²³ Or, put another way, IMC is "a strategic marketing process specifically designed to ensure that all messaging and communications strategies are unified across all channels and are centered around the customer."²⁴

The case for consistency is straightforward.²⁵ If you tout the prestige and exclusivity of certain products and services to one audience on your website, and then turn around and promote sweeping discounting as a way to attract members via the same medium, you risk confusing your audiences and your brand proposition. This isn't to say you can't adopt these tactics via different media, only to take care not to send inconsistent and confusing messages to the broader audiences.

To this end, consistency of design and identity still facilitates strong branding. This means that logo use guidelines, editorial style guides, and easy-to-access resources must be available to those who might represent

your organization's brand. Part of maintaining a brand also includes working with legal counsel specializing in intellectual property to ensure that rights regarding copyrights, trademarks,²⁶ trade dress,²⁷ and other forms of intellectual property are protected.

Embrace the Mission

Successful businesses start with the relentless, organization-wide pursuit of a mission and purpose, not with planning financial returns.²⁸ The mission should be clear and concise, define the organization's fundamental reason for being, and connect with the customer's ideas about how to make a difference.²⁹ They derive their mission from core values and beliefs, and examine policies that might weaken those values. They create a mechanism that directly links actions with values.³⁰ Embrace the mission, and members, financial results, and other support will follow.

Be Authentic and Deliver Real Value

Your audience determines the value, not you. It's important to note that members are likely to have the highest belief in the value of their purchase at the time they join an association, meaning associations start with high credibility to squander, if they're not careful. Also realize that perfection is a myth. Be ready to deal with it when your organization makes a mistake and your audiences communicate with each other, and with you, in ways you might not like.

Ask Five Key Questions

1. What do you *do*? (You should be able to answer this in one sentence.)
2. What makes your offering unique (or, better yet, indispensable)?
3. Why do you do it, and why do your constituents engage with you? (If you can't answer this, why should anyone care?)
4. How do you know what you know? (Are you relying on solid data and testing hypotheses, or are you just guessing? And if you can't answer this, how are you tracking the effectiveness of your brand?)
5. Do you like your customers, or are you focused on trying to get them to like you?³¹ (The latter comes from a place of seeking validation as opposed to creating a relationship and, frankly, is not all that attractive.)

The Care and Feeding of the Brand Is Everyone's Job

Every contact with your brand is a chance to increase or decrease an individual's support of your organization. And as noted earlier, the role of the CSE as brand steward is critical in this regard. This individual will need to maintain focus on the mission and culture, break down any internal resistance to branding, and support marketing and communication efforts to ensure that branding isn't a sideline.

Utility, Utility, Utility

As we said earlier, being indispensable is another way of saying the utility your brand offers is unique. Or, put another way, what indispensable product or service would be lost if your association were to go away?

In conclusion, viewing the association from a branding perspective, you're in a unique position to help focus the organization and connect the outside with what's happening inside it. Many of the tried-and-true brand strategies of yesterday will always be relevant, but it's a new world, and organizations that seek to gain customers or members, engender loyalty, and build a solid financial structure need to ensure the association's brand maintains the emotional tie to the mission and values.

Notes

1. Seth Godin, "Seth's Blog," n.d., available at http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2009/12/define-brand.html.
2. Brandsstoke offers nine criteria to help in assessing brand essence, because articulating how customers feel about your brand in an authentic and meaningful way is often challenging. The features of a brand, for example, "lightweight," "fast," or "blue," are tangible. They are easy to sense, describe, measure, and compare. The essence, on the other hand, is felt. Lacing up a new pair of Nike running shoes feels inspirational. Riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle feels liberating. Experiencing Walt Disney World with your children feels magical. Strong brands have well-defined, easily grasped, simply obvious essences. Test your essence against these criteria: (1) single-minded, (2) intangible, (3) unique, (4) experiential, (5) consistent, (6) authentic, (7) sustainable, (8) meaningful, (9) scalable. Brandsstoke, February 9, 2009, available at