

# Branding for the Nonprofit Organization

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## WHAT IS A BRAND?

Your nonprofit's brand is much more than its name, logo, or the services it offers. It is what others think, share and feel about the organization: it is the impression people have of your work that influences their response to every message sent, action undertaken and project supported by your organization. The well-known phrase "*perception is reality*" may best describe the concept.

There are two very important and possibly conflicting realities at play here because there are two different perspectives. First, we may try to control the way others view our organization by what we say or what we do based upon our definition of what we "really" do and how we strive to benefits others. Second, by comparison, others will perceive us by how they interpret and accept what we "really" do, based on their past experiences and current situation. We cannot control how others perceive us, just as we cannot control what they believe. When we set out to develop a brand, our task is to try to influence the perception of others.

*"Brands are influenced by all sorts of things. In fact, they are influenced by pretty much everything you do and say and what others say about you. This includes logical things, such as your communications, awards you're given, or press articles about you. But it also includes things that may not be so rational – the way you design your materials, the way you answer your phone, the fact that your executive director looks like George Bush..."<sup>1</sup>*

For example, during a conference on the topic of branding for nonprofit organizations, the example was used comparing the World Wildlife Fund to Greenpeace. The author explained that although each organization may do similar things, each has its own brand. In the example, it was noted how the WWF brand "encompasses our general conception of what they do – they protect wildlife – as well as what we think about what they do – they are hardworking, politically savvy, incredibly knowledgeable, a bunch of idiots, whatever." By comparison, Greenpeace "is perceived in a different way – less conservative, more prone to political actions, etc."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **Branding Through Websites Presentation**  
[www.alderconsulting.com/resources/branding.pdf](http://www.alderconsulting.com/resources/branding.pdf) (PDF file)

<sup>2</sup> **Branding Through Websites Presentation**

How do we influence the perception of others? Before we explore how to create a brand, let's dig a little deeper into what it takes to build a brand that will have meaning and substance, supporting our organization's growth and stability. In this paper I will take you through the steps of employing your organization's business plan and Mission Statement as a foundation for your new brand. Most importantly, you will learn how to ask the right questions to clearly define the purpose and scope of your brand, and then develop a set of best practices that will guide the implementation of a unique and sustainable brand for your organization.

## THE FOUNDATION FOR YOUR BRAND

It is easy to recognize the value of a sound business plan and the importance of a quality service or product. Once these two key factors provide the foundation, the next step is to package your agency or organization to be effectively marketed.

As many have learned the hard way, once you begin to the process of defining your brand, you will quickly discover the soundness of your business plan and the true quality of your service or product. The value gained from this thorough analysis of what you have to offer and who will most benefit most will have long-reaching applications toward achieving a sustainable and well-functioning organization.

There are many excellent resources available to help you create your organization's brand. *BRANDING FOR NONPROFITS* by DK Holland provides a clear step by step process and offers illustrations of famous and emerging organizations that have successfully formed a memorable brand. On the second page of his book, DK Holland quotes from Bart Crosby, a brand designer:

*"Cowboys all know you can't brand nuthin' till you tie three of its legs together, slam it to the ground, and sedate it."<sup>3</sup>*

Holland easily makes the point is that you have to master the subject to before you create and stamp your brand. By organizing a set of criteria and best practices according to sound principles and guidelines that align with your Mission Statement, you will be able to effectively implement a branding process for your nonprofit.

Your organization's Mission Statement provides the foundation and focus to develop your brand. A working Mission Statement clearly illustrates the congruencies between three key elements of the organization: (1) plans, (2) people, (3) products/services.

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<sup>3</sup> *BRANDING FOR NONPROFITS* by DK Holland, page 2.

## THE ORGANIZATION'S MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY

Branding of a nonprofit organization starts with understanding the organization's reason for existence and the goals to be achieved. In my book, *A COMMUNICATIONS MANUAL FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS*<sup>4</sup>, I discuss how nonprofit organizations hold a public trusteeship. Both public and privately funded institutions have a responsibility to the public and require community approval and support for their actions. In particular, philanthropic organizations that rely on the public for financial contributions are directly accountable for their program and expenditures.

To align all activities of the organization in a unified, focused effort, the organization's goals should be clearly described in the mission statement. By defining the scope, resources and value of the organization's mission, a mission statement reminds members and the public of the value of the sustainable value of the effort on a specific targeted group and the long-term implications of this contribution to society at large. It is both a tool to establish a direction and to evaluate success.

During the first chapter of my book<sup>5</sup>, I remind readers that:

*"The opportunities to accomplish your goals already exist; you need only to identify them."*

Although it may seem easier for those agencies and groups that have been in existence for a while or who are affiliates of large, national organizations to obtain vital resource, history and financial support do not guarantee continued success. Established and new nonprofit organizations have one vital factor in common: the passion of volunteer leadership providing the momentum to offer services and communicate with the organization's audience. Opportunities to serve the public, offer new products or provide new programs change rapidly as unexpected community concerns arise. Nonprofit organization leadership recognizes opportunities that fall within their areas of expertise, meet the criteria described in the Mission Statement, and align with the organization's philosophy, to consistently and effectively respond to new and ever changing needs.

We live in a world of instant communication. Your organization already has a brand: the public's opinion. Do you know how others view your organization? Does the public's perception of the organization's mission align with its actual Mission Statement? It will take some investigation as well as an organized effort to create the brand that will enable your organization to carry out its mission.

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<sup>4</sup> *A COMMUNICATIONS MANUAL FOR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS* by L. Maddalena is in its third rewrite. For information on projected publication date, please send a note to [james@pgresources.com](mailto:james@pgresources.com).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* See preceding reference.

## HOW TO INFLUENCE THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION

When creating a brand for your organization, the task is to inform the public of the purpose, plans and programs of the organization. You will successfully complete this task when you have enabled people to understand the organization's mission and engaged their support to achieve its goals.

There is one analogy I often use to explain the importance of communicating with the public by presenting your words and understanding of an event or an entire organization. Think about a situation in which you are joining a new group of people. You don't know anyone in the group. How are these people going to learn who you are and, more importantly to them, how your presence will affect them? The typical reaction to a stranger is to gain some information, evaluate it against what we know and how we feel about the data, and then come to an opinion, no matter how arbitrary.

An interesting study was conducted a few years ago on this topic. During the study, those participating in the test were divided into the role of interviewers or candidate for a prospective job. The first interview was precisely a half hour with each candidate. The second interview with each candidate was limited to one minute. After repeating the process with hundreds of interviewers and applications, it was found that the initial impression of the interviewer of the candidate was the same – regardless of the time spent with the candidate. What does this tell us about how we judge others and how we form our perception of people, events, and even entire organizations?

Those who study selling techniques have long suspected that feelings of the 'heart' often override logic of the 'head'. Some researchers clearly state that we first decide with our 'heart', then use rational logic from the 'head' to confirm or support our decision.

## CREATING YOUR BRAND

Whatever the reason, the public's perception of your organization will contain as much emotion, passion and unsubstantiated opinion as it will logic and knowledge of the history, role in the community and value of the services or products offered.

The purpose of influencing the opinion of others to accept your brand for your organization is to align their thinking with the stated mission of the organization. Of course this means that every action, every published statement, every public presentation and every expenditure must be aligned and in total support of your statement mission. Any false move in conflict with or action not consistent with stated goals by a representative of your organization that ignores your state mission will create distrust for the entire enterprise – and trust once lost may never be regained.

To prevent distractions and deviations from your Mission Statement, begin to create your brand by assigning a select group of individuals to form a Branding Team. The goal of the team's is most easily identified when employing the 'smart' goal criteria.

In the list below, I have provided one typical question for each of the elements of a smart goal. The questions you ask are vital to get the answers you need. Build your list based on your organization's Mission Statement by questioning past practices and future plans, perceived needs and current issues: include key events, common reactions, experiences as well as hopes, dreams and wishes. Capture a picture of where you want to go and decide what must occur to guide, invigorate, grow and bring the organization to fulfill those expectations.

By developing a set of factors to describe how you envision your organization, your Brand Team will identify the criteria to define the best practices and benchmarks against which you will build your organization's Brand:

- Specific: **How should others describe the organization?**
- Measurable: **How will we know when we are successful?**
- Aligned with the mission statement: **How will we know when the description by others aligns with our mission statement?**
- Results-oriented: **What will our success mean to the organization?**
- Timely: **How will we use our time and what is the desired completion date?**

Branding Team's task is to create a process that promotes creative thinking and engages others to offer their insight and perspective when considering each of these questions. The team that requests feedback and ideas will significantly broaden its understanding of how others view the organization, its history and its future.

The responses gathered during careful study of each of these five questions will be a set of unique and compelling statements that can only be applied when describing your brand. This description of your brand will provide the guide for every phase of your communications effort, all public documents and statement, as well as your organization's future plans. The combined wisdom expressed in these descriptions will allow you to convey the heart and passion of your organization in a consistent and sustainable manner.

Once your Brand Team has completed their work by answering each of these questions, use those answers as a set of standards to define and apply your Brand. Continually seek available opportunities to present your Brand and influence the perception of others to create a positive and sustainable impression for your organization.

The effectiveness of your brand identified by your team is now in the hands of every staff member and volunteer. Now that you can identify your brand, the process of sending out your message and engaging others to accept the brand is the task of every member of your organization.

## **INFLUENCING TOOLS**

The people who offer and use your services, as well as products themselves represent the organization's brand. Any visual image or repeated phrase that directs someone's attention to your organization is a reminder of what your organization means to that person.

### **Logo and Tag Line**

Most company have invested in a visual image of their organization – a specific piece of art that is immediately identifiable as representation of the organization, often used in conjunction with the organization's name.

Once you have created and introduced a logo to the public, do not change it. Set standards for its use and limit the temptation to tinker with it for a special event or project. It should always appear in approximately the same size in comparison to other text on the page, in the original format, and in an assigned position on the page.

A tagline often accompanies a logo. A tagline is a short phrase that precisely states in as few words as possible the 'heart' or essence of the purpose of the organization. It is the Mission Statement in a nutshell and may be the hardest single sentence you will ever write. It doesn't have to be a complete and accurate sentence – it may simply be a few key words – and should not include superlatives.

For example, United Way of America recently came up with the tag line "Live United": short, specific, and packed with meaning. When selecting the words for your tagline remember that each word you choose will resonate beyond the context in which it is presented and does send a message that may be interpreted in many different ways such as formality/informality, hipness/old time, friendliness/structured, sincerity/boastfulness, etc.

### Thesis Statement

In addition to your tag line, you will want to create what I refer to as a 'Thesis Statement' for your website, correspondence, publications and proposals. A 'Thesis Statement' is a 60-word statement, somewhat akin to an elevator speech, that succinctly describes the organization and its services in a manner that engages the interest of the listener.

Your thesis statement presents your Mission Statement in current, active terms that entice the listener to want to learn more about what you are doing and how you are doing it. To accomplish this in as few words as possible, your Brand Team will first determine what images the phrase should evoke and what feelings about the organization are being conveyed to listeners or readers.

Because different aspects of the organization and its services or products should be called to mind at different times and junctures, it is wise to have several Thesis Statements prepared for use as needed.

### Website

Your website is often the only contact visitors will have with your organization. Does it present the image you are seeking? Have you incorporated your logo, tag line and Thesis Statement consistently throughout its pages and does it align with your Mission Statement?

As with any marketing effort, maintaining a website is an on-going expense for your organization. The branding process is an excellent opportunity to evaluate if this tool is doing its job.

Using the five unique set of statements you created to describe your brand, you can evaluate the effectiveness of your current website by conducting a survey. There are two types of surveys easily available to test the value of the expenditure as well as the quality of the website's ability to influence the perception of others:

(1) On-line survey. There are several very inexpensive and free survey tools available on the internet. You can create a survey that is initiated after someone has visited the site for a select period. The questions on the survey should be designed to gauge the user's feelings about the organization, ability to recall what they read on the website and general reactions the content, graphic presentation and design of the site.

(2) E-mail survey. Using the same type of survey described above, you may choose to focus on existing volunteers or users of your service. Send the target survey group an email explaining the importance of assessing the current website and directing them to follow a link to complete the survey.

To motivate recipients to invest the time to complete the survey, it is wise to offer a reward for their participation. The reward may be as simple as providing them with a description of the results, free subscription to a newsletter, or early notification of up-coming events.

To integrate the set of messages into your website, follow the advice of the professionals. There are several excellent articles available to guide you through the process by "creating **Statements** that appear within the website, the **Information and Functionality** that you provide, the **Prioritization** of elements within the site, and your site's **Graphic Design.**"<sup>6</sup>

## COMMUNICATE YOUR BRAND

Similar guidelines to those you have created for your website apply to every news release, speech or public announcement made by a representative of your organization.

Utilize your Thesis Statement in particular to broaden your image and improve your Brand. For example, it is unfortunate that many people say that they only hear from their charity when there is a fundraising campaign. Your communications with your public must be year-round in the same spirit of giving as the services or products the organization provides. Build your community by identifying a new way to employ an existing service or by linking services with several organizations you may have formerly described as a competitor.

The nonprofit community must support itself. Your organization can be a role model to involve and engage the public. Your brand will tell its story best when presented in a positive environment of giving and trust.

### For More Information

**Branding Through Websites Presentation** [www.alderconsulting.com/resources/branding.pdf](http://www.alderconsulting.com/resources/branding.pdf) (PDF file)

**Branding for Nonprofits** by DK Holland

**The Brand Gap**, by Marty Neumeier

**Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind**, by Al Ries and Jack Trout

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<sup>6</sup> **Branding Through Websites Presentation**  
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