# The Art of Branding the Nonprofit Organization

By: Ira Schwartz, NESC Consultant

Branding is a term that carries great weight in the world I came from, the world of advertising. Successful branding is best illustrated by the world's biggest corporations like Nike, Coca-Cola, and Apple, but it is no less important to nonprofit organizations. The branding work I do on behalf of the National Executive Service Corps for clients such as the Queens Theater in the Park, Guttmacher Institute, and the Carter Burden Center for the Aging is just as important to those organizations. Good branding not only helps raise money for the nonprofit but also attracts board members, clients, volunteers, and inquiries from the press. The brand is the organization's essence, its DNA, its identity; it's every single puzzle piece, fitted into the big picture of your organization, from the services it offers to its website. All that is owned, produced, stated, and offered by the organization falls under the broad heading of the brand.

What exactly is a brand? The term originated many years ago. Ranchers took a branding iron and stamped their cattle as a way to make it visibly clear that a certain group of cows belonged to them. They in effect differentiated their cows from the other owners' cows. Likewise, organizations carve out a unique identity and try to "brand" it into the mind of the consumer. A strong brand enables a company to communicate their differences, express their value, and essentially tell their unique story in a clear, concise manner.

This is not easy to do. In fact, it is quite difficult and does not happen by accident. A brand is not something that is developed over night or even within a few weeks or months. It can take quite a long time and careful thought to identify your core strengths and just what you're all about and how what you have to offer the world is different and better than anyone else.

For example, the Guttmacher Institute is an international organization that advocates on behalf of women's reproductive rights. They conduct proprietary research and they actively lobby in Washington. In turning to NESC for branding advice, one of their fundamental questions was, What really are we? Not surprisingly, there was a fair amount of tension between the research and lobbying groups. What became clear after several months of investigation was that they were neither a traditional research center or a lobbying organization. Rather, they were actually a think tank! Coming to that realization, and incorporating it into a branding strategy, has allowed both factions to coexist happily and allowed the outside world to get a clearer picture of who the Guttmacher Institute is and what they do.

Name recognition is another critically important element for good branding, particularly in the nonprofit world. Unlike the corporate world, I often find organization names in the nonprofit world confusing and too similar to the competition. Does the United Hebrew Geriatric Center serve only Jewish people? No. In fact, more than 75 percent of its clients are not Jewish. We faced an interesting challenge at the Guttmacher Institute. Funders knew the organization as the Alan Guttmacher Institute. The press knew them as the Guttmacher Institute and they themselves referred to the organization as AGI. We finally settled on Guttmacher Institute, in keeping with their new status as a leading think tank concerned with matters concerning sexual and reproductive health. In order to institutionalize the name change, anyone who referred to the organization internally as anything other than Guttmacher Institute had to put one dollar in a kitty per infraction.

Brands are very personal. They are much like a trusted friend. The Queens Theater in the Park is a case in point. It is a lot more than just a building in Flushing Meadows. It is, in the minds of its constituents, "my personal" theater. It is a place where music, dance, and theatrical productions are presented that are geared to "my tastes" and to the "tastes of my friends." Brands even allow nonhuman entities to take on human qualities. In a sense, we judge brands by asking ourselves the same kind of questions we would ask about people we know or are thinking of doing business with. For example, we might ask: Is he authentic? Is he reliable? Is he honest? Can I trust him? The bonds we have with our most trusted friends are bonds based on a promise. Our relationships with brands are usually not as strong as those with people, but if a brand breaks a promise, you can bet that customers will feel betrayed, angry, and take their business elsewhere.

Great brands tie into our emotions. It is crucial that this link be present and underlie all brand-building efforts. If your brand efforts don't touch people at an emotional level, it will have little power to leverage and attract. Increasingly, consumers make their final purchasing decisions based on belief or emotion rather than completely judging a product on only its quantitative or qualitative features. Nonprofit organizations should be built on emotions as well. Potential board members, clients, funders, and volunteers may very well make their decisions based on a visceral appeal to their emotions.

In the almost four years that I have done branding work for the National Executive Service Corps, I have observed that there are four basic elements that go into making a strong nonprofit brand.
These include:
1) the organization's intended marketplace position or its brand promise (it must know itself and what it is about);

2) the organization's external identity that we can see, touch, hear, and smell, including its logo, tag line, and color palette;
3) the organization's marketing and communication materials, including brochures, website, solicitation letters, and business cards; and
4) the organization's customer "touch point" design, or the way it interacts with clients, board members, volunteers, and foundations at each point of contact.

What can you do to establish a great brand for your nonprofit? First, organize. You must get top management support, board support, and senior staff support. Appoint a brand champion: someone whose role it is to speak up when there is consistency and resonance with the brand promise and to speak up when there is not.

Second, understand your clients, your competition, your funders and your volunteers.

Third, take an organizational inventory. Don't throw out the past. It may be the most important thing you have. An in-depth examination of your history can often point the way to the future.

Fourth try to define your brand essence. This will likely come out of your mission. It is your fundamental reason for being. Try to figure out what you stand for that is clear and concise and differentiates you from your competition.

Fifth, implement your brand identity not only on the outside, but even more importantly on the inside. Every aspect of your organization is embodied in the brand, so it is critical that the employees, the board, and volunteers within the organization become the biggest evangelists of the brand. These people must believe deep down in your organizations promise and understand its culture.

Finally, you have to maintain the brand. You have to keep it fresh and relevant so it's in touch with the views of today's funders, today's volunteers, and newer, younger board members.

Brand building is a marathon, not a sprint. It will take time to develop, no matter how big or small your organization is. In many ways the smaller the organization, the more important it is to become a brand so that everything begins to work synergistically. This is particularly important in light of limited resources, fragmentation, and donor inertia. Just as the ranchers needed a way to differentiate their cows from those of their neighbors—and sometimes their competitors—nonprofits need to differentiate themselves from other organizations so they must stand out, stand for something, and succeed in their ultimate mission.