

Not-for-profits: brand superstars in the making?

Many not-for profit organizations resist thinking of themselves as "brands" or "potential brands." For many, branding is a dirty word that conjures up images of plain old hucksterism and salesmanship without substance. Certainly Naomi Klein's excellent book on corporate marketing practices, "No Logo: Taking Aim at Brand Bullies," has fuelled this suspicion among civil society organizations.

Yet, what not-for-profits are recognizing the world over is that like it or not, they have existing brands and their identity or positioning with external audiences requires attention. Here is a five-part series of articles on brand strategies for not-for-profits that include case studies and tips for understanding and rethinking your organizational identity or brands. Please send us feedback or if you are in the midst of re-branding, let us know and we can address some of your challenges here.

Part 1: What is a brand and do we need to think about ours?

According to a recent article on BrandChannel.com, not-for-profits are increasingly well placed to become powerful brands.

We are driven by the conviction of our work and the importance of the views we express and generate. This passion is a fine basis – some might argue the best basis – on which to build a brand. More than a single message, logo or catchphrase, the brand is the platform on which the motivation behind the organization's work may be articulated, and the significance of its work may be appreciated. Not-for-profits are driven by a level of passion, vision and commitment to core values seldom dreamt of by corporate communicators.

But all too often, we as not-for-profits make the mistake of equating the visuals or collateral materials associated with a brand as the brand itself. This is merely the wrapping on the gift. In fact, the brand is far more central to the values and mission of an organization than many realize. Branding for not-for-profit organizations is not created by powerful, well-funded marketing departments, but must rest on the values that created your organization in the first place.

We call this value-based branding and we'd define it in the following way:

- A clear, consistent vehicle for creating dialogue with your audiences,
- A means of deepening trust and loyalty,
- The sum of perceptions your audiences hold about you,
- A way of demonstrating your leadership in the sector; and,

- An ensemble of activities that all employees, board members, and allies engage in the moment they step into the office. From the moment you answer the first phone call to the time when you lock the door at night. Every interaction contributes towards creating and maintaining your brand.

The logo, the colours, the tagline – the fun stuff comes much later.

The tending, sharpening and maintenance of your brand is essential to your success as an organization: Clearly the answer to the question of "why brand?" could be summed up with the following:

- A strong brand makes it easier to fundraise.
- A strong brand makes it easier to get media attention, attract volunteers and reach key publics.
- A strong brand makes it easier to deliver services cost effectively.

So how do you know you need to revisit your brand? Here are some key indicators:

- Different people in your organization are saying different things and using dramatically different language to describe what you do.
- You are doing incredible, effective, urgent work, yet funders and media audiences don't seem to know what you're up to. Or worse, they attribute your work to better-branded organizations in your community.
- You have polled your target audiences and have found that there's a gap between who they think you are and who you think you are. For instance, you may see yourself as a credible, sober policy shop, while your external audiences see you as an activist, advocacy-driven organization.
- Your promotional material at the front desk looks as if it was designed by five different designers, with three different house-styles. Your tagline may be missing from some of your material, may be non-existent or will vary depending on the piece.

If any of these challenges sound familiar, it's probably time to revisit your organizational identity and positioning.

Part 2: Repositioning Your Brand: the Pivot Effect

Once you've identified your need to visit or reposition your current brand, it's difficult to know where to begin. The most common mistake not-for-profits make is to immediately call their graphic designers to mock up some ideas for a new logo or start the re-invention of a brand with the launch of a new website.

The brand exists independent of your logo and your materials. The brand is the DNA -- the core idea, identity, values and spirit that will not change or shift, regardless of the work you undertake. A successful organization in today's fast changing marketplace of

ideas is one that possesses a changeless core -- the DNA that tightly synchronises your marketing, operations, culture and leadership. If you have one foot planted firmly in that changeless core, it becomes easier to pivot to respond to challenges and opportunities around you.

Traditionally, organizations have relied on "mission" and "vision" statements for both inspiration and direction. Ironically, these statements often become so bogged down in jargon and are often so long that staff and managers have little use for them on a day-to-day basis.

Have your mission or vision statements really worked in practice? One way to know is to ask whether your employees know your mission or vision statement. If so, do they remember it daily? Do they apply it daily, especially when they make decisions that affect the bottom line? The most common answer: No.

What is required? A statement of identity that captures this non-negotiable DNA and that is shared by everyone at every level of your organization. In terms of your brand, we suggest the following internal exercises as an excellent place to start.

First, what are the non-negotiable values for your organization? What are the three to five values (i.e., integrity, collaboration, innovation, diversity) that govern the way you currently operate internally and out in the world, and the way you wish to be. We also ask organizations to be very clear about why they exist: what is the big change you're trying to effect? In other words, what is your organizational "Everest?" Be able to state clearly and concisely why you exist and the kind of solutions you generate on the road to reaching this goal. This is an articulation of your brand promise: what you have and what you are going to do.

Second, where is the gap between how you see your organization and how your key audiences view you? Where do you need to focus understanding of who you are?

This work will form the foundation of your brand. It is the strong, anchor that will allow your organization to pivot and shift with trends and demands, while retaining a strong core.

Part 3: Translating your soul into a brand that the world can see and recognize!

In last month's brand dispatch, we talked about the need to examine the desired and current positioning of your organization, the non-negotiable values you hold as well as the change you are trying to effect. These ingredients are the foundation for your brand -- we've described it as organizational "DNA."

Next, you've got to take this "genetic" information, and transform it into a set of working principles and tools. The first stop: an identity statement. This is not a mission or vision

statement – this is something altogether different. It’s a memorable, clear sentence that captures your values, your services, as well as how you’d like to be perceived. It doesn’t have to be clever, just clear, and most importantly, it should communicate a personality profile for your organization.

Example: Oxfam International recently “re-branded” with the assistance of international brand specialists, Interbrand. The organization began with a clear-eyed assessment of who they were and where they wanted to go, how they wanted to be seen, how they are actually seen by audiences, and what really mattered to them in terms of core values.

As a global organization with 12 major chapters operating in 100 countries, Oxfam’s focus and expertise on policy, development, humanitarian response, trade and communications makes it a unique and potent force for change. The organization’s leaders recognized its potential to move policy both at the government and multilateral level throughout the world. Yet, while the organization saw itself as modern, dynamic, passionate, collaborative, original and global, it soon became apparent that their target audiences had a very different picture. A positioning gap emerged. Audiences saw the organization as aging or dowdy, exclusive and academic, slow to respond, with a focus on its retail outlets in the UK and abroad.

The next step in transforming the brand involved identifying core values, non-negotiable values that would provide a clear platform, or “pivot” point as we described last month, for responding to global change. These values: Oxfam is authoritative, inclusive, empowering, innovative.

Springboarding from their desired positioning and their core values, the organization came up with the following identity statement:

“Working with others to overcome poverty and suffering through the most effective, appropriate and enduring solutions.”

This statement is intended to drive all external and internal communications. It is the values-driven core.

Once you’ve got your statement, its time to translate all your thinking and clarification into visuals and language. One way to do this is to create a grid. This approach is a version of one many advertising and brand specialists suggest, because it is clear. Take a flip chart or two and create four columns:

- ***In column one***, list what your organization does - the services you provide, issues you cover, audiences you serve, etc. No judgments or adjectives here - this column is simply for the facts about your work.
- ***In column two***, take the values that describe how you approach these services and the audiences they serve and list them here. These are both the values you’ve identified as well as the adjectives that your audience would be most likely to use

- to describe you. Are you new and confrontational, established and collaborative, multidisciplinary or single-issue focused?
- ***In column three***, translate these adjectives into colors, textures, typefaces, and photographic styles. At this stage, it may be useful to have samples to look at (design books or even magazines can help) so you can point to particular shades, fonts, or photos that feel like your organization.
 - ***In column four***, list all your communication tools, from simple door-hangers to television PSAs.

Now is the time to give your graphic designer a call. Ensure that you are working with a designer who has expertise creating visual identities – this is a very different skill set than, say creating websites or brochures. But all this information should provide the grist for the creation or revisiting of a logo, tagline, and the consistent design of each tool so that all communications materials consistently reflect your personality.

Part 4: Managing the brand

Now you’ve developed the foundations of your brand, you’ve called a graphic designer and you’ve collaborated on a visual emblem and approach.

And you thought you were finished.

Simply put: just because you’ve built it, they won’t come. Your organization must focus resources on selected tangible and intangible attributes to differentiate the brand in an attractive, meaningful and compelling way for your audiences. You’ve got to manage that brand.

One of the principal reasons branding is seen as dishonourable or unlikely work for traditional not-for-profits is the belief that it is a tool for management seeking to “enforce the party line” in the way that large corporations would.

This is an unfortunate belief because careful, sensitive management and promotion of a brand is the hallmark of an organization that sees itself in terms of its relationships with audiences and fulfilling the promise of its core values and activities.

Brand management is less about discipline and more of an organizational framework that systematically manages each external point of contact between you and your audiences. This contact may take the form of an annual report, a press conference, or a meeting. Each external activity won’t look the same or have the same goals, but each should be anchored in the common values, visuals, language, and stories you’ve captured in your brand. Effective brand management means keeping the brand focused and consistent.

Let’s look at what brand management might look like.

Within larger organizations with diverse programming and “silos” among departments, the risk of developing sub-brands with different visual and language approaches is very common. A good brand steward will try to bridge these silos and find common cause in communicating a consistent picture to the outside world.

Are you seeking out sponsorships or coalitions that will help you communicate your brand? Or conversely, those that clash with it? For instance, if your organization is grounded in values of cooperation, negotiation and solutions-oriented processes, you will want to carefully consider a collaboration with an advocacy oriented group that specializes in high-profile media stunts. In such a case, the brand message makes a promise on which the organization does not fully deliver.

And perhaps one of the most common roles for brand management: keeping it consistent. If you’ve hired a web designer who insists on a completely different look or set of corporate colours from your collateral materials, you’ve got a problem. Indeed, over a long period of time, successful organizations delivered a consistent brand message at each contact-point from meetings to website.

Finally, it is important that everyone in your organization becomes a de facto brand steward. When you hand new employees their orientation guide, you should also be handing them a quick profile about your brand and some information about how they can contribute to communicating it in a consistent manner every time they talk to a partner, a funder, or a reporter.

To avoid the sense of cracking the branding whip, everyone -- not just communications staff or senior administrators -- need to be responsible for this work. If the brand is anchored in shared values and approaches, then we should all have a stake and an interest in broadcasting it to our communities and networks.

Part 5: Review of Key Principles

We’d like to finish the series with a few case studies that we feel illuminate some of the principles articulated in these e-pages over the last few months. But first, we’d like to begin with a recap.

IMPACS has defined value-based branding for not-for-profits in the following way:

- A clear, consistent vehicle for creating dialogue with your audiences,
- A means of deepening trust and loyalty,
- The sum of perceptions your audiences hold about you,
- A way of demonstrating your leadership in the sector; and,
- An ensemble of activities that all employees, volunteers, board members, and allies engage in the moment they step into the office. Every interaction contributes towards creating and maintaining your brand.

In brief, here's what we know and recommend to not-for-profits when it comes to creating and maintaining their brands:

1. Not-for-profits are increasingly well placed to become powerful brands.

Not-for-profits are driven by passion, vision and commitment to core values seldom dreamt of by corporate communicators. Branding for not-for-profit organizations is not created by powerful, well-funded marketing departments, but rests on the values that created your organization in the first place.

2. The logo, the colours, the tagline – the fun stuff comes much later.

All too often, not-for-profits make the mistake of equating the visuals or collateral materials associated with a brand as the brand itself. This is merely the wrapping on the gift. The brand exists independent of your logo and your materials. The brand is the DNA - the core idea, identity, values and spirit that will not change or shift, regardless of the work you undertake.

3. Why should you brand?

- A strong brand makes it easier to fundraise.
- A strong brand makes it easier to get media attention, attract volunteers and reach key publics.
- A strong brand makes it easier to deliver services cost effectively.

4. How do you know you need to revisit your brand?

- Different people in your organization are saying different things and using dramatically different language to describe what you do.
- You are doing incredible, effective, urgent work, yet funders and media audiences don't seem to know what you're up to. Or worse, they attribute your work to better-branded organizations in your community.
- You have polled your target audiences and have found there's a gap between who they think you are and who you think you are. For instance, you may see yourself as a credible, sober policy shop, while your external audiences see you as an activist, advocacy-driven organization.
- Your promotional material at the front desk looks like it was designed by five different designers, with three different house-styles. Your tagline may be missing from some of your material, may be non-existent or will vary depending on the piece.

5. Where do you start when repositioning your brand?

- First, what are the non-negotiable values for your organization? What are the three to five values (i.e., integrity, collaboration, innovation, diversity) that govern the way you currently operate internally and out in the world, and the way you wish to be? We also ask organizations to be very clear about why they exist: what

- is the big change you're trying to effect? In other words, what is your organizational "Everest?" Be able to state clearly and concisely why you exist and the kind of solutions you generate on the road to reaching this goal. This is an articulation of your brand promise: what you have and what you are going to do.
- Second, where is the gap between how you see your organization and how your key audiences view you? Where do you need to focus understanding of who you are?
 - Third, you've got to take this "genetic" information and transform it into a set of working principles and tools. The first stop: an identity statement. This is not a mission or vision statement: this is something altogether different. It's a memorable, clear sentence that captures your values and your services, as well as how you'd like to be perceived. It doesn't have to be clever - just clear - and most importantly, it should communicate a personality profile for your organization.

6. Finally, the visual!

Now it's time to translate all your thinking and clarification into visuals and language – to collaborate with a graphic designer on a visual emblem and approach. This process, articulated in detail in our series, asks you and your designer to translate your strategic thinking about your identity, work and values into colours, textures, typefaces, and photographic styles. All this information should provide the grist for the creation of, or revisiting of, a logo, tagline, and the consistent design of each tool so that all communications materials consistently reflect your personality.

7. Manage that Brand!

Brand management is less about discipline and more of an organizational framework that systematically manages each external point of contact between you and your audiences. These contacts may take the form of an annual report, a press conference, or a meeting. Each external activity won't look the same or have the same goals, but each should be anchored in the common values, visuals, language, and stories you've captured in your brand. Effective brand management means keeping the brand focused and consistent.

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Case Study 1: Oxfam International

Oxfam International recently "re-branded" with the assistance of international brand specialists, Interbrand. The organization began with a clear-eyed assessment of who they were and where they wanted to go, how they wanted to be seen, how they are actually seen by audiences, and what really mattered to them in terms of core values.

As a global organization with twelve major chapters operating in 100 countries, Oxfam's focus and expertise on policy, development, humanitarian response, trade and communications makes it a unique and potent force for change. The organization's leaders recognized its potential to move policy both at the government and multilateral level throughout the world. Yet, while the organization saw itself as modern, dynamic, passionate, collaborative, original and global, it soon became apparent that their target audiences had a very different picture: a positioning gap emerged. Audiences saw the organization as aging or dowdy, exclusive and academic, slow to respond, with a focus on its retail outlets in the UK and abroad.

The next step in transforming the brand involved identifying core values, those non-negotiable values that would provide a clear platform, or "pivot" point as we described last month, for responding to global change. The values: Oxfam is authoritative, inclusive, empowering, innovative.

Spring-boarding from their desired positioning and their core values, the organization came up with the following identity statement: "Working with others to overcome poverty and suffering through the most effective, appropriate and enduring solutions."

This clear statement is intended to drive all external and internal communications. It is the values-driven core, and has spurred the organization to create clear, consistent global communications tools that have increased its profile and purchase in the international policy arena. See more at <http://www.oxfam.org>.

Case Study 2: Muscular Dystrophy Canada

Muscular Dystrophy Canada, formerly known as the Muscular Dystrophy Association of Canada, launched a new brand strategy in September 2003. This high-profile health charity recognized the need to re-visit its brand during an IMPACS-lead workshop in Summer 2002. Staff from across Canada gathered to discuss the messages and stories the organization used to describe itself. What emerged: a pressing need to find a more active, engaging and focused set of communications tools.

The challenge: for years, the organization had dealt with public confusion between Muscular Dystrophy and Multiple Sclerosis, in addition to working to forge a clearer distinction between the uniquely Canadian organization and the celebrity-lead former parent organization in the United States. The organization also needed to connect Canadians, clients and decision-makers broadly to the little understood issue of neuromuscular disorders.

The new brand strategy:

- A new more proactive mission statement
- A shortening of the working name to Muscular Dystrophy Canada or MDC

- A replacement of the tagline "Until there's a cure, there's us" with "Let's make muscles move"
- A reworked logo

First, the organization began its exercise with a set of succinct action-oriented mission statements that capture the values and action of the organizational approach. But the piece that spurred the rebrand was a rethinking of the word muscle.

According to MDC, it made sense to use the word muscle as part of the brand identity to capture the little known information that for the overwhelming majority of neuromuscular disorders, the physiological outcome is a weakening or wasting of the muscles of the body.

According to the recent edition of *Connections*, MDC's magazine, "Our new tagline 'Let's make muscles move' embodies a sense of action; it acts as a direct call to participate in our cause, and helps to distinguish us as being directly related to muscles."

The previous tagline had the ring of "last resort" as opposed to the optimism and hope of the inspirational tales behind the science-driven, community-driven, committed and inclusive organization.

"We want people to associate the word 'muscle' with MDC and to understand that we are a proactive and engaging organization moving forward on service, social action and research fronts; consequently, these aspects will be reinforced in all our marketing communications," according to the autumn 2003 article.

Other branding developments have included a "revitalization" of the familiar puzzle piece logo, the implementation of a new toll free number (1-800-MUSCLE 8), and a new web domain: <http://www.muscle.ca>.

Both of these case re-brands have several factors in common. They both recognized and attempted to bridge a gap between the organizational promise and the "word on the street." They both took the organizational vision and core values as a starting place. And they both looked at sharper language as a means to focus and polish their existing brands.