

# BRANDING YOUR NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

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Imagine this: You've dialed the phone and your prospect answers. You introduce yourself and your nonprofit organization. The voice on the end says, "I'm sorry, but I'm not familiar with your group."

If you or your volunteers have ever experienced this, you know how frustrating it can be. But other nonprofit organizations around the country may not be having these kind of problems—what do they know that you don't? Many nonprofits are beginning to realize a visible and recognizable "personality" isn't just for businesses anymore, and are taking steps to build their own identities.

In the for-profit sector, building identity is known as "branding." You may not be familiar with the word, but you understand the concept.

"A product is made in a factory but a brand is made in your head and heart. Products might leave your factory by the thousands a day, but brands are sold one at a time, and they are sold by F-E-E-L-I-N-G-S."

In other words, a brand is how it makes you feel.

Businesses use branding to presell products or services to develop an idea or concept in the consumers' minds, through a variety of marketing approaches.

But most nonprofit organizations don't have the funds to spend on marketing. So, it becomes even more important to understand how branding can "sell" your organization to potential donors. And when people know you and know what you stand for, they are more likely to give to you. Take that charity event you lost money on. Imagine you can turn back the clock and do it all over again. What can you do to brand your organization to increase visibility, attendance and fundraising dollars? Advertise more in the newspaper and on the radio? Enlist more volunteers? Not necessarily. Getting people interested in your charitable event has to begin long before the entertainment is booked and the menu determined.

## BRANDING

Whether you're part of a large nonprofit organization or a small organization, branding has to become an essential part of your operation.

There are now more than 1.4 million 501(c)(3) organizations in the United States, compared with just over 600,000 in 1995. With all those organizations competing for charitable dollars,

many nonprofits realize they cannot conduct business as usual. Branding can help you meet the needs of those you serve amid rising competition for charitable dollars in a slowing economy.

Branding is about saying the right thing to the right person at the right time. It's listening and understanding what's in donors' hearts and minds.

## TELLING YOUR STORY

Above all others, your organization has to find a way to be first in donors' minds. And to be first, you have to tell your organization's story in a way that reaches people's minds and hearts.

Tailor your message to the needs of your donors, not your organization. Also realize that no one message will appeal to or motivate everyone it reaches.

Know your audience. Put yourself in their place. They have to know exactly what your organization's mission is before they commit to you.

While you want to focus your time on raising funds, investing in target audience research will pay off in the long run. Use focus groups, e-mails, phone surveys or direct-mail questionnaires to gather information. Some nonprofits also collect information off their Web sites.

And speaking of Web sites—they're a good way to establish brand credibility. Barbara Mulville, CFRE, past chair of the Association of Fundraising Professionals, says nonprofit organizations with Web sites gain instant credibility, particularly if they use the site to regularly communicate with donors or constituents. Just be sure the information is consistent with the other messages you are sending via traditional channels.

## THE BRAND NAME

A brand name should evoke both the brand's promise and emotional value.

If you work for a philanthropic organization with a name that does both, don't mess with a good thing. Nothing confuses people more than changing names of companies or organizations to suit the times.

## THE LOGO

If you've already got a powerful logo—great. If your logo doesn't fit your organization's name or purpose, perhaps it's

time to revamp it. Either way put that logo to use. Every piece of marketing that goes out the door should have your organization's logo on it. It's like your calling card—it gets you in the door of current and potential donors.

## INTEGRATING THE MESSAGE

Integrating your logo, tagline, organization's colors and typeface into all print materials, video and Web information reinforces the message you tell your audience. Every time donors see your logo or tagline, it reinforces in their minds who you are. Don't forget about the media outlets. Ask those people you have the strongest relationships with to donate space or time to support your organization. This will reinforce your brand.

## BRAND DYNAMICS

Branding goes beyond creating a name, a logo and a look. It's about creating loyalty, which begins with being trustworthy, honest, simple and relevant. Some final tips to help you open the door for future opportunities with your donors and constituents:

- Give your donors a positive experience every time they interact with your organization. This includes thoroughly training your volunteers about your organization and mission.

- Be straightforward with your donors about where their dollars are going. But don't overload them with too much information.
- Always thank your donors seven times. Keep in touch with donors—send e-mails, newsletters, newspaper articles, birthday cards and other communications. Be creative. Don't assume just because they've given once, they'll give again. Nurture those relationships.
- Listen to what donors say about your organization. Set up avenues for them to respond, through surveys, direct mail or e-mail. Then, whenever possible, act on their suggestions and comments.

When you get right down to it, it's all about relationships. People give to people and giving is a personal thing. But first they have to know you. Successful branding can create and enhance those relationships, aiding you in the donor courtship phase. And once they know you, they'll get involved. They'll develop an ownership with your organization that then leads them to giving. Before you know it, you'll be on the way to turning donors into lifelong contributors.

## PLUG INTO YOUR CONTRIBUTORS WITH ME&V.

ME&V fundraising has helped raise millions of dollars for our not-for-profit clients across the country. The key is that ME&V's in-house capabilities of fundraising advisers, designers, writers, video producers, public relations strategists and Internet marketers provide for a fundraising effect that is greater than the sum of the parts.



**Dee Vandeventer, CFRE, MA**, the "V" of ME&V, orchestrated fundraising campaigns that successfully built much-needed hospice homes, a nursing college auditorium, an acoustically perfect performing arts center and many other projects to enhance the lives of others. Contact her at: [Dee@MEandV.com](mailto:Dee@MEandV.com).

Before joining ME&V, **Michele Brock** was a client with experience in the healthcare and human services fields. With ME&V's counsel, she directed a \$4.5 million capital campaign to build a replacement hospital. Contact her at ME&V's Cedar Rapids office or at: [MBrock@MEandV.com](mailto:MBrock@MEandV.com).



**Justin Tolan**, chief fundraising adviser, has worked professionally in fundraising since 1995. He has counseled successful campaigns for projects such as replacement hospitals, hospital additions, community centers, a state bar association headquarters and a symphony endowment. Contact him at: [JTolan@MEandV.com](mailto:JTolan@MEandV.com).

**Mary Benetti** has fundraising expertise in higher education and human services. She is familiar with the challenges of small shops and has directed all aspects of fundraising including annual appeals, major gifts, campaigns, communications and planned giving. Contact her at ME&V's Des Moines office or at: [MBenetti@MEandV.com](mailto:MBenetti@MEandV.com).

