How Branding Drives Agency Fund Development

By Bob Jones, PhD

What's your brand? Few of us in the nonprofit world can answer this question easily. Nor have many of us struggled with its implications on a serious level. Probably few of us have checked with our stakeholders and community about their perception of our "brand." For me, I've always associated branding with an expensive Madison Avenue promotion of a particular commercial product. I never really thought about the power inherent in the branding concept, particularly as it relates to the fund development process in the nonprofit world.

Recently, I had the good fortune to hear a presentation on branding given by Alliance board member Paul Quick of the Hallmark subsidiary Image Arts (see interview with Quick on page 20). For me, it was one of those "light bulb" moments. It became quite clear to me that successful development is actually all about "branding." The concepts and tools associated with a branding process are so perfectly aligned with good development. In fact, many of the best attributes of branding have been instinctively integrated by fund development professionals. I learned that branding does not need to be expensive to be effective. But it does require time and patience. The core of it comes down to no more than five key messages or images delivered consistently and frequently—messages that are reinforced in all your communications and in all that you do.

Paul Quick asked us two simple questions. First, "What is the top of mind response/perception associated with your agency (brand)?" Related questions include, Is there one? Is it consistent? Does it position you? Is it the truth? Can you sustain it? Do you manage it? Does it position you well? Second, "What is the promise you've made to your stakeholders (consumers, funders, and donors)?" Apply these questions to the fund development process and it yields a useful and powerful analysis.

So, what is a brand? Simply put, a brand is a promise (to donors, clients, or any stakeholder). It is how we define and differentiate ourselves. It is dynamic and evolving. It is defined by our stakeholders' perceptions and expectations of us. It speaks loudly about what we stand for.

Take a moment to think about brands you know and consider the associations we make to those brands and how the brands are positioned. What comes to mind with Volvo? For most folks, the answer is safety. What come to mind with Subaru? Is their position safety or reliability and traction? We have come to believe Volvo will protect you if you're in an accident, Subaru claims to keep you out of the accident.

Associations vary with the perception of the customer. Think about the old expression "no one ever got fired for buying IBM." What does that say about the IBM brand? Hallmark's slogan is "When you care enough to send the very best." Yet, my own association to Hallmark is simply "memories." When Paul Quick heard that association he didn't disagree; he instead beamed. He told me that Hallmark's business is all about relationships and the networks and memories of our lives. The company had positioned itself very effectively with me.

Try some more brand associations. What comes to mind for the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union)? Liberal? Social advocacy? Cutting-edge? Civil rights? We may or may not always agree with their positions, but they are very well defined. What about the American Red Cross? Disaster relief? Or, the Salvation Army? Care for the poor and the hungry?

What is your top-of-mind association for the United Way? This takes us to the double edge of the branding sword. My guess is you have old images and notions of the United Way (i.e. building the community's capacity to care) and newer associations based on their many tragic organizational difficulties and their continuing attempts to reposition themselves in a changing philanthropic environment. Has the United Way effectively managed its brand? Was it helped by its involvement in the September 11th relief funds? The jury is still out on those questions. Responses are probably quite uneven depending on the community in which

you live and the leadership capacity of your local United Way. What was your reaction to United Way of America President Brian Gallagher's interview in the last issue of the *Alliance for Children & Families Magazine*? Even more important, what was your board's reaction? Regardless of the variations of perception across the communities of America, the United Way has much work to do in redefining and repositioning its brand with the donor and nonprofit community. In many communities, United Ways are increasingly difficult to differentiate from donor-advised community foundations. The United Way national image issue makes so very clear the important lesson that "branding" is about perception by the customers and reputation in the community.

Now let's look at Alliance member agencies. The Children's Home of Any Town? Family Services of Every Community? What are the top-of-mind associations? What is the promise made to the stakeholders? Which stakeholders? When I tried to answer these questions in relation to my own agency, I was humbled by the exercise. I'd be even more humbled if I had gone out into the wider community for the answers.

Sadly, I fear that in the past we, like so many nonprofits, have more often been defined by our many and varied programs and services than by a simple and compelling promise. We often confuse our stakeholders with more information than they care to manage. Today, thanks to a solid development plan and the support of a number of colleagues in the Alliance community, my agency seeks to drive home a few key messages with our stakeholders. The most simple and clear is what we are about: building futures—building futures for children, their families, and their communities.

The second message is that we are people helping people—a caring community of volunteers, staff, donors, and funders in partnership to build better futures with those we serve. (Authors note: We borrowed "building futures" from a colleague who had borrowed it from another colleague, who probably had . . . Just the power of networking and relationships at work!)

Many fund development professionals have instinctively integrated much of the best of branding into their work.

I have a great deal of confidence in the development department of my agency. Yet, I hadn't realized quite how much the development plan, the push to reach graphic standards throughout the agency and the need to coordinate communications is all about the "brand." Take a look at the Paul Quick interview in this magazine and think about the presentation material that is reprinted. It is very reinforcing of good development work. Although the vocabulary is more business and advertising, the implications are absolutely to the core of our world. The bottom line is that branding is about who you are, how you are perceived within your community, and the recognition—or lack thereof—those facts.

It is now clear to me that a branding process touches all aspects of the agency's service and experience. Good branding is about attention to detail and consistency of method and message. Attention to detail includes such elements as colors, logos, programs and services, office maintenance and décor, client service experiences, mission presentation, slogan, and all agency written and oral communications. It is about managing the message. It is expressed in and by our organizational culture. Most importantly, it is the very "who and the how" of our presence in the community. ▲

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RDN

RDN Workshop Tape Available

Relationship management with donors is hard work, but it is learnable and doable. The Resource Development Network Steering Committee recently sponsored a distance learning workshop called "The Power of Relationships." The tape and PowerPoint overheads of Barbara Ritchie's presentation are available at the Severson Center (800-221-3726). More on this topic will be available at the Resource Development Network presentation at the Alliance Biennial Conference in October.