



by Christine Esposito

this thing called

BRANDING

The phone rings. Your customer service representative answers while laughing at a co-worker's joke.

Your agency has a special event. The signs directing attendees to it are clear and easy to follow.

You launch a new Web site. But the navigation is less than user-friendly.

It's all about the customer experience – good or bad. And the customer experience is all about **your brand**.

{ YOU DON'T OWN YOUR BRAND
YOUR CUSTOMER DOES }

A BRANDING GLOSSARY

They're terms you hear in meetings, conferences, advertisements – even on the street. Here's a rundown of what some common branding terms mean.

BRAND A set of promises, or benefits, that an organization delivers consistently over time. Consistent customer experience is key – break your promise; harm your brand. Because your brand is built and resides in your customer's mind, you don't own your brand. Your customer does.

BRAND IDENTITY What you want your brand to be. It must be realistic, based on the type of organization you are.

BRAND IMAGE Your customers' and prospects' perceptions of your agency. Your brand image might not match your brand identity. The more you know about your customers, the more the two can coincide.

BRAND SYMBOLS Your logo, colors and other recognizable representations of your brand. High-profile examples include Verizon's "Can you hear me now?" guy and the Nike "swoosh." A common misconception is that an organization's brand consists of its logo, brochures, ads and other visual communications. While these communicate the brand and should be consistent with it, the brand extends well beyond them.

RESONATE Making your customers and prospects feel: "This is an organization for people like me." What you offer and how you offer it need to resonate with your customers to build your brand. It requires knowing as much about your customers as possible.

TOUCHPOINTS The many ways and places your customers and prospects experience your agency. These include your facilities, employees, Web site, publicity, voice-mail system, signs, mailings, events, programs and more. Ideally, every touchpoint consistently delivers the promises of your brand.

"Branding" is a term that seems to be everywhere these days. With good reason. Paying close attention to your brand can mean everything from greater participation in your programs, to increased funding and sponsorships, to crucial referendum support and much more.

What is your brand? It's a set of promises or benefits – based on your core values – that your agency delivers consistently over time. Even if you aren't aware of it, you have a brand. Companies have brands. Nonprofits have brands. Units of local government have brands. Even people have brands. The more consistently they deliver on their promises, the stronger their brands.

Your brand is built on how your patrons, funders, elected officials, vendors and other audiences experience your agency. Brand is in the eye of the beholder. And chances are, the beholder sees your brand differently than you do.

The Customer Experience

How do you want your customers to see your agency? You can start by thinking about the benefits, or promises, you offer, which, in the context of branding, fall into three categories:

- Functional – What you do;
- Emotional – How you connect with your audiences; and
- Self-expressive – What it says about someone when he or she is affiliated with your agency.

Because benefits and promises are based on an organization's core values, they will vary, even from agency to agency. But to illustrate the different benefits, you might say that, functionally, you provide programs and places for recreation, fitness, learning, social interaction and fun for young and old, individuals and families.

What about emotional benefits? As a park, recreation or conservation agency, you instill trust in patrons, who feel safe in your facilities and at your events. You give them the satisfaction that comes with improving their health.

On the self-expressive side, people who participate in your agency's activities might convey that they're open to trying new things, that they're part of a community or that they're resourceful. An easy way to understand the concept of self-expressive benefits is to consider Lexus cars. What does it say about you when you own a Lexus? To many, it says you've "arrived."

What Sets You Apart?

Part of determining your brand is identifying what sets you apart, what differentiates you. There was a time when providing quality products and services were ample differentiations. Nowadays, that's not enough. People have come to expect quality. It's become the status quo.

The way you differentiate yourself must be meaningful to your audiences. For instance, if you serve a community whose residents are generally environmentally conscious, you can differentiate yourself by being the "greenest" agency – with environmentally friendly buildings, comprehensive recycling and composting, land restoration efforts and more.

When thinking about differentiation, remember that you're not just being compared to other health and fitness providers, recreational outlets and child care facilities. A woman might drive to your tennis class after shopping at Nordstrom and enjoying the exceptional personalized attention the store is known for. She'll compare her experience at your agency with her experience at Nordstrom, whether you'd like her to or not.

Brand Associations

Something else to consider as you define your brand is what your patrons, funders and other audiences associate with your agency. Do they think of "innovation?" Do they think of "families?" The ideal is for your brand to "own" a particular association. Ask someone what he or she associates with Volvo. Without hesitation, people say, "Safety." What about FedEx? "Overnight delivery." No other car manufacturer owns safety. No other courier service owns overnight. Granted, it can be difficult, without substantial marketing dollars to "own" a particular association. But it is nevertheless something to strive for.

What about personality? People have personalities. Brands do, too. Even if you've never flown Southwest Airlines before, once you step on the plane you probably know you're going to enjoy the flight because of the fun persona the company projects. Flight attendants are specially trained to interact with



passengers in a lighthearted way and to entertain them. Southwest's fun personality is no accident. It is the result of a conscious branding decision.

So is the type of relationship an organization has with its audiences. How would you characterize the type of relationship you have with yours? Is your agency like a big brother or sister to your patrons? Is it a mentor? A trusted friend?

Branding Through and Through, Top to Bottom

Thinking about your agency from a branding perspective may mean a significant shift in how you operate. The programs you offer, the tone and look of your Web site and print materials, the usability of your voice mail system and the ways you acknowledge funders and sponsors are just a few of the functions that should be driven by your brand. That means, ultimately, your brand should inform all decisions and plans – strategic, operational and financial.

It's not a change that will happen overnight. Once you determine your brand identity – or what you want your brand to be – you'll need to gain the support of your departmental directors. Without it, your brand will languish. They can then reach out to key employees who have been leaders and change agents in the past to build the brand's momentum

internally. This, coupled with concerted efforts to introduce the brand throughout your organization, will begin to bring the vision of your agency's brand to life – causing your audiences to experience your brand the way you want them to

Everyone affiliated with your agency will be your brand ambassador – from the executive director and commissioners, to directors and program managers, to clerical and grounds personnel. Everyone will be key to creating and maintaining your brand. The executive director's ongoing enthusiasm for building the brand and commitment to cultivating it throughout the organization will keep your brand strong over time.

Eventually, your brand will permeate your ranks. It will become second nature for the entire staff. Employees will "live the brand." And then you will have a powerful brand indeed. ■

Christine Esposito is president of Terracom Public Relations, a 15-year-old, Chicago-based PR and marketing communications agency serving government agencies, nonprofits and small businesses. Visit www.terracompr.com. You can reach Christine at 773-637-3939.



Establishing & Marketing Your Brand

Check out these resources that will help you manage your brand.



Becoming a Category of One by Joe Calloway

This quick read can help you gear up for incorporating brand thinking throughout your agency. It's full of examples of organizations that have excelled through paying attention to their brands – from top to bottom. If you read nothing else in this book, read the chapter on Tractor Supply Company, whose chairman/CEO devotes 100 percent of his time to helping his employees keep the organization's brand top of mind and first in performance.

Building the Brand-Driven Business by Scott M. Davis and Michael Dunn

Need to convince your executive director or board that focusing on your brand is important? This book can help. It delves into the value of a brand and cultivates an appreciation for placing your brand front and center when considering business decisions – making your brand strategy your business strategy. While at times it can be more technical and in-depth than the average reader might want, it's worth reading.

IAPD Guide to Marketing

The IAPD commissioned and produced this concise and practical "how to" manual that addresses such topics as: current trends in marketing; informal research methods; research

analysis; marketing goals and strategies; establishing a marketing budget; implementing the budget to accomplish marketing goals; and evaluating marketing efforts. Whether your agency has a fully staffed marketing department or is just beginning to focus on a comprehensive marketing strategy, you'll find valuable information here. Download your *Guide* for free at www.Ilparks.org/publication.htm.

PR to GO Tool Kit

The *PR to Go Tool Kit*, created by the Communication and Marketing Section of IPRA, provides templates of press releases, public service announcements, newsletters, and more. Learn how to deliver effective messages that will get you recognized in the electronic and print media. The *PR to GO Tool Kit* includes a 150-page binder, a CD and nine tabbed indexes that let you quickly find helpful public relations and marketing ideas and examples to use at your own agency. Order your *Tool Kit* at <http://www.ilipra.org/forms/prtogoflyer.pdf>.

Winning in the Face of Organized Opposition

Use identity building and marketing techniques to create the community support you need to pass a referendum. *Winning* can help agencies develop action plans and offers valuable strategies to counter the messages and tactics that anti-tax groups may use. Order *Winning* at www.Ilparks.org/publication.htm.

Have you thought about IP Video Surveillance, for your parks, pools and parking lots?

Let Sikich, ICS Technology division, show you how technology can be used to improve public safety.

Sikich has a proven track record in implementing IT Infrastructure Solutions for Illinois Park Districts—solutions designed to create long-term cost savings, increase productivity, enhance communication and provide the best possible services to the public.

- Facility Connectivity
- Security
- Wireless Access
- Web Services
- Spam Filtering



630-566-8400 • www.sikich.com

Citrix Certified, Cisco Certified, Microsoft Gold Certified Partner