

HELLO my name is

Assessing Your Brand and Marketing Communications

The second in a 3-part series by Howard Levy, Red Rooster Group

How well do your donors know your organization? In large part that depends upon how well you are communicating your brand — your vision, values and personality. If done well, you can form deep and lasting bonds with your donors. If not, you risk confusing your audience. In a short-attention span world, organizations that are able to quickly communicate their value are the ones that attract the most overall support.

This article focuses on how you can evaluate your brand and marketing communications. A 10-step brand review will help you assess how your brand is holding up or, if you are just starting out, it will help you develop a successful brand.

1. Uniqueness Matters

With 1 million nonprofits in the United States competing for donors' attention, your organization needs to stand out. A clear and compelling mission is crucial for attracting people to your cause. Is your mission unique, easy to understand, and inspiring? Or has it become muddled over the years?

2. Message

You know what your organization does, but do other people? Getting others to understand your message requires persistence. A recent survey we did of long-time donors to an organization showed they did not fully understand the nonprofit's

services. Repetition is key, and just as you begin to tire of hearing your story, it is probably just starting to get through to your donors.

3. Brand Personality

Personality is a powerful way of distinguishing organizations with similar missions. For example, in finding a cure for a disease, one organization may communicate in an authoritative tone to establish credibility on policy issues, and another may speak more emotionally to inspire people to action. Your organization's personality is conveyed through the language, images, colors, and even the media that you use (think policy report versus Facebook). Review your marketing materials with this in mind (or, better yet, have others do it) to determine how your organization comes across.

4. Emotional Impact

People choose to donate to an organization because they are motivated to do so in some way. They may feel an affinity for the organization's values, be moved by a story of someone the organization has helped, or feel inspired by the organization's mission or leader. Language in brochures and websites that is organization-oriented and merely describes services (often with industry jargon) misses out on the opportunity to inspire donors to action.

5. Perception

Your brand can build trust and positive

perception when you speak with a genuine voice, are consistent in your actions, and follow through on what you promise. Strong leadership, empowered employees, and fiscal responsibility set the right tone. Decisions inconsistent with your mission — such as partnering with a corporate sponsor that does not share your core values — undermines your credibility. Are all of your organization's actions in alignment with its values?

6. Professionalism

If you want people to take your organization seriously, you have to do so as well. This starts with presenting a professional face to the world. You would not take someone seriously if they wore jeans to a job interview, so why solicit donors with an unprofessional logo, brochure, and website? To earn people's trust, you need to ensure that all your marketing meets a high standard of excellence.

7. Consistency

When your donor receives your newsletter in the mail, visits your website and receives an email requesting a donation, do they know that they come from the same organization? Is there consistency in how your logo colors and images are used, the values and messages that are conveyed, and the tone of voice that is used? Consistency breeds familiarity, recognition and trust. And it maximizes your marketing budget by reinforcing your brand at every opportunity.

CASE STUDY: How a Nonprofit Association Improved Its Membership Appeal

When a statewide nonprofit organization was facing sagging membership renewals, they turned to Red Rooster Group to address the problem. Armed with an understanding of the organization, we started by reviewing all their membership materials — brochures, flyers, letters, and emails. Over time they had developed a series of different materials, and so to sort these out, we described each piece on a spreadsheet showing the target audience and intended purpose, whether it was used for acquisition or renewal, the main message each one imparted and how it was printed (some were in color, and some were photocopies).

Charting this helped to uncover the membership renewal process, such as what materials were sent out, in what sequence, and the key messages used.

We found that the materials contained a lot of good information about the benefits, but were not well organized, so the information was difficult to discern. Overall, the materials lacked a professional appearance, and sent confusing messages. For example, membership benefits differed from one publication to the next.

Our recommendation was to use the goodwill of the organization as part of the membership appeal. We strengthened the logo to create a more dynamic feel for the organization and grouped its services into 3 main categories so they could be more clearly understood.

We then developed one brochure that used testimonials and photos from members to instill credibility and establish a personal connection. An abundance of photos shows people in action benefitting from the organization's services and a palette of 3 colors reinforces the organization's brand identity. The new brochure, being rolled out in the fall, creates a compelling package for potential members that clearly explains the benefits and ties in with the organization's overall mission and look. ■

8. Communication Strategy

The method and frequency in which you reach people can be just as important as what you say. Everyone has their own preferences for printed newsletters, email, social media, and events. The extent to which you can tailor your marketing to your individual donor preferences will improve your responses and potentially save you money on printed mailings.

9. Budget

Planning your marketing budget for the year is critical to maintaining a regular brand presence in front of donors. Consider all the ways you reach donors and map out the costs for each in a spreadsheet to see your total fundraising and brand investment for the year. This will also help to plan for subsequent years and provide a good basis of comparison.

10. Ongoing Measurement & Monitoring

Developing an effective brand is part art and part science. You may not get everything right the first time, but you should not repeat the same mistake twice. Establish systems to track your responses and periodically review them to determine which tactics to eliminate and which to increase. A combination of quantitative research such as web traffic reports, and qualitative feedback such as interviews, will help you keep your message, brand and strategy on target.

What Next?

A brand assessment will indicate the ways in which you can improve your message as well as give you a better understanding of your stakeholders. The results may help you refine or redefine your programs and mission. You will feel empowered, knowing that you are pro-actively shaping your organization's brand, rather than leaving it to fate. This assessment can help you to:

- Communicate more clearly with donors
- Build your organization's visibility and recognition
- Allocate your marketing budget in ways that are most effective
- Determine if you need outside help to set up a marketing plan with ongoing assessment and refinement

To be most effective, the brand assessment should be overseen by one knowledgeable decision-maker who can communicate well with both staff and Board members. This "brand champion" can lead the efforts to a more effective organization. There are many resources to help you get started, including *The Nonprofit Brand Institute* (npbrandit.com).

In the next article, we'll address how to build and implement your brand and marketing communications plan. ■

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Rate Your Marketing Efforts

For a quick assessment your brand, rate your organization's marketing on a scale of 1 to 10. This will give you an overview of your strengths and weaknesses.

____ Staff members and donors understand and agree on our mission — they know exactly what our organization stands for and hopes to accomplish.

____ Our brand clearly sets us apart from other nonprofits that operate in our sphere.

____ Our communication materials convey a modern, professional image that holds up compared to other organizations.

____ Our public messages accurately represent our organization's core values and personality.

____ We communicate with stakeholders in a way that inspires passion and generates excitement.

____ Our website looks contemporary, accepts donations and can be easily updated by staff (and is kept current).

____ It is evident that all our marketing (brochures, newsletters, website, etc.) comes from the same organization.

____ We reach people in many different ways (including social media), depending on their communication preferences.

____ We know how much we spend on marketing and communications annually.

____ We regularly monitor and review our marketing and solicit feedback about our brand to ensure that we are on track.