

Why Should Nonprofits Invest in Brand?

And,
Where
to Begin.

By Mary Weisnewski

August 2009

Investing in brand development is increasingly important to build credibility and differentiate in this competitive giving environment.

Cynthia Round,
*Executive Vice President of
Brand Strategy and Marketing,
United Way of America*

If I give the average Man-on-the-Street \$50 and tell them to donate it to the charity of their choice, where will that money wind up? In the hands of the organization they have the strongest and most meaningful relationship with — the one they trust the most, and that shares their passion and core beliefs. About 60,000 organizations gained nonprofit status last year alone, bringing the total number to more than 1.1 million in the US.

“Investing in brand development is increasingly important to build credibility and differentiate in this competitive giving environment,” says Cynthia Round, Executive Vice President of Brand Strategy and Marketing at United Way of America, which recently rolled out a completely revamped brand campaign. “People are making purchasing decisions based on how closely aligned their values are with an organization and how much they trust what that organization is providing. This is as true when

it comes to making donations to nonprofits as it is for buying consumer products.”

In a sense, “doing good” has become a shop-and-compare commodity, with an onslaught of images and messages bombarding people just like for consumers goods. You need to take a page from Corporate America to not only stand out but stand above the hundreds of thousands of philanthropic endeavors vying for individual and corporate donations and attention. Building a viable brand platform that focuses your mission, and then investing in that brand, is the golden differentiator. And then make sure your organization walks the talk of your cause. The end result: You’ll attract like-minded donors and provide the foundation for the longterm meaningful relationships that lead to consistent support, funding and growth.

The truth is that every organization already has a brand.

What is Brand?

Simply put, brand is everything associated with a company, product, service, or person — all of the attributes, both tangible and intangible. It's your logo, your promise, the product or service you deliver, your name — all of that and more. It's what you stand for, what you do, what you say and what you look like. It's everything. It is the beacon that will incite people to join forces with you and make your cause their own.

The truth is that every organization already has a brand. Employees, volunteers, board members, community stakeholders and donors already have perceptions and experiences they associate with you. This community is your tribe of like-minded supporters. The real sixty-four thousand dollar question is: Do you know what your brand is, and are you consciously managing it, leveraging it, and strengthening it to continue to grow your tribe

and move them from supporters to raving fans? Transforming your core values and unique approach into a platform that you can consistently and effectively communicate builds common ground, making it faster and easier to connect to your tribe, and advance your cause with vision and purpose. It's the key to being the master of your organization's destiny.

The good news is that strong brands are fueled by people with a passion. Chances are you already have a strong base of people beating the drum for your organization. The problem many nonprofits have is that they are so busy beating that drum — loudly proclaiming the value of what they provide — that they don't hear the needs and desires of their audience. This is critical in building a meaningful platform. Successful brands are infused with a clear set of shared values.

Revealing Your Brand Platform

Discovering your brand platform is about having a conversation with your key audiences to find out where your common ground lies.

Katya Andresen,
Vice President of Marketing,
Network for Good

Capturing and defining your organization's core beliefs — the brand platform — is done through an audit of those who come in contact with your organization. This means surveying and talking to all segments of your tribe — doing deep-dive interviews — to reveal what they really think of you. And, more to the point, what is truly meaningful to them.

“Nonprofits get mission myopia, because we care so much about what we're doing that we forget to find out what our potential donors' interests and concerns are,” explains Katya Andresen, author, *Robin Hood Marketing: Stealing Corporate Savvy to Sell Just Causes* and vice president of marketing for Network for Good, the Internet's leading charitable giving site. “Discovering

your brand platform is about having a conversation with your key audiences to find out where your common ground lies.”

Friends of Youth of Washington conducted a brand audit in 2004, to develop a clear, singular identity and expand their reach. “We had been providing youth services for more than 55 years, and grown to over 100 employees and about 10,000 volunteer hours per year,” explains Ed Belleba, President and CEO of Friends of Youth. “The people and the communities we served knew us, but we needed to expand our reach into the general public.”

The organization hired a consultant to conduct an audit of 750 members of its tribe — everyone Friends of Youth touched. The majority of the

ASK

ACT

REVEAL

- : Brand team
- : Brand audit
- : Research
- : Analysis

DEFINE

- : Preliminary elements
- : Audit report
- : Brand workshop
- : Brand platform

IMPLEMENT

- : Message development
- : Internal education
- : Visual brand
- : Launch

MANAGE

- : Living the brand
- : Consistency of touch points
- : Infuse into culture and actions
- : Partner management

community members were surveyed by phone, while a selection of clients, volunteers, employees and funders were interviewed face-to-face.

“We asked what they knew about us, what their perceptions and experiences were, as well as what they thought the important youth issues were,” Belleba says. “We were surprised to learn that some of their answers were different from our perceptions. That helped us to

develop brand messaging that told people in a simple, straight-forward way what we were about. Our brand promise was revealed as: To make a lasting impact. When it comes to providing services for troubled youth, we found that was the common ground that we all stood on. And, it speaks to our reputation for having a high level of expertise and credentials that allows us to deliver not just for today, but also for longterm, future success.”

Spotlight: The Brand Audit

While a comprehensive brand audit should be conducted by a consultant experienced in brand development, you can begin mining the members of your community who know you well for insights into their perceptions through a simple phone survey of, say, 50 people: a cross-section of donors, volunteers, employees, board members, and members of the community who do advocacy or lobbying work on behalf of your cause. Qualitative, open-ended questions will reveal the essence of the brand — something that cannot be achieved through close-ended quantitative surveys. Questions may include:

What is your top of mind association with the organization?

What are its strengths? And weaknesses?

What do you value the most?

How would you describe the organizations personality and style?

What other organizations do you consider donating to/volunteering for/working for?

What makes this one unique?

What messages are the most meaningful to you? And why?

Spotlight:

The Anatomy of Brand

Using the information gleaned from the audit, you'll uncover the tools that keep your brand—and your organization—running smoothly:

Mission; Explains why the organization exists, its reason for being. Should be easy to understand, easy to remember and inspiring.

Guiding principles; The values that drive the culture of the organization and define its belief system.

Promise; The everyday shortcut to the brand that all staff can use to guide daily decision-making. It defines the unique approach you want to be known for.

Personality; The way you would describe the character of the organization if it were a person. It defines the appropriate look and feel and tone of voice of all communications.

Positioning; The foundation for all your messages, and how you are positioned in the marketplace against your competition. It is your value proposition.

Brand Architecture	Organization name Product/division names	Outside view of your organization
Brand Platform	Mission Values Promise Personality Positioning	Why you exist Your culture driver Your unique approach Driver of look and tone Message foundation
Visual Brand	Logo Visual Design	Visual beacon Look and feel
Living the Brand	Alignment Education	Consistency Training

Brand Platform: making your brand tangible so it works for you

The visual brand is powerful emotional glue that connects communications to the experience of the organization.

Brand Personality: A Key Calling Card for Nonprofits

The brand platform is the foundation that drives all of the actions and decisions your organization makes, and the development of all your communications tools. It defines your unique approach to what you do, and what you want to be known for. Through the audit of your tribe, the values and drivers that were once so intangible have been captured into solid tools that are the wheels that keep your brand turning: mission, guiding principles, promise, personality and positioning. (See page 6).

Once your brand platform is defined, it will include the brand personality, the key element that communicates the appropriate emotion for the organization's personality — what makes it feel different from the other one million-plus caring and compassionate nonprofits out there. It becomes your calling card to emotionally connect with, and rally, the members of your tribe.

The visual brand is powerful emotional glue that connects communications to the experience of the organization, making design one of the most tangible ways to differentiate and convey your

messages. Close your eyes and think of the Red Cross, the World Wide Fund for Nature (formally named the World Wildlife Fund), American Cancer Society, Habitat for Humanity. What many visuals came to mind? The red cross, the black and white panda? These successful nonprofits use design to connect and differentiate in all of their communications. Establishing the visual elements of the brand is more than just picking colors — it's how the colors are used. It's the style and feel of photography: faces cropped or long-shots? It's how that font is used: big, small, centered? And, it's the tone of voice, what words are chosen, the energy level conveyed.

Design is the place where many organizations start to communicate their brand, but it's certainly not the end-all.

"The cosmetics of how you present your organization aren't nearly as valuable as making the substantive changes needed so that you're actually living the brand," says Andresen, who recommends spending one-fourth of your resources on design and three-fourths on fixing internal problems identified in the brand

Brand is an outward reflection of your organizational values and culture, and needs to go way beyond collateral...

Diana Reid,
Vice President,
Global Communication
Unitus

audit — whether that's how you conduct your programs, improving accountability to donors of where their money goes, training volunteers or community outreach. "If you want people to align with your cause, you have to show you care about their concerns, especially when it comes to how you carry out the mission you are asking them to support."

"Brand is an outward reflection of your organizational values and

culture, and needs to go way beyond collateral," says Diana Reid, Vice President, Global Communication for Unitus, a nonprofit in Seattle that facilitates microfinance loans in developing countries. "Our personality is reflected in everything from the red walls of our curved hallways, to the consistent interactions that people have with our employees whether they're in Africa, India or the US."

Three good times to evaluate your brand

Brand is not a launch event, it's a long-term investment. As your organization grows and evolves, so should your brand. Particularly relevant times to evaluate and build your brand are when your organization experiences:

Shift in focus; When there's a change in the direction of your organization, you may need a brand audit to help ensure the shift is meaningful and to make sure everyone is on the same page with the revitalized mission. For example, many nonprofits start as direct care agencies and then discover they want to make a bigger impact and shift to being influencers of change through advocacy and policymaking.

Growth; When an organization is small and funding efforts are grassroots based — asking 1,000 people for donations of \$10 — your communications can be less sophisticated. But if you are approaching heavy hitters and corporate sponsors for substantial donations and support, you have to demonstrate that you are reliable, credible and savvy enough to trust. A sophisticated visual brand and messages are needed for this.

Broadening geographic reach; The farther spread out your tribe is, the more important it is that they have clear and focused guidelines. A strong brand is the filter for consistency, no matter how far apart they are.

Be real. In every action that everyone within your organization carries out, because consistently delivering on your promise builds trust.

Building Relationships: It's About Trust

Ultimately, great brand boils down to relationships built on trust—both internally and externally.

“Our brand isn't just our logo or our tagline, it's everything we do,” says United Way's Cynthia Round.

“Our new platform and tagline, Live United, is an invitation and call to action to our community. Our brand audit told us that everyone wants to see themselves as part of the change, and we're providing even more opportunities for people to do that.”

The redesigned United Way web site has sections devoted to volunteering, donating money and advocacy—and lots of personal stories of how people from all walks of life are getting involved with the organization. The complete brand makeover—the first one since the organization first developed its platform in the mid-seventies, encompasses everything from a new public service announcement campaign, to marketing materials, to work in customer relationship management. “We're creating a total experience around our new brand because that's what successful brand is: a total experience,” Round explains.

Remember that Man-on-the-Street I gave \$50 to? Exactly how can you convince him, in this age of instant promises overloading him from everywhere he looks, that your organization is for real? Easy: Be real. In every action that everyone within your organization carries out because consistently delivering on your promise builds trust.

“People make decisions about buying products for lots of reasons, but the decision to invest in a charity is made 100 percent on faith and how much trust there is in the organization,” Round says. “The confidence one has in the brand has a lot to do with the choices people make about donating their time and money.”

In fact, when United Way underwent a rigorous brand evaluation in 2003, they discovered that the strong brand was 67 percent of the reason why people chose to invest in the organization. That's a clear and powerful return-on-investment that holds as true for corporate support as it does for individual donors.

“Companies are under increasing pressure from board members, shareholders, employees, customers

Brand is an accessible and useful tool to ensure consistency in thought, word, and deed.

and the community to be positive contributors to society—and this is good news for non-profits,” explains Andresen. “They’re looking to cobrand with charitable organizations that share their core values. That’s why it’s more important than ever for non-profits to be able to communicate their brand easily and succinctly in everything that they do.”

The bottom line is that when it comes to investing in brand, it makes sense to do it right from the get-go. If you develop a strong

brand foundation it perpetuates itself— everyone acts on-brand and decisions are made that reflect your core values—and you’ll save money in the long-run.

The true power of a brand-driven organization that is building ever strengthening relationships is the understanding that everything matters. Every interaction at every touch point is an opportunity to strengthen or dilute the experience and therefore the level of trust and loyalty. There are no neutrals.

Living the Brand





About the Author

Mary Weisnewski is principal of Kite Inc., a full-service brand strategy, graphic and interactive design firm passionate about building authentic brands.

While the sky is the limit of our creativity, everything we do is down-to-earth, strategic and authentically brand driven. We build, guide and protect the meaning of a brand through clear, consistent design and communications that connect emotionally with employees, customers, donors and other stakeholders.