

Nonprofit Brands in the Age of Supporter Shift

Marc Chardon

When we were kids, no one talked about branding, that is, unless they meant cows. They did talk about individual brands here and there but not about brands in the broader sense, about what they stood for or the value they held for those who aligned with them. In a very general sense, brands were associated with a handful of specific products that have taken a nostalgic place in our memories...like Campbells or Wrigleys.

Back then, there weren't as many national brands. Life was much more local. The interstate highway system, authorized by the federal government in 1956, was brand new, and the network of high-speed roads that crisscross this country were just beginning to be built. At the same time, the earliest chain restaurants were beginning to transform from small restaurants to the franchise model. With highways came big-brand fast food, billboard advertising and access to places in the country that used to be too expensive to reach. That reach exposed us to new and different brands and gave those same brands a channel to reach consumers. The world was beginning to flatten.

Fast forward to today, and the network of "roads" that provide access to whatever we want makes us think about tech all-stars like Gates, not Eisenhower. Access comes to us through our computers and phones via the information super highway. Concepts that used to be local (like the yellow ribbon tied around a tree to symbolize support for the troops) are now digital (pink ribbon = breast cancer awareness and prevention). In this Web 2.0 world, commercial ventures are woven into every aspect of our lives. We engage with so many brands every day that we'd be hard pressed to actually count them. They're just there, a part of our lives. We actively endorse what we like through how we spend, what we wear, what we drive, what we do for a living and what we say to peers on the Web. We've evolved to a point where, brands -- and a focus on branding -- are everywhere...even the nonprofit sector.

Why should you care? Although your mission is vital, it's the brand that defines your organization. And as generations shift, your brand needs to stay relevant. Our parents might have given to long-standing, trusted nonprofits without many questions, but our Millennial children are different, bringing their own unique approach to engaging with nonprofits that's all about the brand and what it promises. Are you ready?

Branding Defined

So what exactly IS a brand, that ethereal thing that is more concept than concrete? A brand is a promise, a point of view, or as senior vice president and chief marketing officer Kate Coleman of the YMCA of the

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To be clear, a brand is not a logo. It's also not an advertising play. And, it's not your mission. Your mission is about what you offer, what you do. Your brand is about what people get, the experience they receive, the promise that comes true when they interact with you. Although you technically “own” the brand within your organization, it's your customers (those you serve through programs and those who support you) who bring it to life. They're the ones who have the power to say whether (or not) you have lived up to the performance level you promised. In the end, the quality of a brand is determined by the promises made and the promises kept. A really great brand promise lets people know you kept it. If it's too vague or too abstract, it isn't real. Good branding moves someone from the abstract to the specific, proving what you say to be true. It's about deepening the promise.

What We Can Learn from Cows

So, back to that other kind of branding. A brand – a physical, registered mark – on a cow tells you that someone specific owns the animal. “This is our cow.” In fact, brands in the cattle industry were an early form of copyrighting, a way to “register” an animal and show ownership. Cattle owners would literally take their brands to an office where they would have to prove that their symbol was unique in order to have it registered and recorded. The key was that you had to be able to tell the difference when you looked at the actual cow. “That's Harvey's cow, not John's.”

Making the leap to current day branding in the marketing sense, the focus is similar – it's about telling the difference, getting the uniqueness. Many nonprofit missions or visions, which organizations tend to rely on as unique identifiers in place of their brands, often aren't unique at all. Imagine your organization grazing freely on an open range with dozens of other nonprofits like you. It's a herd. Together, you look the same. When people get close to you, can they really tell how you're different?

Keeping the Brand Relevant

Left alone, brands get stale. When a brand gets stale, it loses relevancy. So periodically, every organization, nonprofit or for-profit, needs to refresh its brand to make sure that the audience who cared about it yesterday still cares today. A general rule of thumb we follow is that brands need to be looked at, seriously, every five to seven years. Even as we write this, we realize that maybe it needs to be more often, given the ever accelerating speed of change we see around us.

Beyond a periodic review of the brand “just because,” there are moments in any organization's life when a brand refresh is needed. A critical one is when your nonprofit shifts from having a board of “doers,” who pretty much did whatever was necessary to keep programs funded and delivered, to a board of governance. This shift is critical for nonprofits attempting to achieve scale. Often, this moment coincides with the introduction of a beefed up staff infrastructure and a refined focus on the needs of not just program recipients, but also supporters. It's a time when the organization accepts that it has become – or needs to become -- a more mature entity in every way. From our observations, of both the business and nonprofit

sectors, some organizations try to update parts of their operations and not others, leaving the brand issue behind. This can lead to an unbalanced, off-kilter situation that affects quality of service, ability to raise funding and the overall happiness of those you serve and those doing the serving. The brand should be one of the first things you think about during such a period of change, not the last. It can and should serve as that “discipline for how an organization acts and communicates,” as Coleman recommends.

It’s also important to understand that clarifying your uniqueness isn’t just about the outside world, the customers you have and hope to add. Branding begins at home, having everyone in your own organization think about it, own it, be responsible for delivering on your promise. They must understand the signature programs and characteristics that truly make you different from the rest. If you do this, your staff will become brand ambassadors who make your promise come to life. In addition to proving the believability of your brand to the world, your staff will get their own reward in the form of a heightened bond with the organization, their employer. They will find value in their part of delivering on the promise and will stay with you because of that uniqueness you have, because “the place simply can’t be replicated.”

Brands in an Age of Supporter Shift

To make matters even more complex, we aren’t just faced with differentiating our brands as our organizations mature. We’re also faced with making them relevant to several generations.

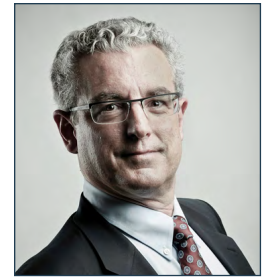
At the core of relevancy is the basic understanding that the audience for the brand really matters, not the other way around (are you focused from the “customer in” or the “organization out?”). In an age of supporter shift, discussed in a previous article, nonprofits must figure out how to make their brand promise relevant to different generations that each has varying wants, needs and perspectives:

Generation	Self Identify As	What They Seek
Silent Generation	Loyal donors	Trust (knowledge they are supporting a solid brand)
Baby Boomers	Change agents (donors and hands-on partners)	Outcomes (data that shows their support is making a difference)
Millennials	Participants	Meaning (causes they care about in the overall context of how they affiliate)

It’s tempting to meet the challenge by deciding to have different brands for different groups. But at its heart, a good brand is a unifying force, offering a promise that is high enough to provide shelter to everyone.

Updating a Well Known Brand

The Salvation Army offers us a timely example of an exceptionally well known organization that has taken on the challenge of refreshing its brand, in large part to increase donor loyalty and improve donor experience. Founded in the Victorian era, The Salvation Army is one of the world’s most well known nonprofits, ranking #2 on the Chronicle of Philanthropy’s report of the top 100 most valuable nonprofit brands.



Marc Chardon

Marc Chardon joined Blackbaud as president and chief executive officer in 2005. Previously, he served as chief financial officer for the \$11 billion Information Worker business group at Microsoft, where he was responsible for the core functions of long-term strategic financial planning and business performance management. Chardon joined Microsoft in 1998 as general manager of Microsoft France. During his three-year leadership, the subsidiary remained one of the three most admired companies by French professionals and achieved increased customer satisfaction. Prior to joining Microsoft, Chardon was general manager of Digital France. He is an American/French dual national and an economics honors graduate from Harvard University.

At the Nonprofit Leadership Summit, hosted by Blackbaud in August 2011 in Washington, D.C., Major George Hood shared the journey The Salvation Army has been on for the past 11 years. Being a well known, longstanding brand in the market isn't always an easy thing. With it, comes the baggage of history that seeps into how people think and operate. In a very real sense, the work The Salvation Army has done with its brand has made the organization relevant for a new, younger audience while keeping hold of positive memories and good feelings held by older generations.

The unifying force for this work, which also involved updating operations and enabling immediate customer response through the strategic use of technology, was a new promise – “Doing the Most Good.” It helped to clarify what the organization is about today and to establish a brand personality to which donors of all ages can relate. Beyond the brand itself are the experiences the organization is offering for people to engage. The Red Kettle campaign, something we identify with the holiday season, continues, but it does so both on main street and online. And new efforts, like a rather impromptu Jonas Brothers concert, held at a shopping mall in LA, are showing that the organization isn't just relevant to younger audiences, it's becoming a part of their social networks and experiences. The concert, which was produced with donated services, was attended by 2,000 people and watched online by another 18,000. Those 20,000 ‘tweens now have a reason to say The Salvation Army means something to them – and an outlet for them to join in the cause of “Doing the Most Good.”

Some Closing Thoughts

We know, as we write this, that it's much easier to offer overarching advice than it is implement changes within your own organization. Take some time to learn more and to think about what you need to do, to touch base with the people you serve and your supporters to learn what they think of the organization and what it does. And, while you're thinking and planning, remember that small steps matter just as much as big ones. Here's a parting thought from a marketing expert, David Meerman Scott, who spoke at Blackbaud's 2011 conference in Washington, D.C. If you care about your brand, your organization, make sure you use real photographs of real people doing real mission-related work on your website, in your ad campaigns, in your materials. Don't cop out and use stock photos. Be real. After all, that's where branding begins – with a true sense of who you are, what you do, why you matter.

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