

## Branding the Non-Profit By Kristine Kirby Webster

The word brand is loaded in meaning and possibility. One definition of “brand” is “a characteristic or distinctive kind.”<sup>1</sup> Another definition is “a trademark or distinctive name identifying a product or manufacturer.”<sup>2</sup> One of the best definitions of brand has come from Stephen Pidgeon, the Chairman of Target Direct Ltd (UK). He defines a successful brand as “an identifiable product or service, strengthened because the buyer or user sees relevant, unique added values, which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition.”<sup>3</sup>

In essence, a brand is a piece of real estate you occupy in a person’s mind, and the related impressions it leaves behind.

How important is the brand in marketing and to success in the marketplace? Very. Think about it, people don’t say they need an adhesive bandage, they say they need a Band-Aid. They don’t ask for a tissue, they ask for a Kleenex. They don’t want a cola drink, they want a Coke. A brand at its strongest “owns” the concept of the generic product in many consumers’ minds.

To a non-profit organization, the brand is perhaps the most important asset it has. Many corporations actually carry the worth of the brand on their balance sheets; for example, the Coca-Cola brand is said to be worth \$13 billion.<sup>4</sup> However, non-profits are often at a disadvantage when it comes to branding. After all, they don’t have the deep pockets of corporations who can afford to hire brand specialists, nor do they have staffers whose job it is to protect the integrity of the brand and promote it at every turn. But successful branding of the charity can have a great effect on the awareness and fundraising of the charity and its mission. If you have built and promoted the brand well, it is like having an introduction in the person’s mind, or having a door opened. A strong brand creates trust and builds recognition, which can – properly managed – be parlayed into affinity, loyalty, and a relationship.

Let’s say you go to the store to buy potato chips. There are several types available, a brand known to you, like Ruffles, and two lesser-known brands. Which one will you choose? If you are like most people, you will choose Ruffles; you know the name, and the inherent quality and taste you associate with it.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <http://www.britannica.com/cgi-bin/dict?va=brand>

<sup>2</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary, Second College Edition

<sup>3</sup> Presentation at AFP conference, March 2001, San Diego, CA, USA

<sup>4</sup> “Building Better Brands” by Chris Claridge, October 2001, [www.bzone.co.nz](http://www.bzone.co.nz)

Now, let's say you get several appeals from relief organizations, such as the American Red Cross, Friends in the West, and ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). If you have only \$20 to give to a relief charity, which do you choose? Chances are you would choose the Red Cross, due to the strong brand equity they hold in your mind.

Why? Because the Red Cross brand is strong and well-managed. They consistently use the same logo, the same color, the same mission, and the same general message in all communications, whether they are in direct mail, print ads, TV ads, web pages, emails, billboards, etc. Everyone can recognize the red cross on the white background. This has in turn given them incredibly strong brand equity in the public's mind. When people turn on the news, and hear about a natural disaster – hurricanes, earthquakes, floods – many go to the Red Cross to offer assistance and support – without even being contacted directly by the charity. They “own” the concept of disaster relief, and a great deal of that is due to effective branding. The Red Cross, and its mission, are greater than a single direct mail appeal, commercial, or email. The Red Cross is a wonderful example of a sum being greater than its parts.

So if you are a non-profit, how do you mimic the success of a charity such as the Red Cross when it comes to brand building and equity? To be blunt, there is no shortcut, no quick answer. A strong brand is the result of good experiences; consistent messages; and positive, reinforcing images over time. Inherent in this brand strength are factors such as trust and reliability. Neither are created overnight, whether with a donor or with a consumer. It takes time and effort to create a brand image, and to make it a bankable asset.

But that effort results in a brand image and association. People buy brands for the halo effect they perceive they get from it. Gucci suggests style; the Nissan Xterra suggests a rugged, adventurous spirit; Jaguar suggests wealth; and the Red Cross suggests relief and compassion.

While a strong brand and its resulting effects can't be created and happen overnight, it can happen, if a clear plan exists and – more importantly – the charity is committed to the process of brand building. The following tips are a good starting point.

- ✓ **Appoint someone to be in charge of the brand.** Perhaps it is the Development Director or the Communications Director. Whoever it is, this person should be the brand traffic cop, making sure all are moving in the correct direction, and that there is a consistent brand message/image being used. He or she should review all materials, web pages, ads, etc., to make sure the right and consistent message gets out.

- ✓ **Define the brand.** Look at the charity’s mission statement, programs, and values. The brand image must work with them and truly represent them. Ask questions such as: who are you, what do you do, how do you do it, and – most importantly – who do you help? Charities rely on the kindness of donors, and consistency is key; if the brand, mission, and goals aren’t in sync, donors will notice, and you will lose the relationship that the charity has cultivated over time. The brand must create cohesion between all programs of the charity and constantly reinforce the charity’s goals and mission.
- ✓ **Check out the competition.** With more than 700,000 charities in the US alone, most likely there are other charities in your “space.” Look at them, how do you compare? What do you do better than those non-profits, or worse than them? This form of benchmarking helps you clearly see your core competencies, and allows you to formulate a brand strategy that sets you apart from similar groups.
- ✓ **Educate the organization about the brand.** Once senior personnel have sat down and defined the brand, make sure all employees and volunteers understand the brand, why it is important, and how they are a part of the brand building and maintenance process. Integral to success is the support of all, from board members to junior staffers. Like all big initiatives, the senior management must be on board to ensure success!
- ✓ **Make sure your marketing and communication plans support and reinforce the brand.** Have a plan! Make sure the strategic plan of the charity incorporates and supports the brand image at every turn. Everything from logo and colors, to typeface, language, and placement must carry from piece to piece. Remember, brand equity and loyalty is built over time, and requires clarity and consistency.
- ✓ **Put the brand in the driver’s seat.** The brand should drive all communications, and be a carefully planned part of each communication, whether it is an appeal, a newsletter, a website, collateral materials or a special event. The brand is part of the charity’s personality. As Tony Elischer, a leading UK fundraiser wrote, “It is on this platform (the brand) that we can build our personality, values and beliefs and then connect to our donors and potential donors.”<sup>5</sup>

Remember, a strong brand adds value, and creates affinity and loyalty, which are important to a charity’s future stability and effectiveness. As Phillipa Hankinson, a researcher at the University of Surrey Roehampton (UK) states, “Branded charity organisations are more likely to attract voluntary donations than unbranded charities whose cause and values may be less clearly defined and

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<sup>5</sup> “It’s the Personality that Counts” by Tony Elischer, September 2001, [www.tonyelischer.com](http://www.tonyelischer.com)

less well known. Brands allow donors to identify more closely with what the charity does and the values it represents.”

Be consistent with your brand and use it to differentiate your charity from the crowd. Brand building requires commitment and patience, but the benefit is well worth the effort.

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