

Why Would I Brand My Association?

by Melynn Sight

Your members have options.

Your members have four options. They can 1) use your service to get what they need, 2) get their services somewhere else, 3) do it themselves, without anyone's help, or 4) do nothing at all. What will it take to get them to choose you?

Whether your goal is to grow membership, or improve value to the member, the better you can articulate your promise, the more members you will attract, and convert from joiners to lifetime members. Loyal members get involved, respond to calls-to-action, read your mailings, and tell their non-member colleagues about you.

Your brand is your promise.

A brand tells your member the one thing that makes your association valuable to them – bar none. The brand is your promise to them. It is a statement – a symbol that describes clearly how every staff person and board member will interact with members. The brand begins with your knowledge of your members' biggest needs. It reflects your culture, your philosophies, what you're good at (or what you aspire to be), and ends with promise that never ends.

**It is not only a
“marketing promise”,
it is an organizational
commitment delivered in
every single interaction.**

There is an important, unexpected benefit to branding. When you declare your promise to your members, it's a unified statement of your value. When a company commits to a promise that “We Try Harder” (like Avis) or “We're In It For You” (like OKC REALTORS® Association), the staff and leadership is responsible to deliver on that promise.

- Each person has the obligation to reinforce the brand for their small piece of your business.
- When leadership makes decisions based on the brand, it is a demonstration of their commitment over time.
- Finally, the brand is a tangible way to measure the efforts of your organization, so that each staff member and leader is not only satisfying his/her piece of the pie, but delivering on the association's unified brand promise.

Branding doesn't stop when new leadership takes office, or when a staff member is replaced. Brand building that lasts requires trust and consistency, year after year. You earn your brand by continuing to deliver it over time.

It's not about your logo.

The definition of “brand” (noun) came from cattle-ranchers, who burn a mark – the “brand” – on the haunches of their cattle to differentiate their cattle from other ranchers. Unlike the literal definition of the

brand, this is not what I mean by a brand. In marketing terms, a brand is a distinctive characteristic that sets a product, service, person, or place apart from other products services, people, or places.

The European Brands Association proposes that a “brand is a constant point of reference; a contract, a signpost, a relationship. It is a signpost because it shows consumers a way to fulfill their needs. It is a relationship because trust and loyalty are earned over time.” This may be the most misunderstood and undervalued marketing concept. Let’s explore more below.

Good customer service is not a brand.

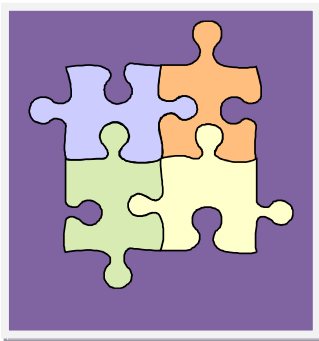
Customer service is a basis for running a good business. But it is difficult to call it a true point of differentiation. You will need to work harder to determine a promise your members will consider valuable and one that gets their attention.

Building your brand and then delivering can actually provide your members a return on their investment.

As Warren McKenna says “You brand yourself through your people, your places, and your things.”

Branded People – Consider your association staff, volunteers, committee members and board of directors as “Agents of Change”. From the mailroom to the boardroom, your constituents can be a strategic force for change.

Branded Places – Build events on a philosophy of “anticipate, experience, and remember.” Any physical place is an opportunity to build a relationship. Every place you are in front of your members, at industry conferences, training events, seminars, etc., you have the opportunity to build on your brand.



Branded Things – Develop touch points that can demonstrate value while also providing unique channels to service members: membership materials, websites, brochures, newsletters...the list goes on. The continuity of these vehicles is essential in building a two-way dialogue with your members, to build on your brand.

What’s involved in determining your brand?

- A brand will be useless if it doesn’t help you improve your members’ experience. For your brand to be relevant, you must identify what your members really want (the vital needs). Discover their top three needs through a [member survey](#). Find out what members think is most important.
- A brand can be a way to change the skills or direction of an organization. You must evaluate your desired strengths against your current strengths in order to brand yourself realistically. A branding assessment, though not long or involved, will help you direct your efforts. It can bring your staff and board closer, can bring focus to a trait that requires development, and can position you to attract a more involved membership.
- Ultimately you want to fill in these two blanks:

1. Why would members join if they didn't have to? In other words, what one valuable member benefit do you want to be known for?
2. If you are known for the one *benefit* above, how will it help you achieve your association's goals?

Selected properly, and embraced by your leadership, your brand is an intangible yet invaluable asset. It is the basis of the way you communicate your association's value.

For more information on branding, [click here](#) for nSight Marketing's one-pager on the topic.

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