



# Why Invest in Brand?

## And Where Should You Begin?

Here's the best way to build loyalty and forge relationships that matter.

By Mary Weisnewski

If I give the average man-on-the-street \$50 and tell him to donate it to the charity of his choice, where will that money wind up? The answer is clear: in the hands of the organization with which he has the strongest and most meaningful relationship—the one he trusts the most, that shares his passion and core beliefs.

How can you become that organization? How can you stand out among over a million nonprofits? Again, there's a clear-cut answer. Building a brand that focuses your mission, and then investing in that brand, is the golden differentiator.

### What Is Your Brand?

Simply put, your brand is everything associated with your organization—all the attributes, both tangible and intangible. It's your logo, your promise, the product or service you deliver, your name—all 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 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 communicate makes it easier to connect to your tribe. 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're 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. Listening to the community is critical in building a meaningful platform. Successful

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brands are infused with a clear set of shared values.

### How Do You Design Your Brand Platform?

To develop your brand platform, conduct an audit of those who come in contact with your organization. That means surveying and talking to all segments of your tribe—doing deep-dive interviews—to reveal what they think of you and what is truly meaningful to them. (See "How to Audit Your Brand" on page 15.)

### Brand Personality: Your Key Calling Card

Once your brand platform is defined, it will include your brand personality—what makes you 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, members of your tribe.

### Your Brand's Visual Elements

Design is one of the most tangible ways to convey your message. 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 visuals came to mind? The

*Continued on page 14*

## Are you moving your tribe from supporters to raving fans?

### Three Good Times to Audit Your Brand

Brand is 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 any of the following:

**A shift in focus.** When there's a change in your organization's direction, you may need a brand audit 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 influence change through advocacy and policy-making.

**Growth.** When an organization is small, its communications needn't be highly sophisticated. But if you're asking corporations or major donors for support, you need a sophisticated brand to demonstrate that you're reliable, credible, and savvy enough to trust.

**Broadening geographic reach.** The more spread out your tribe, the more important it is that they have clear and focused guidelines. A strong brand is the filter for consistency.

*Continued from page 13*

red cross, the black and white panda? These successful nonprofits use design to connect and differentiate in all their communications.

Establishing the brand's visual elements is more than picking colors. It's how the colors are used. It's the style and feel of photography: faces cropped or long-shots? It's which fonts are used: big, small, centered, bold, italic? And, it's the tone of voice, what words are chosen, the energy level conveyed.

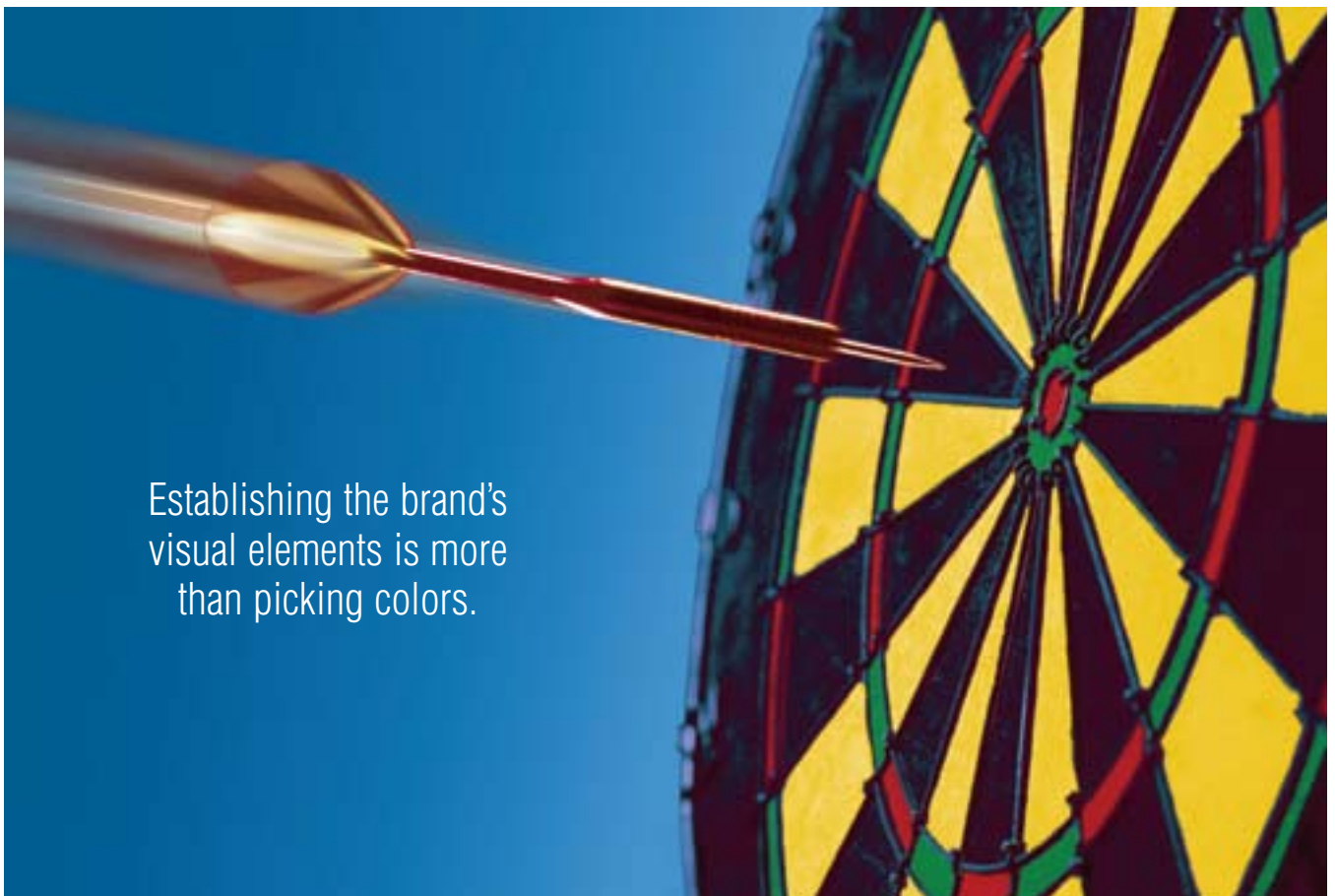
"Brand is an outward reflection of your organizational values and culture," says Diana Reid of Unitus, a nonprofit in Seattle that facilitates microfinance loans in developing countries. "Our personality is reflected in everything from the red walls of our curved hallways to the consistent interactions that people have with our employees, whether they're in Africa, India, or the U.S."

### 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

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builds trust.



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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, advocacy, and donating money—and lots of personal stories of how people are getting involved with the organization. The complete brand makeover encompasses everything from new public service announcements to customer relations. "We're creating a total experience around our new brand, because that's what successful brand is: a total experience," Round says.

When United Way underwent its brand audit, its leaders discovered that its brand was 67% of the reason why people chose to invest in the organization. That's a clear and powerful return-on-investment.

Remember that man-on-the-street I gave \$50 to? Exactly how can you convince him, in this age of instant promises, that your organization is for real? Easy: *Be real*. Be authentic and forthright in every action that everyone in your organization carries out, because consistently delivering on your promise builds trust.

The true power of a brand-driven organization 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. ■

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### Your Branding Round-Up

For more on developing your brand, take a look at these *Nonprofit World* articles at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members):

- **Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do** (Vol. 20, No. 1)
- **Are You Following the 4 Cs of Branding?** (Vol. 25, No. 3)
- **Defining Your Leader Brand** (Vol. 25, No. 2)
- **The Nonprofit Branding Exercise** (Vol 26, No. 1)

### How to Audit Your Brand

Every organization should conduct an audit of its brand. If possible, find a consultant experienced in brand development to help.

Begin by mining members of your community who know you well for insights into their perceptions. You can do so by conducting a simple phone survey of, say, 50 people: a cross-section of donors, volunteers, employees, board members, and members of the community who work on behalf of your cause. Qualitative, open-ended questions will reveal the essence of the brand—something that can't be achieved through closed-ended, quantitative surveys. Questions may include:

- What do you think of first when you think of this organization?
- What are its strengths? And weaknesses?
- What do you value most about the organization?
- How would you describe the organization's personality and style?
- What other organizations do you consider donating to, volunteering for, or working for? What makes this one unique?
- What messages are most meaningful to you? Why?

The answers will help you define the following tools to keep your brand and organization working smoothly:

**Your mission** explains why the organization exists, its reason for being. It should be easy to understand, easy to remember, and inspiring.

**Your guiding principles** are the values that drive the organization's culture and belief system.

**Your promise** is the shortcut to your brand that staff can use to guide daily decision-making. It defines the unique approach you want to be known for.

**Your personality** is the way you would describe your organization's character if it were a person. It defines the appropriate look, feel, and tone of all your communications.

**Your positioning** is the foundation for all your messages, and how you're positioned in the marketplace against your competition. It is your value proposition.

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