

Building the Value Behind Your Brand

By Steven A. Reed
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It's about survival. Your organization's survival. Your survival.

As an association marketing executive, you're probably a pro at telling people about your organization's value. Otherwise you wouldn't be where you are.

But it's a changing world. People are drowning in information. Travel seems risky. Networking is online. Members and customers have more choices than ever. Communicating value isn't enough anymore. You need to build value.

So how do you help your organization build the value that will build your brand? Lead the way in four areas: focus, learning, development, and communication.

1. **Create a brand focus.** Consider yourself the internal brand evangelist. You have to make the argument for brand. And you have to be the one to tell people that branding is not logos, slogans, or advertising.

You'll have to be the main bearer of the message that branding is about value: What do we offer that's so valuable that people will join to get it? Why should they join our organization instead of another one? What can they get from us they can't get from Amazon or Yahoo?

You'll need ammunition to support your arguments. Start with a situation assessment:

- What are trends in membership?
- What's the basic financial picture?
- How are donations?
- How is meeting attendance?
- Is it easy to get volunteers?
- What's the average age of your members? (Just how gray are they?)
- How are publication sales?
- Are subscriptions up or down?
- How many new products do you have?
- If your assessment shows a healthy, growing organization, congratulations! You just have to continue telling everyone about it.
- If not, you have to help change everyone's vision of value. Because what will really work today is knowing your customers and developing the products and services they value, not just giving them the same things you've been giving them for years.

2. **Become a learning organization.** This didn't start with the current economic downturn. It was 2001 when Horace B. Deets, the then-AARP executive director, said, "People are no longer joining associations just to join ... they want organizations to prove their relevance, justify dues, and describe what they can offer that can't be provided elsewhere."

But you can't prove your relevance—your value—until you know what your customers do value. So your first step is to find out everything you can about that somewhat faceless cloud you call “membership.”

Your organization must develop true customer insights and understanding. You can get this information from focus groups, staff/member roundtables, online surveys, chat rooms, analysis of your existing member data, e-mail, and ListServes, or any other place you can interact with members and customers.

Actually your first question should be: Who are the customers? How old are they? How long have they been in their jobs? What are their jobs? Are they men or women? How much do they make? Then, what do they think? What are their interests? Opinions? Are they most interested in keeping up to date or in belonging to a group? Is career development more important than social contacts? Do they value certifications or professional development?

How do they act on those values? Do they come to meetings? Which ones? Which members take tests? Buy books? Who else buys things? What are their other interests and activities? Which members or customers spend the most?

What do they say they want or need? Do the things they buy support what they say or indicate other unmet needs?

You'll find many differences within your organization. What segments are there? How do their wants and needs differ? How does the purchase experience affect each group?

The important thing to remember is that your members and customers never stand still. One big survey every three years won't keep you in touch with them. You must devise ways to stay in contact constantly. A customer-focus plan outlining exactly how you will gather ongoing customer intelligence is just as essential as plans for sales or marketing.

3. **Create purple cows.** Your next step is to use that understanding to develop products tailored specifically to each segment. In *Purple Cow*, business consultant Seth Godin says, “... if your offering itself isn't remarkable, then it's invisible — no matter how much you spend on well-crafted advertising.”

The way to be remarkable is to develop a compelling attraction for each specific market. How do you reach students? How do you convert them into paying members? What product would attract former members? Retired members? How can you leverage customers who buy from you but aren't members?

What do you have that these unique groups can get only from you? What can you be known for to each specific group? What is the essence of your society?

Then build your purple cows: your organization's unique products.

4. **Now for the easy part: communication.** Communicating your value is what you've probably already been doing. Only now it's easier.

You have been involved all along in the process. You know the products intimately. More important, you know the audiences intimately.

But communicating value is much more than fliers, letters, newsletters, or e-mails. Every product and service is a communication and must demonstrate your customer focus.

So you must continue to be a brand evangelist. The experience each member or customer has with your organization either supports or defeats all the branding efforts. If your external communication makes promises the organization doesn't keep, you will lose your customers' trust.

And a brand is about the trust. Your customers trust that you understand them, that you have products and services specifically designed for them, and that your performance meets their expectations of you.

That trust, in turn, will energize your most powerful communication tool: the customers themselves. When people enjoy a trusting, comfortable relationship with your organization and feel they get good value, they will tell others. These ambassadors are your most valuable asset.

Build and communicate value—and trust—and you will survive.

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