

A Brand Never Sleeps

The bottom line? Organizations are finding it more cost effective to maintain that “space in the mind of the consumer” through managing the purchase experience rather than through marketing communications.

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Whether you know it or not, your organization has a branding program, and your brand lives 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The activities and services your Society provides (and how they are provided) are at this very moment creating a “brand” in the minds of your members and non-member customers.

Regardless of whether you are currently engaged in a formal “branding program” or haven’t even begun to define what you want your brand promise to be, your brand is out there. Living, breathing, being shaped, reshaped and ultimately judged by everyone who comes into contact with it...especially by your members.

The challenge is to take control of that branding effort and make it work for you.

Brand Speak

What is a brand?

To branding theorists, a brand is often defined as “mindspace,” or “a space in the mind of the consumer.” That space is the collection of all the experiences an individual has with your organization and its products and services. Past or present. Good or bad.

Applying this business theory to everyday association reality, we see that a successful association’s brand is “a set of promises that imply trust, consistency and define a set of positive expectations in the mind of members and non-members.”

Specifically, a strong brand...

- Makes and keeps promises to your customers;
- Represents all that you are and aspire to be;
- Makes you different from the competition;
- Creates an emotional connection with your customers; and
- Guides your organization and its people.

“A brand embodies the organization’s promise to consistently deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services to the buyer. If the brand cannot influence choice, it is not a brand; it is just a corporate identity.”

Marketing Partners, “What’s all the Buzz about Branding,” 2001

Questions, Questions, Questions

So what should your brand promise? What does it currently promise? What do members expect? What about non-members’ expectations? Most important, when should you ask these questions and how can you obtain the answers?

For all of these questions, what it comes down to is “know thy member.”

By member, we mean everything from member and customer segments (members, former members, never-member customers, conference attendees, subscribers, certification candidates, seminar attendees, etc.) to individual member and customer records where staff can call up significant information on a single person at the touch of a button.

What is a brand?

The intangible and emotional connection between an organization and its customers...

"The exchange consumers make with a good brand...makes perfect sense: The brand offers **comfort, trust, convenience** and **identity** in an excessively complicated world. In return, consumers give the brand their **predisposition to buy...**"

David E. D'Alesandro, *Brand Warfare: 10 Rules for Building the Killer Brand*, 2001

Self-examination, market research and strategic prioritization are the initial steps your organization can take to answer these questions, identify what you stand for and create an effective brand promise. However, just because you've collected the information once doesn't mean you're done.

The practice of continuous data collection forces you to evaluate and re-evaluate your brand to confirm that the products and services you offer continue to live up to your brand promise.

Branding: Old-School Talk vs. New-School Walk

Old-school branding encouraged organizations to pour large sums of money into mass media to create space in the mind of the consumer.

Branding Key Number 1

Continuous customer understanding (market research and analysis) to support every stage

What is branding?

Branding is a **conscious, ongoing effort** that promises a consistent experience to members and customers and delivers on that promise every day.

Rather than focus on enhancing or improving the membership experience, organizations bought and deployed promotion and advertising to persuade consumers that the organization was doing something for them.

Today, new-school branding encourages organizations to spend money on brand segmentation, brand maintenance and if need be, brand reinvention. That is, you should spend money to create, provide and ensure that products and services consistently meet or exceed expectations, not just to convince consumers you're doing it.

The bottom line? Organizations are finding it more cost effective to maintain that "space in the mind of the consumer" through managing the purchase experience rather than through marketing communications.

That's not to say that marketing communications such as advertising aren't important; however, today's "what's in it for me economy" demands that organizations create a positive experience for members so they make a repeat purchase decision based on that experience—they renew membership.

Branding Key Number 2

Involvement and commitment to the branding process throughout the organization

What else would explain why consumers clip coupons to make sure they purchase ground coffee at a grocery store for the least amount of money, yet spend as much as \$4.50 on a Venti Mocha Frappuccino at their neighborhood Starbucks? Again, it's all in the experience and meeting the expectations of that experience.

Branding Never Stops

Because a brand never sleeps, branding never stops.

While a brand is the promise you make to your members, effective branding is also aligning everything you do, say and sell in your daily activities to create an organization that single-mindedly lives up to that promise each and every day.

Branding is where the rubber meets the road. It involves everyone at all levels within the organization continually creating, offering and monitoring programs within your association to live up to your brand promise. This necessitates training and, if necessary, hiring staff that can make this service component a reality.

What is branding?

Branding is **cross-functional** with one single message running through all customer-focused activities; it is not just the responsibility of membership, marketing or any other single department.

Driving the Brand Strategy

By now it must be apparent: the act of branding an association or professional membership organization is strategic, not tactical.

More than just a marketing tool, effective branding is a significant financial and management strategy. Senior leadership must drive the branding effort because a successful effort will be all-pervasive.

But, while the impetus and direction for the branding effort must come from senior leadership, every department and every function must be single-mindedly focused on the brand. That means creating and maintaining a relationship with every one of the organization's customers and members. In other words, every department, not just membership or marketing departments, is responsible for recruiting and retaining members.

Where do you begin?

Expanding on the three keys to effective branding outlined in the previous pages, the next article will shed light on how to effectively brand your association and most important, how to get started using market research as a guide. We suggest a three-step approach to effectively brand your organization.

Branding Key Number 3

Committing the organization, top-to-bottom, to single-minded brand focus

This includes:

- Creating and reshaping (if necessary) your brand promise;
- Developing a brand strategy that aligns your organization around prioritized brand building daily activities; and
- Living your brand through daily activities that “walk the talk.” **MPI**

About the Authors

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Marketing Partners, Inc. is a strategy and business services organization serving individual membership societies and associations, as well as consumer packaged goods, consumer durable and health care clients across the United States. The firm's focus is on business improvement—principally in three areas:

- *Customer Focus*, which includes using market research to create market-driven products and processes designed to gain and retain customer and member loyalty;
- *Organizational Advancement*, which views the organization itself as the product and focuses on developing both strategy and organizational capabilities including custom-designed strategic and breakthrough planning processes; and
- *Revenue Enhancement*, which employs both fund raising and marketing tools to identify and tap new sources of revenue.

If you would like more information about how branding might benefit your Association or Society, or more information about any of the services Marketing Partners offers, please contact Viki Gudas in St. Joseph, MI, (269) 983-0016, (hq@mpicompanies.com).