

“There’s another way to look at a brand. It’s been increasingly recognized that brands have immense financial significance, and it can be argued that the whole concept of the value of a strong brand is primarily a financial one.”

*Agnieszka M. Winkler
Warp Speed Branding, 1999*

Standing Firm Upon a Brand Platform

Third in a series of articles adapted from a presentation to the CESSE Annual Meeting,
San Jose, California, July 2002

*By Marketing Partners, Inc.
2919 Division Street, St. Joseph, Michigan 49085*

Walk through the business section of any library or bookstore in the country and you will more than likely find at least 50 books on branding. Buy all of those books and after 500 hours of reading time and \$5,000 lighter in the pocketbook, you will have learned two basic things.

First, market research is the foundation in order to “know thy customer.” Once you know your customer, elements to building a strong brand naturally flow from this information and the steps towards creating an organization’s brand promise are easily understood and executed.

Second, and perhaps most important, they all point to the fact that while brand building may take a certain level of investment, an organization can expect solid financial returns from that investment.

Save money and time and read on to learn about the process Marketing Partners, Inc. has developed to help associations successfully build their brand platform.

The Brand Platform

Brand platform? Brand promise? What does it all mean? Well, up until now, we’ve concentrated on an organization’s brand promise—the one consistent message that an organization delivers to its members and customers each and every day. However, in order to help identify that promise and measure its effectiveness after implementation, it is necessary to develop two companion pieces to the brand promise: a brand contract and a brand value proposition.

Brand Contract: A brand contract helps provide a framework for selecting a positioning strategy and developing the brand promise. It asks tough questions regarding an organization’s current brand, such as its reason for being, its distinguishing characteristics and reasons for customers to believe in the brand.

Brand Value Proposition: Brand value proposition statements help a society understand how effectively the brand is meeting member and customer needs so that specific actions can be developed to remedy any inconsistencies. In effect, they are statements that are built off of the brand contract and brand promise that are measurable over time.

The ABC Society Brand Promise

“The ABC Society knows and understands you as a member of the scientific community. You know us as a trusted partner in providing top-quality products and services, as a reliable source of relevant information and insight about scientific issues, and for our commitment to customer service. You can rely with confidence on ABC as your primary source for technical knowledge you need to succeed in your career.”

Thus, a brand platform consists of three core elements: a brand contract which helps identify the brand promise, the brand promise which is what an organization uses to live by and brand value proposition statements that can be used to measure performance. And it is all three working in concert together that creates the brand platform and drives brand building.

Brand Building Tools

Marketing Partners, Inc. has developed a process that organizations can follow to create a brand platform. This three-step process begins with an assessment of the branding environment within the organization, includes market research activities to continuously inform the process of branding and ends with senior-level workshops that create an organization's entire brand platform, with the brand promise as its center piece.

Step 1: Situation Assessment as the Foundation

It has been said, "you don't really know where you are going until you know where you've been" and that certainly holds true when developing a brand platform. A detailed situation assessment of an organization's current brand status among key leadership and senior staff is the initial step in developing a brand contract. The assessment measures an organization's current brand-building activities, whether the organization is ready for any type of activities required for brand change and what market research needs to be conducted to inform the development process.

Brand Contract	Current	Desired
Reason for Being	Advance the profession and its contribution to society	Be the leader in providing knowledge, skills and values that help members improve the well-being of society
Brand Character	Stodgy, conservative, older, serious, no-nonsense, male	Market leader, caring, sensitive, competent, professional
Target Audience	Everyone	Academics in leading U.S. and international institutions, Fortune 500 CEOs
Principal Differentiating Benefit	ABC Society offers publications created by members and proceedings of its meetings	ABC Society is the one complete resource I can depend on for easy and convenient access to what I need to know to succeed in my profession
Reason to Believe	Has been around forever; My peers and co-workers belong; annual meeting is the best in the industry	Trusted and reliable source of information; Helps me do my job; Very visible and dramatically improved customer service
Brand Position	Helping leaders improve society	

Step 2: Market Research to Inform the Process

The mere mention of conducting market research is often enough to send a shiver down the spine of many a membership director. Ineffective use of data collected during organizational needs studies has caused many research reports and data tables to go untouched, forever stored away on seldom-viewed shelves. And market research will continue to have this bad rap until the information collected during the studies is actually used to help guide the strategic, operational and financial aspects of the organization, a la branding.

Market research is essential in supplying information to create a brand contract that is ultimately used to develop a strong brand promise. When conducted successfully, market research uncovers:

- What customers value most/least about your society
- What they expect from your society vs. what they perceive they are receiving
- Where they see the society headed and where they would like the society to go
- What the differentiating aspects of your organization are vs. your competitors
- How the society can best fulfill their needs and become more relevant them

Organizations may attempt to answer these questions with anecdotal information, but without direct input from customers, you cannot accurately predict answers to these questions. And without answers to these questions, it is nearly impossible to survive in the marketplace.

Market research thus becomes an interactive tool that is used to inform the process of building not only your brand promise, but also your entire organizational brand platform.

Step 3: Brand Platform Development

Senior organizational leadership then uses information collected from the situation analysis and market research phases in a series of workshops to further develop the organization's brand platform, facilitated by branding specialist organizations such as Marketing Partners, Inc.

Branding as a Financial Decision

Although previous articles have focused on the managerial and operational benefits of branding, the decision to engage in a branding effort is first and foremost a financial one. If an organization finds itself still reluctant to commit financial resources to engage in activities that help build its brand, the changing role of societies might convince it otherwise; especially considering the potential return-on-investment branding can provide the organization.

And this return-on-investment remains positive regardless of the financial climate. Many organizations think they can't afford branding during economic downturns; however, the real question is given the competitive structure, can organizations afford not to do it? Consequently, during economic booms, organizations often feel they are too busy to implement programs that they feel might upset the positive flow and ask, "Why rock the boat?"

Brand Value Proposition		
Member Need or Situation	Brand Value Proposition	Customer Belief System
I want to be treated as a special person	Attentive to individual member needs	At XYZ, the staff really seem to care and understand my needs
I want expert answers	Trusted Knowledge Source	XYZ provides me with the latest expert information I can't get anywhere else
Getting information or ordering products is inconvenient	Timely Access and Convenience	XYZ makes the membership experience easier by offering 24/7 access and flexible options
I am willing to pay a little more if I feel I am getting a better value	Assurance of Quality	I will experience higher satisfaction with XYZ because of their superior customer service and product development standards

In effect, organizations "wait out" an economic storm or stay still and ride an economic wave. Either way, what you end up with is stagnation when no one wants to rock the boat internally with change. However, most forward-thinking organizations recognize that without this change, they are in danger of sinking.

Branding has proven to successfully create a customer-centric organization that results in increased financial returns. The money that is invested within the organization on branding, i.e., those things that improve the customer experience — employee training programs, enhanced CRM capabilities, improved quality control, product customization — ultimately pays dividends in the form of reduced costs and increased revenue. A successful branding effort forces an organization to set, consistently measure and evaluate both short-term and long-term ROI objectives, just as one would any other organizational initiative or program. Strong brands enjoy a price premium and strong sales, and that's what increases ROI.

Brand Platform Strategy Success

As a business improvement firm, Marketing Partners, Inc. is unique in that it can conduct steps one through three — from market research to senior staff workshop facilitation — in order to help an organization develop its brand platform. More importantly, MPI has a successful track record of doing so.

Coming up in the next article will shed light on how organizations can develop goals and objectives for their brand platform. This entails first a developing strategy that aligns the organization around prioritized brand-building daily activities. And we'll give you a hint: it begins by thinking of your brand as a person, as a product, as an organization and as symbol. [MPI](#)

About the Authors

Leslie Gilreath is a vice president of, and client services director for Marketing Partners. Her experience includes the development and implementation of market research, strategic planning, advertising, marketing and public relations programs for clients in consumer durables, electronics, health care, education and professional and trade associations. She holds a Master of Arts in Professional Writing from Western Michigan University.

Viktoria Gudas is a practice leader for Marketing Partners. Her experience in association management spans strategic planning, new product development, membership recruitment and fund raising. Gudas managed the development and distribution of a medical vocabulary system that has since become the international standard for the electronic patient record and a significant new revenue source for the association. Gudas holds a Master's in Public Administration from DePaul University.

Richard Lukey, Jr. is a strategy consultant and heads the Marketing Partners market research practice. In addition to designing and executing market and member research studies for associations and personal membership organizations, he has helped develop brand management and new product launch strategies for over 50 products with companies such as Kellogg, Nestle, Pillsbury, Whirlpool, Wilson Sporting Goods and Procter & Gamble. Lukey holds a Master's Degree in Advertising from Michigan State University.

Steven Reed is president of Marketing Partners, Inc. He combines advertising agency creative experience with a research-based strategic orientation and more than 25 years of marketing, strategic planning and fund raising experience. He has worked in all areas of not-for-profit planning, marketing and communications, as well as in consumer packaged goods, consumer durables and business-to-business marketing. Reed has moderated hundreds of consumer focus groups and is an experienced facilitator and public speaker.

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).