

# Using the Power of Branding for your Association

## Why Branding? Why Now?

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Branding is not a fad.

Branding has been used in the for-profit world for years as the essential strategy that companies have engaged in to become the preferred choice for products and services by making an emotional connection with consumers. Some of the world's most memorable products and services owe their success to effective branding.

So why have many professional membership societies only recently recognized that they need to adopt branding as a strategic tool for managing their organization?

### Why Should Members Join?

Historically, associations have relied on “golden handcuffs” — products and services members had to have and that were not available in the private sector — to recruit and retain members. The reasons for belonging to a professional membership society these days are not as clear as they once were and member loyalty is no longer a foregone conclusion.

<b>Association Challenges</b>	
<b>External</b>	<b>Internal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Competition for members</li><li>• Attracting “non-joiner” member</li><li>• Member retention and loyalty</li><li>• Relevance</li><li>• Image and awareness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demand for new revenue sources</li><li>• Staff turnover and morale</li><li>• Staff silos and cross-purpose activities</li><li>• Consistent imagery and messaging</li><li>• Customer service</li></ul>

Today, dot coms and private sector businesses are competing for your members' hearts, minds and pocketbooks through advancements in technology. This new technology, although increasing the accessibility and speed of information you are able to provide members, is also doing the same for entities that didn't exist 10 years ago, but have now become your competitors. Remaining relevant is a true challenge to an organization when members and former members say, “I can get the same information for free over the Internet. Why should I pay for it?”

Today's professional membership society must engage strategies that help manage difficult external trends such as the erosion of member retention, declining loyalty, new “non-joiner” generation attitudes and competition for products and services from niche societies.

In addition to these difficult external issues, societies continue to struggle with many internal issues that have beset non-profit organizations since their inception. Today's societies must engage strategies that help grow staff morale, improve customer service, cut through departmental silos and satisfy the demands of boards and volunteers.

Deploying branding as a strategy can effectively address these issues. However, earlier attempts at bringing traditional branding to associations brought results that were less than effective.

### **Not Your Father's (or Mother's) Old-School Branding**

In the past, creating a brand was often primarily a function of image and advertising. It was based on gaining customers' trust through heavy advertising over an extended period of time to create a top-of-mind, programmed response to purchasing. And this worked for a long time for many large for-profit organizations.

However, smaller for-profit organizations and professional membership societies didn't find this approach very useful. Most societies did not have the financial or personnel resources to adopt branding through advertising as a strategy. Those that did soon found it took a long period of time, and an even larger investment, to build their brand.

Now with fragmented markets, astronomical media costs and smarter, better-informed customers, even large, for-profits are finding their old-school branding strategy is failing them.

"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."

Horace B. Deets, Executive Director, AARP,  
*Association Management*, "Feeling Groovy? Join  
AARP," February 2001

### **The Brand is the Experience**

While smaller organizations could not compete with larger organizations to advertise their brand, they found they could compete with them on customer service. Providing superior customer service led to a relationship with customers that was built on consistently meeting their expectations through positive experiences.

And that's when old-school branding evolved into 21st century experiential branding.

Today truly effective branding, even for well-heeled big advertisers, cannot be based solely on mass media advertising, but must be focused on identifying, creating, providing and managing the sum of all the experiences a member or consumer has with your product, service or organization. The ultimate goal is to create the highest level of member and customer trust and that trust is gained through every experience he/she has with your organization.

With a focus on direct interaction with the customer as the key driver, rather than advertising dollars, the length of time to create a brand can be significantly shortened. Coca-Cola and Ford have been around for over 100 years; however, Apple Computers has been around for 20 years, and Amazon.com less than 10.

### **Old- vs. New-School Branding**

#### **Old School**

Based on mass media, advertising and reach

- Trust is gained through familiarity
- A brand is built over a long time
- The brand is a marketing concept

#### **New School**

Based on customer experience

- Trust is gained through experience
- A brand can be built in a short time
- The brand is a financial concept

## The Brand is the Promise

The 21st century branding revolution has begun.

Pick up any association magazine or seminars catalog today and you're likely to find the topic of branding at the top of the list. However, as professional membership societies race to brand their organization, they are leaping to communicate the brand through new logos, taglines and symbols before understanding how to effectively brand.

Effective branding is the act of making a promise to your members and then 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. The litmus test is this: if what you say, do, offer or sell does not support your brand's promise, don't do it.

## The Brand is What You Do

In today's association environment, the brand strategy must be the business strategy of the organization. While the vision and mission articulate what the association wants to do, a brand strategy illustrates what the association is going to do — it's all about looking at the organization from the audience's point of view.

Externally, branding can help associations:

- Increase awareness and recognition of the organization in a competitive market;
- Differentiate the association from competing societies, businesses and dot coms;
- Create a positive image in the minds of the targeted publics that is relevant and emotionally connected with their daily lives; and
- Increase membership and enhance retention rates.

Internally, branding can:

- Align organizational efforts across business lines;
- Instill pride in employees and build loyalty to the organization; and
- Boost the level of customer service.

"Without members, we are without income or mission. Connecting with ongoing member needs is becoming a different process. Members are changing rapidly and we must connect more often than in the past."

Michael Wolf, Executive Director, Kappa Delta Pi, *Association Critical Issues Survey*, Marketing Partners, Inc., November 2001

"In the next century, the membership experience will become the frame of reference for members when they receive their renewal notices. It will no longer be a specific program, service or activity that members will remember. They will judge the value of their membership by recalling the total experience of the previous year."

Mark Levin, *Millennium Membership*, 2000

## Branding On the Outside...

When you brand your organization, your members and customers understand who you are, what to expect from your organization, and perhaps most important, how you are different from your competitors.

When you brand your organization, you develop a promise to consistently deliver a specific set of positive features, benefits and services to the public.

When you brand your organization, members and customers become loyal to the brand because they know what to expect from that brand. A successful brand serves as a guarantor of quality and an anchor for trust and security. Over time, the customer sees a uniform service that is relevant, trustworthy and emotionally connected to the needs and wants of the consumer.

### **...and the Inside**

Branding your organization aligns your organization's activities by identifying and conducting only those everyday activities that support the brand strategy. The key is to ensure that everyone in the organization

understands the membership experience and believes that they are the brand whenever they relate with the public.

The branding strategy assumes that the lines between various disciplines are artificial and that the branding effort will be cross-functional — *branding is one single message running through all customer-focused activities, not the responsibility of the membership or marketing or any other department.*

Branding your organization ensures consistent customer service and moves organizations from mass marketing to mass customization using new technology and relationship marketing principles to deliver targeted messages and relevant products and services that increase the share of customer. Many associations have already begun using relationship marketing as a way to maintain a brand presence and stay close to their customers.

### **The Brand is a Survival Strategy**

Branding is becoming fundamental to the survival of any professional membership society today. To remain viable and competitive, associations need to create a truly memorable membership experience, an experience that is valuable, distinct and relevant in the new marketplace.

As more and more professional membership societies jump on the branding bandwagon, some will fall off while others will make it to the finish line. Branding can make all the difference for your association. [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 fundraising 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](mailto:hq@mpicompanies.com)).