

## Why Would I Brand My Association?

*by Melynn Sight*

### **Your members have options.**

Your members have four options. They can 1) use your service to get what they need, 2) get their services somewhere else, 3) do it themselves, without anyone's help, or 4) do nothing at all. What will it take to get them to choose you?

Whether your goal is to grow membership, or improve value to the member, the better you articulate your value, the more members you will attract, and convert from joiners to lifetime members. Loyal members get involved, respond to calls-to-action, open and read your mail, and tell their non-member colleagues about you.

### **Your brand is your promise.**

A brand establishes relationship and trust. It says the one thing that makes your association valuable to members. The brand is your promise to them. It is a statement – a symbol that describes clearly how every staff person and board member will interact with members. The brand begins with your knowledge of your members' biggest needs. It reflects your culture, your philosophies, what you're good at (or what you aspire to be), and ends with a promise... that never ends.

***Your brand is not a  
“marketing promise”,  
it is an organizational  
commitment  
delivered in every single  
interaction.***

### **The unexpected benefit to branding.**

When you declare your promise to your members, it's a unified statement of your value. When a company commits to a promise that “We Try Harder” (like Avis) or “We're In It For You” (like OKC REALTORS® Association), staff and leadership are all-responsible to deliver on that promise.

- It's each person's responsibility to reinforce the brand in their own way.
- When leadership makes decisions, asking “Is it in line with our brand” shows a commitment over time, and a link between the brand and the way you run your business.
- Every member of leadership and staff self polices the brand; when a fellow colleague is doing it right, it's up to each one to recognize the behavior and say something.

This creates a very healthy and united culture.

Branding doesn't stop when new leadership takes office, or when a staff member is replaced. Brand building that lasts requires trust and consistency, year after year. You earn your brand by continuing to deliver it over time.

## It's not about your logo.

The original definition of a brand came from cattle ranchers, who keep their own livestock separate from that of other ranchers by "branding", burning a unique mark on the haunches of their livestock. In marketing, a brand is a distinctive set of characteristics that differentiates a product, service, person, or place from other products services, people, or places. It's not about making a mark (symbol); it's about making a mark – an impression – on your member.

The European Brands Association proposes that a “brand is a constant point of reference; a contract, a signpost, a relationship. It is a signpost because it shows consumers a way to fulfill their needs. It is a relationship because trust and loyalty are earned over time.” This may be the most misunderstood and undervalued marketing concept. Let's explore more below.

## Good customer service is not a brand (unless your are Zappos or Nordstrom).

Customer service is a basis for running a good business. But it is difficult to call it a true point of differentiation. You will need to work harder to determine a promise your members will consider invaluable and one that gets their attention.

Building your brand and then delivering on it can actually provide your members a return on their investment.

As Warren McKenna says “You brand yourself through your people, your places, and your things.”



***Branded People*** – Consider your association staff, volunteers, committee members and board of directors as “Agents of Change”. From the mailroom to the boardroom, your constituents can be a strategic force for change.

***Branded Places*** – Build events on a philosophy of “anticipate, experience, and remember”. Any physical place is an opportunity to build a relationship. Every place you are in front of your members, at industry conferences, training events, seminars, etc., you have the opportunity to build on your brand.

***Branded Things*** – Develop touch points that can demonstrate value while also providing unique channels to service members: membership materials, websites, brochures,

newsletters...the list goes on. The continuity of these vehicles is essential in building a two-way dialogue with your members, to build on your brand.

## What's involved in creating your brand?

A brand is useless if it doesn't help you improve your connection to the uninvolved member. For your brand to be relevant, identify what you want from their relationship with your association.

Discover their top three characteristics through a poll, a focus group, or even feedback on social media. Find out what members think is most important. Then verify their needs in your member survey.

## What can a brand really do for your organization?

A brand can change the skills or direction of an organization. Be realistic when you go through the branding process. A branding assessment, though not long or involved, will help direct your efforts. It can bring your staff and board closer, can help you focus on a trait that needs development, and can position you to attract more involved members.

- Ultimately you want to fill in these two blanks:
  1. Why would members join if they didn't have to? In other words, how do you want your members to feel when they get their dues renewal invoice?
  2. If you are known for one reason that you establish through the branding process, how will it help you achieve your association's goals?

Select your promise well, and charge your staff and leaders to embrace it. Only then will your brand become a tangible and invaluable asset. It's the first, and a critical step in conveying your value proposition.

*Melynn Sight is dedicated to improving value to your members through communications across trade Associations. For more information on branding and communications, contact Melynn below.*