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# Building A Strong Brand Identity

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JOHN R. OISHEI FOUNDATION



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## BUILDING A BRAND IDENTITY

More and more, we are surrounded by brands and "branding." Branding is no longer just for large companies with products to sell, but is increasingly important for smaller companies, events, celebrities and, of course, for non-profit organizations like yours.

Creating and maintaining a strong brand identity helps to make your organization stand out, builds a solid professional image, and can build a connection with critical stakeholders to help them understand who you are and what you represent. Organizations that can highlight a unique story and clearly define what they represent are much more successful at engaging their target audience and driving their mission.

The following pages provide some insight into what a brand is (and isn't) and how you can create or sharpen your organization's brand identity.

## WHY IS A BRAND IMPORTANT?

In a strict marketing sense, brand is important to help define your organization and to set it apart from competitors. When considering toothpaste or running shoes or any other consumer product, it seems somewhat obvious why this is important – to sell more! Your branding is a promise to your stakeholders – it tells them what to expect from you and how you are unique. For non-profits, it should also provide a reason to support the organization.

It is important to distinguish who your organization is to better connect with key stakeholders and to give them a reason to donate, volunteer or engage in other ways. Stakeholders have choices – to support other organizations, different causes, or to not support at all. By building a brand that defines you, it creates a personality and conveys your values, giving you a better chance of gaining attention and support.

A strong brand sets an expectation of who the organization is and what the stakeholder can expect in its interactions with you – Are you the strong fighter? The compassionate nurturer? The innovator? The experienced and reliable organization? Defining this will help you begin to create or sharpen your brand so that you can connect and engage with your stakeholder in a more direct way.

## BUILDING A STRONG BRAND CAN HELP YOUR ORGANIZATION:

1. Tell its story and communicate its values
2. Differentiate it from competitors
3. Create an emotional attachment with key audiences
4. Provide a framework for all organization communications
5. State its promise and create trust as the brand lives up to its promises consistently and over time

## WHAT IS AND ISN'T A BRAND

An effective brand identity is not something that is created from scratch and then imposed upon an organization. The most authentic brands are built over time and highlight and build on key characteristics of an organization. Most organizations have some sort of identity or personality to start with (whether they have planned it or not), which can be a good starting point to clarify and strengthen a brand identity. Building a strong brand means understanding your values, mission, culture, and personality and highlighting them in a consistent, meaningful way that engages your target audiences in a positive way.

It is easy to think of a brand as a slogan, tagline or logo. Each of these are important elements of brand identity but shouldn't be confused with the overall brand. Successful brands use these tools to reinforce their brand identity but don't rely solely on these to tell their story.

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Your brand identity encompasses all of the ways you interact with your key stakeholders. These interactions include your typical marketing/communications materials like logos, taglines, brochures, annual reports, websites and more. It also includes the nuances of how an organization presents itself in interactions with customers/clients, in signage, through presentations, and its physical surroundings.

While many successful brands have significant budgets with which to create their brand, spending a lot of money is not required. Many of the ways you currently communicate help to shape your identity and can be tweaked or strengthened to sharpen your focus and better define your brand.

## **DEFINE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY – CONSIDERATIONS TO START**

To get started on creating or sharpening your brand identity, it is important to have a clear understanding of your current organizational identity. Even without specifically creating a brand, there are many ways your organization is communicating (positively or not). What does your facility look like? How does your staff interact with clients or donors? What is your messaging? How often do you proactively communicate? How do your stakeholders view you? What are your materials conveying in tone or emotion? These are all factors in how your key audiences form an opinion of you and what you represent.

Defining your brand is somewhat of a discovery of who you are and who you want to be. It involves some self-reflection on the part of the organization as well as some focus on defining what your important and credible traits and characteristics are. The following are some steps to help you begin to define your brand identity:

1. **Define your brand vision by asking, “who do you want to be?”**
  - a. Must be credible – build on what you have/who you are
  - b. Provide the “why” by asking what is the reason you exist – what is the clear impact of what you do? What would the world lose without you?
  - c. What is the emotional connection to your audiences – why should they care?
2. **Define and prioritize your core values**
  - a. Look to your organization’s mission/vision statements, the reasons the organization was formed, the values of your founders or other background/history to help define these values
  - b. It’s okay if they overlap
  - c. Look for themes
  - d. Write down those core values that you want to highlight as your brand
  - e. Core values should remain constant even as the organization might evolve; however prioritize those that really define you or that are held with highest regard
3. **Think through your organization’s personality – what characteristics make it unique?**
  - a. Think of the organization as a person – what are the strongest traits?
  - b. Consider how the organization should interact based on those traits (Strong and independent? Compassionate and nurturing? Young and hip?)
  - c. Consider how that personality translates into “voice” or how the organization comes across to its core audiences in all its interactions. Does it seem consistent? How should it change?
4. **Consider the view of stakeholders**
  - a. Where possible, gather information from key external audiences including clients/customers, board members, and donors to get a sense of what currently resonates

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with them and how they currently view the organization. This may be done informally or through more structured tools such as one-on-one interviews, surveys or other research tools.

- b. Review available research to gain a better understanding of overall audiences and what influences them.

#### 5. **Look at other brands**

- a. What elements are you drawn to? How do they connect?
- b. Consider those that seem similar to what you want to convey – how do they communicate? What do they do well? How do they highlight the brand throughout the organization/throughout your interactions?
- c. Identify brands that your organization is not like and understand why.

#### 6. **Pull vision, values, and personality together to begin to establish your brand**

- a. Keep it authentic and unique
- b. Build on strengths and assets of the organization
- c. Identify priority traits/characteristics

#### 7. **Understand your current identity and gaps in the brand you want to be**

- a. Review current materials and other communications tools to determine how close/far you are to the desired brand identity
- b. Identify those materials/communications that can be kept, modified or eliminated to build a new enhanced identity

### **CRAFT YOUR MESSAGING**

Now that you have better defined your brand identity, it is time to integrate it into your communications tools. Start by drafting the critical messages that define and support your brand. These messages should form the foundation of your communications. It is okay, and even desired, to change the specific language from time to time as long as the

message itself remains consistent. Be sure your team understands and embraces the messaging in order to project a consistent, clear definition of your brand in all communications.

### **DESIGN YOUR BRAND**

A strong brand will benefit from a strong visual identity, so consider how best to convey your organization, through its logo, website, core type fonts, collateral materials and other visual tools.

Whether you work with a full-service branding agency or an individual graphic designer, your goal should be to create a compelling, memorable visual identity that supports the brand and personality that you have begun to outline in the previous steps.


The visual identity for your brand should be evident through all materials - your logo, website, stationery, business cards, advertising, collateral materials, social media platforms and in the physical places that your stakeholders may visit. Setting specific design standards is important to ensure that these visual elements are used *consistently* and as intended. Issues such as how and where to use logo, colors, typeface and other elements should be defined so that all communications have a consistent, professional look.

Visit [http://www.oishei.org/docs/corp\\_id\\_manual.pdf](http://www.oishei.org/docs/corp_id_manual.pdf) to view the Oishei Foundation's corporate identity guidelines for reference.

### **INTEGRATE YOUR BRAND**

This is the how, what, where, when and to whom to communicate with and deliver brand messages. Identify communications tools and develop your overall strategy, tools and timing. With a more defined brand, supporting messaging and visual tools, you can now integrate your brand identity throughout your organization to continually reinforce who you are, why you exist and your impact.

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Some considerations for integrating brand identity include:

- Take stock of current communications and interactions with key audiences and consider how and where your new brand identity can be better integrated. Does it need a tweak or an overhaul?
- Integrate brand personality throughout the organization. Consider the small but every day touches such as how you answer phones, the wall color and signage in your offices, and your email signatures – these can support your brand and be easily updated to reinforce your brand identity.
- Consider the company you keep. Do you partners, vendors, board members, or other relationships help to reinforce your brand or detract from it? If your identity has been established as grassroots, nimble, and innovative, does the old-style fundraising gala fit that image or would something else work better? Are there relationships with funders, partners, or board members that, if highlighted, help to better establish your brand because of the equity in their brand or public personality?
- Set standards and templates to provide guidance to your team and any outside vendors to portray your brand consistently.
- Be consistent. This is important to help you cut through the clutter of communications that your organizations must compete with and will also help you develop, define and reinforce your brand.
- Be true to your brand. All the pretty logos and clever tag lines in the world will be worthless if your organization fails to live up to the brand promise that forms the basis of your brand identity.