

What's in a Name?

Four Management Factors in Building a Strong Brand

By J. Sebastian Traeger

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title.” –Shakespeare

In Shakespeare’s time, it might have been okay for Juliet to think that ordering 12 red rhododendrons for Valentine’s Day or calling Romeo Robert wouldn’t matter—but in the modern world of branding, renaming is not an ingredient for repositioning. Of course, Juliet would probably have figured this out if she actually tried to change Romeo’s name. While he might still retain his dear perfection, I don’t think “Robert and Juliet” would have retained its “dear perfection” in our hearts and minds throughout the years.

Brand building is a complicated topic. Scott Bedbury, the man responsible for building both the Nike and Starbucks brands, wrote in *Brand New World*: “Building a brand is the most challenging, complicated and painstaking process a company can embark on. It’s more intuitive than analytical, and most of the time it can’t be seen. But it can always be felt.”

While branding is complicated, it’s incredibly important in a changing world. Ministries, in particular, need to carefully think about how to position themselves in a crowded marketplace of ideas to a limited pool of potential donors

and an increasingly skeptical culture. Most importantly, they have a theological and biblical need to be careful in what they say and how they say it.

This is basically the advice Paul gave to his young protégé Timothy: “Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them.” While I don’t want to reduce Paul’s teaching to marketing principles, I think Christian organizations—by virtue of our calling and the message we’ve been entrusted with—have a special obligation to consider how we’re understood by our various audiences. And this, in essence, is branding.

Consider answering two simple questions: What makes up

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your brand, and how can you begin to position and refine it?

There are four important facets, I believe, to building your brand. Unless you address all four, your brand will be unstable.

■ **Make your brand an outgrowth of who you are—your mission, vision and internal culture.** The art in

developing your brand is to ask: “Who are we?” What’s your mission and vision? Why does your organization exist? If “who you are” is not who you want to be, then you’ll need to begin a strategic, brand-building campaign to get where you need to be.

Part of who you are is also your internal culture—the values you espouse, the unique characteristics that describe you. As Chris Riley, CEO of branding company Studioriley, says: “Branding is a way of articulating the core values of the corporation. Companies need to project into the world who they really are.”

What does your organization stand for? How do you carry out your work? What are the important cultural distinctives you adopt?

For these values to be real, they must be infused into every part of your organization. Your people, from the CEO to the volunteers, need to understand and articulate your mission and vision and how you carry it out. Your brand should be clearly demonstrated in your works and acts; the way everyone in your organization delivers your message, leads your programs, directs your social services, trains your volunteers or develops your products strengthens or diminishes your brand to your constituency.

Starbucks is a famous example of this. Bedbury summarizes how its internal culture contributes to its brand: “Starbucks’ employees know how to behave. Their training, benefits and sense of solidarity—and therefore their attitude and presentation—are a cut above those of employees in the rest of the fast-food industry...If you understand your brand—its values, its mission, its reason for being—and integrate it consistently into everything you do, your entire organization will know how to behave in virtually any and all situations.”

In the Christian organizations I know, a sense of mission is typically a strongly shared value by top leadership. But we need to go to extra lengths to make sure the culture is clearly understood, articulated and lived out by everyone connected with the organization. This is a central building block in creating a strong brand.

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■ **Authenticate your brand by delivering on your brand promise.** We’re becoming increasingly a cynical society and therefore authenticity is at a premium. Consumers are more skeptical, scrutinizing the brands they use. They’ll ask themselves, “Do these brands deliver what they promise, or are they saying one thing and doing another?”

As Christians, we understand the importance of our lives backing up what our lips confess. As Christian organizations, we need to be especially mindful that we’re delivering on who we are. Over time, our behavior and the quality of our work will either build or erode trust in our organization.

Leslie Kilgore, chief marketing officer for Netflix, understands the importance of delivering on your brand promise. She says: “Customer service, convenience and selection are the essence of our brand...Customers have a level of enthusiasm because we have a great experience, and that’s why constantly improving the quality of the service is an obsessive part of our culture.” Your brand is only as good as your ability to deliver on what you say.

I believe truthfulness, sincerity and excellence should be hallmarks of every Christian brand. Because our culture often labels Christians as hypocrites and charlatans, let’s make sure our brand reflects the character of Christ.

■ **Communicate your brand clearly and consistently.** Most people reduce their brand to a specific logo, trademark or advertising slogan. These are certainly part of your brand, but your logos, letterhead, print collateral and website are also important expressions of your brand. They’re symbols meant to summarize with words and visuals “who you are.” They’re the fruit of creative people translating “who you are” and “what you do” into visual images. Your

corporate identity and promotional materials, as Bedbury says, “should help confirm what already is, not what should be.”

Your goal in creating a website is not to project an image of who you’d like to be. Instead, the goal should be to create an accurate, excellent representation of “who you are” that captures the minds and hearts of your audience. As our creative director likes to say: “You can put lipstick and a dress on a pig, but it’s still a pig.”

Your image is a reflection of your brand. Understand your brand, your brand promise and your position in the marketplace and then create consistent communication materials that accurately reflect this.

■ **Check your constituents’ perceptions of your overall branding efforts.** Do you really want to know what your brand represents? Ask your constituents. Determine who your most passionate constituents are and listen to them. How would they describe their experiences with your organization? What adjectives would they use to describe you? Your constituents will evaluate you on such metrics as performance, trust, reputation and love (how you make them feel).

While most people won’t scrutinize you so analytically, the image you project through the services you provide is the intangible quality called brand. And your constituents’ perceptions are the fruit of your brand. At the end of the day, that’s really all that matters. What kind of fruit are you producing?

Yana Kushner of Clif Bar understands that brand loyalty is the fruit of all your efforts. She describes the Luna Movement this way: “I think the first layer of loyalty is that they love how the bar tastes, the nutrients in it, that it’s all

natural. But beyond that, they quickly move up and join the Luna movement: social purpose, balance, healthy living, wanting it all. These are the values we stand for, and because we have that in common with them, they feel like they've found a friend."

We need to become just as intentional in building our brand. We need to be truthful in what we convey and thoughtful in how we say it. Use these

four facets of branding as a diagnostic tool to determine where you're weak and then strategize on how to fix it.

If you want to develop a strong brand, work hard to understand your mission and vision, communicate it clearly and truthfully, deliver on your brand promise and then check the pulse of your constituents to see if your brand is really taking hold.

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