

Bringing a Brand to Life

A CASSLING WHITE PAPER

Research shows that people see more than 4,000 brands every day. You can probably visualize the Starbucks logo, say the Nike tagline or sing the McDonald's jingle.

Think about your favorite brands for a moment. Why are you loyal to them? How have they positioned themselves to be so appealing that you'll pick their product above other similar, maybe even lower-priced options?

People choose certain brands because they "believe or perceive" them to be better. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as "a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." Legendary marketing strategist Al Ries defines branding as "a word that stands for something in the mind of prospects."

These definitions indicate that a brand is more than a logo and a tagline, which are simply elements of a brand's *identity*. In branding, perception is reality. The strongest brands have created a strong brand image by successfully differentiating themselves from their competitors, showing that their product or service has value and by establishing an emotional connection with their consumers.

Bringing a sustainable, valuable brand to life is a long-term effort that involves more than just the marketing department. The following steps outline how to develop your organization's unique brand.

1. Realize the importance of a brand

In developing your organization's brand, you need to first understand the impact of a strong brand as well as the absence of one. A brand provides meaning beyond your organization's services and can create and strengthen

patient loyalty. A solid brand foundation should be the foundation on which all other marketing activities rely and must be established prior to undergoing individual advertising campaigns, according to The Advisory Board Company. Once developed, the brand can help propel marketing campaigns and aid fundraising efforts.

Internally, a strong brand gives employees a sense of direction and pride. A great brand's momentum is ignited within your organization and gains speed as it is rolled out into the community. Every single person in your organization needs to be on board with branding efforts, delivering on the brand promises you've made to the community.

Hospitals are devoting a sizable amount of their budgets to establishing their brand. According to The Advisory Board Company, almost one-third of hospitals' marketing budgets are spent on pure brand advertising. Research shows that stronger brands bring greater value, and strong brands need an investment of both time and money to be truly effective.

2. Take inventory

A brand isn't just "created." It is a representation of the existing characteristics of your facility – good and

bad. In *A Marketer's Guide to Brand Strategy*, health-care brand expert Chris Bevolo states that a brand is shaped by the following elements:

- Product or service experience
- Customer service
- Price
- Environment
- Reputation
- Word-of-mouth
- Marketing, communications, public relations
- Corporate identity

To begin shaping your brand strategy, The Advisory Board Company recommends starting by measuring baseline consumer awareness, the image of the institution and consumer preference. This information can be obtained through community perception surveys and focus groups; patient and employee satisfaction surveys; one-on-one consumer interviews and internal interviews. Conduct a media audit to determine the amount and type of coverage your organization receives – positive and negative – and search the Web to find out what people are saying about your organization.

Organize internal brainstorming sessions with staff to learn about every thought, perception, characteristic, strength and weakness they hold about your organization. Ask your employees why they are loyal and what experiences define your organization and differentiate it from your competitors.

From patients, find out what they value most – is it the friendliness of staff, convenience or level of technology? Fallon Brand Consulting recommends an exercise called “Ask/Thank.” During interviews, have participants ask the brand for three things and thank the brand for three things.

3. Funnel and simplify

All of the key characteristics uncovered through your research will be used to bring your brand image and identity to life. Define your brand by organizing your hospital's key traits into these categories:

- **Value statement:** Also known as a positioning statement or brand promise, this declaration establishes how you want to be portrayed in the mind of the patient and perceived by the marketplace. It's important to be honest and authentic – do not overpromise. Define who you are right now, not what you want to be in the future. Your brand promise is really who you are and what you believe.

Create a concise phrase to represent the brand personality and create an emotional response or personal connection with the target audience.

Example: *Bringing the world the joy of healthier kids. – Cincinnati Children's Hospital*

- **Attributes:** These are key descriptors or words that you, your staff and your patients use to describe your organization. Attributes are positive and negative associations and can describe what people think, see, feel, hear, smell, and experience – they give your brand meaning and value.

Example: *Caring, high-tech, convenient, experts, innovative*

- **Differentiation or core competencies:** How do you set yourself apart? What can you do that no other organization can? This can be difficult for health-care organizations to define. Bevolo states that traditional differentiation in health care often involves patient satisfaction results, new imaging technology, a specialist certification or a patient testimonial. Over time, your brand will help your organization stand out from your competitors and create top-of-mind awareness among consumers.

Example: *Mayo Clinic's core principles include practice, education and research.*

4. Create your brand identity

Now that you've defined how your brand “feels” it's time to decide how it should “look.” Using your brand values, attributes and core competencies, decide if your name accurately represents how you are positioned in the marketplace. Do you use an acronym or nickname for your organization while consumers use another name? Do your logo, institutional fonts and colors need to be updated to reflect your brand personality and the position you are claiming in the marketplace? In *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, Al and Laura Ries recommend that a brand use an organizational color that is symbolic of the category yet one that is the opposite of its major competitor's.

It's important to maintain control of your identity elements and watch for improper use of logos, fonts, taglines or colors - even when used internally. Over time, consistent use of your brand messages combined with your logo, tagline, institutional fonts and colors will help the consumer match your visual brand identity with your emotional brand image.

5. Implement internally

Your brand not only starts with your employees, but it is carried out every day by the service they provide, their actions and reactions, conversations, e-mails and appearance. A brand is built on a patient's experience – from the moment the exam is scheduled to convenient location/parking, first interaction with your receptionist, waiting area, wait time, service, amenities and follow-up. All of these elements, as well as the absence of expected services, are part of the brand experience.

Conduct internal training sessions on your brand values to ensure your employees live your brand, understand the importance of it and realize how their actions impact an organization's branding efforts. Can they truly deliver on your brand promises? All frontline and support staff, nurses, physicians, volunteers and anyone else that represents your organization need to know the meaning of your brand and be aware that everything they say and do impacts your organization's brand experience. Your employees are now brand ambassadors - your best and most important marketers.

6. Implement externally

Once staff and referring physicians are fully educated on your new brand, it can be introduced to consumers. Use public relations strategies in addition to marketing tactics as an opportunity to promote your new brand. This can be done through publicizing newsworthy accomplishments, anticipating newsworthy events, identifying physician leaders to media and staying informed of hospital initiatives that may be good human interest stories.

7. Measure

It takes time and patience for a brand to take hold and generate measurable awareness. Marketing and branding are undeniably intertwined, but the main difference between marketing and branding is that marketing tactics often include a call-to-action, while branding efforts are intended to create preference for and loyalty to your organization. That emotional connection is much harder to measure than attendance at a health fair.

To measure the impact of your brand, conduct consumer awareness and preference surveys on your own or use a

research company. Brand experts Paul Mlodzick and David Aaker recommend using these key measurement indicators:

- Advertising awareness: Have consumers heard or do they remember your ad? Would they consider choosing your facility?
- Brand awareness: Are they familiar with your brand attributes?
- Brand equity: How would they describe you? What words (positive and negative) come to mind when hearing your organization's name?
- Employee engagement: Why do your employees want to work for your facility?
- Personality – Does the brand have one and does it resonate with consumers?
- Organization – Is there a visible organization behind the brand and can you trust, admire or be proud to work for it?
- Return on Investment (ROI): Measuring ROI for branding efforts is extremely difficult because it doesn't provide immediate, measurable results. Branding helps to position your organization to create preference, which will generate results over time. Charting benchmarks such as patient volume, requests for information and patient, staff and community surveys will help gauge the impact of your brand.

8. Protect and maintain

Kent Seltman, PhD, former director of marketing for Mayo Clinic, advises to always play brand offense, not defense. Continuously monitor and be aware of perceptions of your organization and make sure your brand attributes accurately represent the experience you're promising.

The three main reasons branding efforts fail is because the positioning was not believable, the brand strategy was short-term and not enough money was spent to build and sustain the brand, according to Buckley. Branding is a long-term commitment that requires buy-in from everyone in your organization – from the CEO to referring physicians to volunteers.

It takes time, diligence, consistency and simplicity to build a strong brand. In the end, the ultimate goal is to deliver a positive patient experience.

