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Your Brand: What It Is and Why It Matters **Elizabeth D. Richter, Vice President**

If your cultural organization is like many others, you spend a great deal of time developing programming, creating exhibitions, selecting works to present, and training artists. But, beyond your logo, have you thought much about your brand? With the expansion in the number of leisure time activities available to everyone, it's more and more important for arts and culture organizations to understand the depth of what is meant by "brand," and why it is important to develop and nurture. Your organization is in friendly competition for audiences not only with other theaters, museums, concert venues, or dance companies, but also with the ever-increasing entertainment options facing us every day, including everything from your community's new casino or its suddenly successful sports team to the thousands of movies available at the click of an iPad.

Your brand is fundamental to your visibility and your ability to stand out from the crowd, and thus your ability to create a value proposition for ongoing support. Can you, your staff, your board, and your array of stakeholders easily and quickly describe your organization in a way that differentiates you from the competition, conveys the value you offer your audiences, and provides a compelling case to experience the great art you make available? If your organization understands how to create and maintain a vibrant and engaging brand, you will be able to tell your story effectively to the outside world.

WHAT IS A BRAND?

Your brand is the essence of your organization as others experience it. It is intangible. You can't see it or smell it or touch it because, like beauty, it exists in the proverbial eye of the beholder. Your brand is what your staff, board, artists, audiences and community think of your organization. It's the sum of every experience one has with your organization or its products. It is the reputation of your company, the perceived quality of its working relationships, the promise of its products, and the value it brings to anyone engaging with it.

WHAT A BRAND IS NOT

"It's not about a brand, it's about our work."

This comment, made by a nonprofit staff member in a focus group, represents the feeling of many in the nonprofit sector that "brand" is a dirty word and that "branding" is only about selling something – a transaction rather than a relationship. A common misperception is that a brand may be important if you want customers to buy soap or cereal, but it has no role in the world of the arts. This misunderstanding of the term prevents many organizations from seeing how helpful an effective brand can be for communicating an organization's identity to its audiences, funders and other stakeholders.

A brand is also sometimes seen as just an organization's logo, such as the Starbucks mermaid or Apple's ubiquitous apple. These graphic identities reference a brand, but they do not in themselves make up the brand. A logo is developed to be a visual expression of a brand, but it is not and cannot be the meaning of the brand itself.

BRANDS IN THE NONPROFIT WORLD

Those who see the value of a brand as a selling tool unique to commercial enterprises may not remember that some of the most recognizable brands in the world belong to nonprofit organizations. Think about three of the top nonprofit organizations in the social service sector: the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and the YMCA. The value of their brands was estimated to be from three to over six billion dollars in a report titled *Cone Nonprofit Power Brand 100*, released in June, 2009.

Philanthropedia (now a part of Guidestar) ranks arts and cultural organizations according to their impact and other organizational strengths through the “crowd sourcing” of expert opinion. Their top ranking individual institutions include the John F. Kennedy for the Performing Arts, the Walker Art Center and the Metropolitan Opera. Each of these entities has developed and maintains a strong national brand.

Nonprofit arts organizations now compete on many levels, not just for audience and donors but also in product sales and services. They have a unique challenge in addition to the works they create: their missions often also include the promotion of intangible values such as artistic achievement and cultural enrichment. Their revenues are not only generated through ticket sales and ancillary revenue streams but also from donors, foundations, and sponsors. An organization’s brand is key to communicating with and appealing to these target audiences.

HOW DO YOU CONTROL YOUR BRAND?

As important as your brand is, the elusive quality of a brand means that you can’t *completely* control it. You can guide it, but you can’t force your community to believe what you want it to think. For the most part, your staff, board, stakeholders, and target audiences will judge you by your organization’s actions and its product. The elements and activities that shape a brand are many and vary dramatically depending on the nature of the organization. The following are just a few of the ways you are judged:

- Quality of your exhibits, performances, products, venue, education programs, artists, and other services
- Audience and reviewer comments about those presentations
- The social and audience interaction experience at your events
- Quality of customer service
- Advertising campaigns for exhibits, performances, products, or services
- The way your phones are answered and how quickly calls are returned
- Personality of your staff and board members
- Collateral materials such as newsletters, marketing brochures, fundraising materials, and annual reports
- Graphics on and usability of your web site
- Ease of buying tickets and pricing
- Quality and type of media visibility
- Vendor comments about working with you

Each of these, and many more touch points with your community and target audiences, will either support or undermine the brand you are trying to create for your organization. It is seldom just one of these elements that defines your brand, but the totality of the experience of interacting with your organization that counts.

A BRAND IS FRAGILE

Brand strength in the commercial world may relate to sales, but in the nonprofit sector it also translates directly to donations. Because you cannot completely control your brand, it is important to appreciate how fragile it can be. Even a brand as powerful as the Red Cross is vulnerable.

Following a series of problems including the distribution of funds after the 9-11 disaster and criticism of preparedness in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the Red Cross saw a dramatic drop in donations that led to significant layoffs and the departure its eighth CEO in 12 years. The Red Cross continues to rebuild its brand today.

DEVELOPING YOUR BRAND

In order to support your brand successfully, you need to define it. Every member of your organization must understand your brand, its attributes, and the specific activities each can take to develop, maintain, and support it. A Brand Platform will supply the lens through which your programs, communications, and related activities are viewed. The Brand Platform is a document that summarizes the elements of your brand: its Essence, Promise, Personality and Pillars. You use the Brand Platform as a touchstone to ensure that all your communications have a consistent message. Consistency will create more powerful messaging across multiple media platforms and reinforce with your audiences what you want to convey.

A thoughtfully developed Brand Platform begins with a clear vision, a concise mission, and a set of values that provide the foundation of your organization. Your organization's vision expresses your aspiration for the future – the goal your organization works to achieve. Your mission states what you actually do and why. Finally, your values detail the foundational beliefs at your organization's core. These basic elements should be revisited and revised as needed every few years through a Strategic Planning and Community Engagement Process, and become the foundation for the Brand Development Process.

ELEMENTS OF YOUR BRAND

An effective Brand Development Process builds on an organization's vision, mission, and values. There are a variety of models for a Brand Platform, but the key elements are the Brand Essence, the Brand Promise, the Brand Personality, and the Brand Pillars.

The Brand Essence is a statement that identifies the unique and distinctive characteristic of your organization. This should differentiate your organization from others that do similar work. It must incorporate your organization's mission but also define what you do that is different from your competition. The Salvation Army, for example, defines its essence as a Christian service organization that preaches the gospel to meet human needs without discrimination. The TimeLine Theatre in Chicago produces plays with historic relevance that resonate with today's issues.

The Brand Promise explains what value your target audiences can expect your organization to deliver. A simple example is Volvo. Its brand promise is Safety. The Shedd Aquarium in Chicago promises an engaging, educational experience with marine life. Their advertising campaigns and web sites emphasize and reinforce these straightforward messages.

The Brand Personality describes the tone and quality of your communications. Visiting Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts, both coffee companies at their core, one quickly senses the differing personalities of the products, services, and locations. One is a sophisticated, hip neighborhood gathering place while the other is a fast, convenient fuel stop for the day.

The Brand Pillars are your organization's core beliefs. They might include such qualities as integrity, diversity, community service, innovation or other similar values.

The Brand Platform is the sum of these parts. It can be effectively presented as a triangle, with the Essence at the top, Promise and Personality in the middle, and Pillars appropriately at the bottom.

THE BRAND PLATFORM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

As with any major undertaking, it is always a good idea to assess what resources are available to your organization before you begin. Developing a strong Brand Platform does not necessarily require assistance from outside sources, but you will want to include key stakeholders in the process and you may find that bringing in an outside facilitator helps to create strategic brand focus supported by objective research and analysis, while avoiding potential pitfalls.

Step One: Establish a Branding Committee of key staff and board members. This group will pull together relevant materials, including the organization's stated vision, mission and values statements and the existing Strategic Plan for review. It will also sign off on a set of questions to be examined in Step Two.

Step Two: Conduct interviews and research. The Branding Committee is interviewed individually along with artistic team, administrative staff, board members, key donors, community leaders, and other key stakeholders. The interviews will produce a list of your organization's perceived strengths and weaknesses, its deeply held beliefs, and other attributes and adjectives commonly used to describe it. Note: Sometimes this step is performed within a proper strategic planning and community engagement process.

Step Three: Hold a facilitated daylong Ideation Retreat. Bring the Branding Committee together for a day of creative exploration of pictures, words, colors, personality types and other concepts that free participant's thinking from conventional images and descriptions of the organization. The output of this day informs the framing of the Brand Platform.

Step Four: Analyze the outputs of the Retreat, the stakeholder interviews, as well as additional market research and information from other sources. This analysis will strategically inform the development of the draft Brand Platform. Multiple draft Brand Platforms may be prepared for the initial presentation.

Step Five: Present the draft brand platform(s) to the Branding Committee for discussion and input. One or more meetings of this group lead to the refinement and finalizing of the Brand Platform, which is often brought to the full board for feedback before a final draft is completed.

Step Six: Introduce the new Brand Platform to the full board and staff.

Step Seven: Launch the new Brand Platform. Develop elevator speeches – short, concise and compelling statements reflecting the new Brand Platform. Write and distribute Brand Guidelines. Train all internal stakeholders on using the new Brand Platform to guide all the activities of the organization.

Initially, in some organizations, there may not be a uniform comfort level with the concept of brand. If you sense your organization has individuals who think brand is a dirty word or view brand as only logo/slogans and color palette, it's important to help them understand the systemic importance of brand to achieving the organization's mission and vision.

First, schedule small focus groups for staff members in which the Brand Platform is explained. Tease out concerns about any of the elements of the Brand Platform. There may be adjectives or brand attributes with which individual staff members are unfamiliar. It is critical to acknowledge what objections exist, even at the lowest level of the organization, because every individual will be encouraged to "live the brand." All comments should be captured for the second phase of training.

Once focus groups have been held, a second round of brand training is scheduled. It is at this session that concerns are aired and explained in the context of the overall reactions to the Brand Platform. Printed Brand Guidelines are passed out. Issues are framed in a way that acknowledges concerns while affirming the overall Brand Platform. In these sessions, the basics of the elevator speech are demonstrated and each staff member is asked to work on his/her own speech and share it with the group.

CONSIDERING A NAME CHANGE?

Organizations sometimes think about changing their name when they go through a rebranding process. The wisdom of doing so depends on the name's "brand equity", or what value it brings to the organization. A name that no longer represents the mission of the organization or conveys a negative connotation is worth changing. The Chicago Historical Society, for example, has changed its name to the Chicago History Museum. Research determined that despite its venerable history, many people did not understand that the organization was a museum and felt its name suggested an elite or closed institution. The new name states clearly what the institution offers its audiences and is more welcoming to the public. Developing a new name requires adding additional steps to the branding process.

WHAT ABOUT THE LOGO?

Creating a new logo can also be part of the brand development process, particularly if a name change has occurred or has been proposed. In this case, a graphic artist is added to the team and additional steps follow the adoption of the brand platform, as it will be the foundation for the new logo as well as for all future communications activities. The development of the logo also involves the selection of a color palette and family of typographic fonts to be used throughout all print and electronic communications as well as related marketing materials such as signage and exhibit design. Consistency in the presentation of such visual elements is an essential part of maintaining the integrity of the brand from this point forward.

IMPLEMENTATION

With a trained staff and enthusiastic board, you are ready to review your print and electronic communications, promotional materials, exhibits, performances, fundraising collateral, and public appearances. You can now update your communications with consistent language and graphic elements that create a verbally compelling and visually recognizable impact.

LAUNCHING AND MAINTAINING A LIVING BRAND

You have now developed, with input from all stakeholders and appropriate internal and external research, the Brand Platform, an embracing concept which will act like an umbrella over all future communications. Your stakeholders will understand the Essence of your organization, the Promise it makes to your community, the Personality of your organization, and the Pillars upon which your work is grounded. While the format and exact words of your various communications will vary, the elements of the brand will always be present and consistent.

If your brand faithfully represents your organization and your staff and board understand and "live it," its launch is likely to produce immediate results in the form of positive feedback and an energized response to your organization's programs and services. Nevertheless, the work of maintaining a brand will continue. It's essential to review your brand on an annual basis along with your strategic plan to be sure that you are reflecting your artistic vision accurately and responding to changes in your ever-evolving community.

CONCLUSION

A vibrant, living brand will enable your organization to deliver consistent messaging to your audiences and other stakeholders while helping to create more effective print and electronic communications. Because an effective brand captures the essence of your organization, it will become an essential component of your communications as well as a powerful tool in expanding audiences, ensuring donor loyalty, and promoting your organization's mission, vision, and values.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW ARTS CONSULTING GROUP
CAN ASSIST YOUR ORGANIZATION IN IDENTIFYING & CREATING A VIBRANT BRAND
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