

EVENT MANAGEMENT THROUGH A BRANDING PRISM

With hundreds of thousands of not-for-profits vying for attention, it's noisy out there! How can you ensure that your organization is seen and heard? What tools do you have at your disposal to attract attention and get out your messages?

Have a special event! Special events are powerful marketing communications tools. A well-thought out event will make a world of difference for your organization, and are vital to their long-term health and sustainability.

The numerous benefits from a special event include:

- Increased visibility
- Strengthened identity
- Greater "esprit de corps" for your staff
- A significant mechanism for raising funds
- An exciting opportunity for involving board members and volunteers
- New ways to reach donors and corporate sponsors

A large repertoire of special events exists, from intimate parlor meetings to extravaganzas such as gala dinners, sporting events, art auctions and benefit concerts to rummage sales, bingo games and bake sales. Consultants and event management software provide the expertise and systems needed to develop and implement a successful event.

However, you must own your event to ensure that your organization reaps the most long-term benefits. Your event needs to "carry the flag", communicate your organization's distinctness, vision and values. A strong brand is the key to your success.

WHAT IS BRANDING?

The Dictionary of Business and Management defines a brand as "a name, sign or symbol used to identify items or services of the seller(s) and to differentiate them from goods of competitors." In other words, for a not-for-

profit, your brand is the graphic and narrative marketing elements that identify your organization. This includes your logo and colors, tagline, and the style and substance of the words you use to define and describe your services.

Your brand is much more than a promotional or design tool. It touches every aspect of the organization. It is the promise you keep in all your programs and services, communications and operations. When people see your logo, hear your name, read an article or open an invitation, they should think of your organization, as you want. Your brand resonates with the totality of experience that your organization provides.

Every organization has a brand; the key is to make sure you create and define your brand, instead of the marketplace. According to Duane Knapp in the *Brand Mindset*, a brand should contain three distinct attributes: an internalized sum of impressions, a distinct position in the mind's eye and a perceived functional and emotional benefit.

A strong brand differentiates your not-for-profit from others, communicates your commitments, and expresses how you carry through with your promises. Good brands create strong relationships. They help ensure that your organization can break through the noise to engage new stakeholders, successfully compete for diminishing resources, volunteers, board members and staff.

Brand building is an investment in how people think and feel about your organization. Make sure that your organization's brand is clear, concise and consistent. This will help make sure that your target audiences recognize you in the marketplace and know what services you provide or what issues you support.

Once your organization has completed its branding initiative, create a brand portfolio or style guide. This will be your marketing communications roadmap. Suggested elements include:

- Positioning statement based on mission, vision and value statements
- Key messages
- Design guide with colors, graphics and logo use

- Tagline
- Style guide based on communications standards such as *AP Stylebook* or *Words Into Type*
- Templates for communications vehicles including letters and collateral materials

The guide becomes an invaluable tool to help ensure consistency and buy-in. It provides guidelines for everything from internal communications, web design, and enriched e-mailers to special events.

BRANDING AND SPECIAL EVENTS

Branding will differentiate your special event from all others. Your event will carry your distinct look and feel. Your event will have the power and strength of your organization's branding and vice versa – your organization will reap the benefits from your event marketing.

Special event branding increases your position in the market by creating an experience and/or memory that participants will not forget. And, that message will carry the brand promise of your organization and add to the public knowledge of your mission, vision and values.

Don't forget that the heart of your branding campaign is an emphasis on getting your organization's name out into the community. Events help bridge the gap between what your not-for-profit does and what people think you do. Special events help you share your story, your brand experience, with your audiences.

Many event planners and event planning committees feel a need to be creative when planning events. They want the event to be special and exciting and tend to see repetition of logos and graphics as boring. They do not "link" the event to their branding initiatives to ensure consistency and repetition of the brand and brand values. Unfortunately, the event becomes an opportunity to create a whole new marketing focus with a new look and feel.

When this happens, the organization loses the energy and power of its branding efforts. The "look and feel" of the event does not add to the brand

visibility. Quite often, even when participants find the invitations and e-mail announcements exciting they do not identify the event with the host organization.

EVENT MANAGEMENT THROUGH A BRANDING PRISM:

I begin every event project by asking strategic questions. It is most helpful if you have your event committee in place at this time. The consultant and/or a senior staff person should take responsibility to make sure that the event is in line with the organization's brand.

- Why are we holding the event?
- When will it occur?
- Has anyone checked with the community calendar to make sure there are no major conflicts?
- Where should we hold the event? Are there any new venues?
- How many people do we plan to invite?
- Are we committed to projecting the organization's brand with this event? Will this event add to the power of our organization brand?
- Will our audience recognize the event as ours?
- What are our goals?
- Can we get sponsorships and/or in kind support from companies? Have we planned this event thinking about our stakeholders, current and prospective corporate partners and their expectations of our events?
- What are the newsworthy aspects for media coverage?
- What is our budget?
- What is our ROE – return on event?

Once the details are worked out, it is time to concentrate on the branding elements of the event. What can you do to ensure brand equity in your special event?

- Make sure the event ties in with your organization and services
- Create an event that is consistent with your organization's values
- Own the event and infuse it with your brand
- Promote the event as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Annual, etc

- Build on the success of each year's event to increase brand recognition
- Use the organization's portfolio and style guide to ensure that the special event look & feel resonates with the organization's brand.
- Incorporate your organization's name and logo into the promotional materials
- Include your organization's boilerplate on all press materials
- Stay focused on your organizational goals and how these relate to event goals
- Distribute collateral materials such as brochures and newsletters at all events. Make sure the audience knows how to get in touch with the sponsoring organization.
- Create a special page and/or web site for the event. Be sure that it identifies your organization, resonates with the organization's mission and goals – even if the event has its own branding elements.
- Post the event media alert and press release in your organization's web site Press Room
- Test the effects of the special event on your audience's perception of your organization. Commit to holding post event evaluations.
- When another organization or for-profit company is doing an event for your not-for-profit, provide your brand portfolio and style guide. Make sure your voice is heard as the event is planned. Don't lose your brand identify.

Organizations with brand strength attract passionate volunteers. They are the organizations with committed stakeholders and dedicated staff. Always make sure that the event adds to the value of your brand and that your brand value adds to the event! Then your special event will differentiate your organization from other not-for-profits and raise your organization's brand value in your community.