

Four ideas to help you strengthen your charity's brand

by Redina Kolaneci

Senior Fundraising & Stewardship Consultant

McConkey • Johnston international UK

“Our support base is getting older! We don't seem to be able to connect to new audiences” – says the CEO to his Board members. Then he goes on to suggest that what the charity needs is a new brand – and that he has just spoken to a graphic design firm who would be happy to assist in this process.

This is an all too common scenario amongst UK charities today. As branding and re-branding become more popular, are charities creating stronger brands or, are they just giving themselves a *'design and copy makeover'*?

If your charity is about to embark on a re-branding process here are a few suggestions on what branding is or isn't that you and your team might want to take on board.

1. A sustainable and successful brand is donor-centric

I know this seems very basic but, often too many charities overlook this simple fact. They engineer a re-branding process behind closed doors without consulting any of their constituencies (i.e. donors, beneficiaries, major supporters) – not even their staff members.

This means that all key decisions about the new brand are made by a small working party of marketing staff, consultants or graphic designers. And when the new brand is launched nothing much really happens. These charities continue to do business as usual with no increases in donations or in the numbers of new supporters.

However, in a few forward thinking charities donors, beneficiaries and staff are involved in the branding process. Their insights on the charity's mission, vision and performance and their feedback on donor relations enable the charity to craft new branding messages that resonate with their constituency and get the charity noticed.

Here are a few questions to consider: does the voice of your current donors and beneficiaries resonate throughout your charity? Do you know what donors think about your charity and how your charity makes them feel? What systems or mechanisms do you have in place to receive donor feedback? And if you receive feedback, how do you use that information?

The fact of the matter is that **your donors are the ones who decide on the value of your brand**. And, you can not strengthen your charity's brand without insights on their collective evaluation of your brand's equity.

2. Donors' perceptions can make or break your brand

Some people think that the main ways to strengthen a charity's brand are by having a new fancy logo, a catchy tagline and lots of advertising campaigns.

Although all the above are important tools for enabling a charity to engage with various constituencies they are not what a brand is all about.

A brand is the total sum of perceptions created in the current and potential donor's minds from all their interactions with a charity's materials, website and/or staff members, etc.

In other words, a brand can be defined as the total value of the positive and negative relationships that your charity has with its supporters. Consequently, your charity's ability to generate increased donations or make new friends in the future depends largely on the value of the relationships your charity has with its supporters.

For example, a charity might assume that it is strengthening its brand by sending out regularly beautifully designed magazines with news of its work. However, the same charity takes two weeks or longer to acknowledge donors gifts. The charity might think that it is doing a great job in strengthening the brand – through the magazines.

But, donors might think (as market research or donor attrition will show) that the charity is a poor communicator because it takes such a long time to receive a gift acknowledgment. Therefore, some donors might decide to stop supporting the charity labelling it as 'slow to get in touch and not efficient'.

3. Effective brand management is much more than slick ads

Many people think that brand management is all about communicating inspiring message to current and potential donors and protecting the identity of the brand.

However, successful brand management is about much more than sending out brochures, launching web based initiatives, ensuring that each communication adheres to branding guidelines or doing advertising campaigns. *It is about creating and managing all the interactions a charity has with its current and potential donors.*

I call these interactions ‘*Connection Points*’ in the charity - donor relationship cycle. At MJi UK we actively encourage our clients to map out the ‘*Connection Points*’ at different stages of the cycle and articulate the desired outcomes the charity wants to generate from them.

Identifying and managing these ‘*Connection Points*’ can also help the charity to set objectives for strengthening donor relations and to evaluate the performance of its promotional and fundraising activities.

Nothing should be left to chance or taken for granted in this process. A donor's positive experience with your charity is priceless. And, **if your brand is well managed such experience can soon become a real competitive advantage in a crowded marketplace.**

So, the question is: have you identified the ‘*Connection Points*’ in your charity’s relationship with its supporters? What’s more: what tools and resources do you have in place to strengthen the relationship with donors at every step of their involvement in your work?

4. Every employee is involved in managing your charity’s brand

By now, this final point should be self-explanatory. Managing your charity’s brand is not a just a function of your marketing or communications team. It is a function that runs throughout your charity’s departments and teams.

Everyone, from your newest employee to your oldest employee, from your receptionist to your CEO is involved in managing your charity’s brand. Why? That is because everyone who interacts with your constituency either directly or indirectly, has an impact on the evolving relationship between your charity and its donors or beneficiaries.

So, next time you start thinking about new ways to increase the effectiveness of your charity’s brand make sure that all employees and key volunteers receive the training and the tools they need to strengthen the brand.

Here are a few questions to get you started in this process: Do your charity’s employees understand the vision, the mission and the values that your charity stands for? How do your employees interact with your charity’s beneficiaries and donors? What impressions are they making on your constituencies?

One thing is for sure – there are no shortcuts in this process. So, if you want to manage your brand successful you can start by listening to what your beneficiaries, donors and employees are telling you about your charity’s brand.