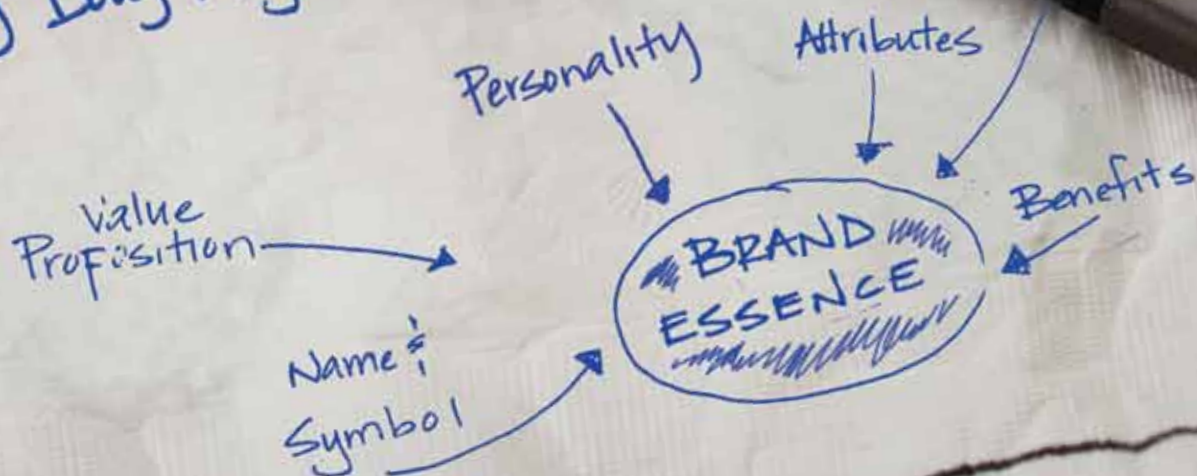


Design a Brand Identity, Not a Logo

By Doug Klegon, Ph.D., FACHE





A

successful logo visually represents an association's value to members, prospects, partners and stakeholders. At a glance, it evokes an understanding of the benefits of the organization's products and services, creates an expectation about how those products and services perform, and conveys the organization's desired positioning in the minds of the target market.

A logo isn't just pretty, then. It's a critical part of an association's identity, fully intertwined with the overall member experience — and the overall member experience hinges on substance, not style.

Before your organization can design a successful logo, it must therefore build a strong brand that informs and supports it. Here's how in five steps.

1. Develop a Strategy

Brand identity doesn't start with logo design. It starts with strategy.

In *I'm Feeling Lucky: The Confessions of Google Employee Number 59*, author Douglas Edwards, Google's first brand manager, tells the story of setting up a meeting to discuss his marketing plan. Internal research showed that competitors were approaching Google's level of quality. In a world where search engines become equal, he argued, Google would need to rely on branding to differentiate itself. As Edwards tells the story, the room grew quiet until co-founder Larry Page spoke up: "If we can't win on quality, we shouldn't win at all." The message was clear: The business strategy was to deliver superior quality. Google's brand identity would flow from that strategy.

In a June 2011 post on the *Harvard Business Review* blog, Dan Pallotta makes a similar point. "Back in 1969 NASA didn't have the best logo," he writes. "But man did it have a brand. It has a nicer logo now — but the brand no longer stands for anything. If you don't know where you're going or how you're going to get there, that's your brand, no matter what fancy new name you come up with."



2. Focus on Member Value

With your business strategy as the driver, brand development begins with a brand promise, which requires translating your strategy into member value. An association might develop a brand promise based on enhancing members' ability to acquire new knowledge, for instance, network with industry peers or achieve career advancement. Another association, on the other hand, might focus on creating a more favorable business environment for members by impacting regulation.

Associations may have several components to their brand promise, and may vary the degree of emphasis on each component depending on the specific needs of its various membership segments — for example, young professionals versus senior executives. If your organization embraces individuals just entering a field, as well as veteran members who are well established, it may require a brand promise that's uniquely targeted to each.

3. Consider Segmented Brands

Speaking of member segmentation, some segments might be best served by their own unique brand identity while others might benefit from a common umbrella brand. The decision depends on your strategy.

Google recently faced this issue with the introduction of Google+. Rather than maintain separate brands for products designed for specific uses, Google+ involves rebranding some

products to reinforce a unified interface and user experience. For example, Picasa is to become Google Photos. An additional advantage for Google is that Picasa users may be drawn into experiencing Google+, hastening its adoption while reinforcing the value of the overall Google brand.

The American College of Healthcare Executives faced the issue of establishing a sub-brand when it underwent a major change in its credentialing system. ACHE serves health care executives who lead health care organizations and offers them the opportunity to become certified in health care management as Fellows of the American College of Healthcare Executives. Targeting experienced health care executives, the FACHE credential signifies expertise as well as commitment to professionalism, ethical decision making, leadership and lifelong learning. The credential represents a unique status based on passing an examination and meeting rigorous experiential, academic and professional development criteria. Given the special status of the FACHE credential, ACHE determined that a dedicated brand identity would be appropriate. However, the identity would be designed to link to ACHE and to focus on the uniqueness of having earned the credential. The result was a brand identity that includes a special tagline — “The Distinction of Board Certification” — but also references the parent organization's name.

4. Create Branded Products, Services

The brand promise leads to the creation of products and services that add value for members. After all, the brand itself ultimately is defined not by a tagline or slogan, but rather by members' experiences — all the touchpoints they have with the organization.

ACHE's management of the FACHE brand begins at an early stage. Promotion to encourage individuals to seek the credential includes language and imagery of the FACHE as a unique accomplishment. Those receiving the credential are formally honored with a convocation ceremony at the annual

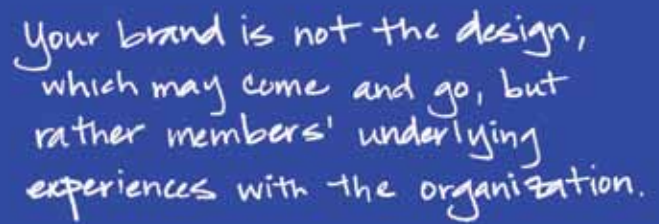


meeting. There are special seminars during the year, as well as dedicated educational and networking events at the ACHE annual meeting. Certain elected volunteer leadership opportunities are limited to those who have earned the credential. Overall, there is an effort to ensure that all touchpoints with the organization reinforce the brand positioning: the notion that Fellows have earned a special status within the profession.

5. Communicate the Brand

The FACHE brand is reinforced through promotional initiatives. For example, ACHE runs advertisements in relevant health care publications in order to establish the significance of the FACHE credential by focusing on leadership characteristics of senior executives who are credentialed. The marketing communications strategy also includes efforts with major health care executive search organizations, which sign on to a statement that those who have earned the FACHE credential have an advantage when they interview candidates. Thus, there is alignment between the FACHE brand strategy and the execution of the brand in terms of products, services and experiences, as well as graphic identity and marketing communications.

Of course, there always is a risk that an attempt to align strategy with brand execution will misfire. When Drake University introduced a brand identity to symbolize the added advantages of enrolling there, it designed a new logo: a large



Your brand is not the design,
which may come and go, but
rather members' underlying
experiences with the organization.

D+. Unfortunately, the symbol of the “Drake Advantage” was also immediately recognized as a sub-standard grade. The D+ logo did not reflect the desired product experience (i.e., a good education). After first defending the logo, stating it was “intended to be ironic,” the Drake administration eventually dropped it, noting the “intensity of concern expressed by students, faculty, staff and alumni.”

While the Drake example illustrates potential missteps in brand execution, it also highlights the need for a successful brand development strategy. Your brand is not the design, which may come and go, but rather members' underlying experiences with the organization, the best of which will last a lifetime. ■

Doug Klegon, Ph.D., FACHE, provides marketing and communication consulting services for associations. He may be reached at dklegon@gmail.com.