

BRINGING JUSTICE HOME

BRANDING LEGAL AID

A brand is shorthand, a word or two that communicates a larger, more complex idea. Brands are useful because they communicate a great deal of information in a succinct way. They also transcend borders, whether those borders are geographic, political, or cultural. People know, for example, what to expect from a McDonald's, whether it's in France, China, or the United States. Regardless of where they live or the language they speak, most people recognize the "Golden Arches," and many share a common perception of the kind of food and service they will find there.

Brands also serve to differentiate one product from another in the mind of the customer. While people believe they make purchasing decisions based upon particular characteristics of a product or service, it's a fact that most are basing their selection upon their perception of a brand, or perhaps more to the point, upon what they perceive the preferred brand stands for. This concept of "standing for" something lies at the heart of effective brand management, and is especially important when branding principles are applied to not-for-profit organizations such as legal aid programs. A good brand stands for something positive in the minds of an organization's customers, whether they be clients, donors, or members of the press. And a good reputation must be nurtured and protected, which is what brand management is all about. It's just as your mother always said: Your most valuable asset is a good reputation.

Al Ries, a noted expert on branding, defines the world's most powerful brands as "proper nouns that can be used in place of a common word." These are brands such as Kleenex, Jello, Xerox, and Rollerblade. In some cases, powerful brand names have become more than just nouns, they've also become verbs, as in "I went Rollerblading yesterday," or "Please Xerox this for me." Brands such as these, which have moved into everyday speech, almost always hold market leadership positions in their respective product categories. Think about it. How many other brands of in-line skates can you name? Of gelatin?

Now think about this: What is the brand name of your organization? Is it the legal name of the corporation? The name of a program or service you provide? Do you have a brand that communicates what you stand for? One that is meaningful to all your customer groups? What about acronyms? Are they effective, or do they blur your organization's identity in a crowded marketplace?

These are difficult questions to answer, but perhaps even more challenging are these: Is there a national brand that applies to all providers of civil legal aid? If so, what is it? How might you use that brand to increase support for civil legal aid in your community or in your state? Around the country? If not, should legal aid providers develop a national brand identity? How would that work?

The power of a national brand is formidable. It lends portability to an organization's good reputation, which is especially meaningful in today's mobile society. If, for instance, a legal aid donor moves from Los Angeles to Long Island, that donor is likely to support legal aid in her new city if she realizes that Nassau Suffolk Law Services Committee is part of the same national network of legal aid providers as is Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles.

But how will she link the two when the names of the organizations provide no clear signal that

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they are related? Certainly there are other ways that a donor might make the connection, but an obvious national brand for civil legal aid would greatly facilitate the process.

A national brand name would help volunteers, donors, and other supporters stay in touch with civil legal aid providers across the country. It would help them recognize that the legal aid organization in Miami stands for the same values of fairness and justice as the legal aid organization in Minneapolis, or New York, or Seattle.

It would also help local programs leverage the good work and goodwill that each has invested in their individual communities, so that providers everywhere benefit from one another's excellent reputations. A great news article about legal aid in Boston would, by association, generate positive visibility for legal aid in Portland, Oregon; Austin, Texas; Annapolis, Maryland and elsewhere. A strong national brand for civil legal aid could also open the door for new fund raising opportunities and, if managed properly, reduce the negative effects of competition for funding among various legal aid providers.

This halo effect cuts both ways, however. Consider the case of Jack-in-a-Box restaurants. When a child died of food poisoning at a Jack-in-a-Box in California in the early 1990s, the entire chain suffered financial losses. Rightly or not, when an organization has a brand with high recognition, the misfortune of one local program can negatively impact the others.

Nevertheless, the benefits of a powerful, national brand generally outweigh any possible negative consequences. This is particularly true when a brand is well-managed and its equity is guarded by a clearly identified individual or group who is trusted by those who share the brand name. If providers of civil legal aid opt to develop a national brand, you will want to consider carefully how such a brand will be managed and who will have primary responsibility for doing so.

Legal aid providers are well positioned for moving toward a consistent national brand image. And in the short-term, providers should develop consistent brand images within their states. Consider once again Al Reis's definition of a brand market leader, quoted above, "a proper noun that can be used in place of a common word." Then consider this: How often have you heard someone do exactly that with the words, "legal aid," as in, "I went to see a legal aid lawyer," or "You need to get some legal aid." If providers of civil legal aid wish to work together to create a powerful national brand, the opportunity is here.

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