Effective brand strategy addresses root question:

Who Are You and Why Are You Here?

It seems like every time I'm at a party, the same conversation plays out. Somebody asks our era's defining question, "What do you do?" I tell them I do brand strategy. They respond with one of three variations on a theme. "Ah, branding. Where I work, we a) could really use that…b) have been talking about doing that… or c) just went through that. New logo, new tagline, new colors, the whole nine yards. It must be so interesting to do that for a living." Well, yes and no. Yes, brand strategy is deeply engaging because it can be so transformational. But no, brand strategy isn't about new logos, taglines, or color schemes. True, they're often byproducts. But a sound brand strategy goes far deeper, into the soul of the organization to answer Jean Paul Sartre's defining questions: "Who are we and why are we here?"

If your organization has been around for awhile, you know the answers to these root questions can get fuzzy or outdated over time. As client needs evolve, as new players and funding sources emerge, as donor interests shift, and leaders impart their personal stamp…mission drift happens.

Many agencies try to combat it with strategic planning or a mission statement tune-up. But you can't build a solid plan on a shaky foundation. And mission statement rewrites too often amount to wordsmithing exercises. The most coherent and action-able plans—and, ultimately, the most successful organizations—are built on the bedrock of a crystal-clear brand identity.

In these crisply focused organizations, management, staff, and board members can all give roughly the same elevator speech on the organization's reason for being, its target market, the "value proposition" it sells and delivers to clients, and how it differs from competing service providers. What's more, even absent the speech, you

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could infer most of this from their internal communication, hiring and training practices, Web sites, publications, and marketing material. Most important, in your firsthand experience of the organization, you would sense a clarity of purpose and practice tying everything together—think Starbucks.

In contrast, consider Holiday Inn, a once-dominant hotel chain player that today suffers from a brand identity that's both fuzzy and outdated. This manifests itself in unfocused marketing messages, uneven service quality, and unspectacular business results.

So how does your agency achieve the clarity of a Starbucks so you don't turn into a Holiday Inn?

In fall 2003, the Alliance for Children and Families was interested in developing a better brand strategy. President and CEO Peter Goldberg and Senior Vice President and COO Susan Dreyfus contacted me about helping the organization better define its brand in order to further deepen its relationship with its current members, attract new members, and generally grow the organization.

At the time, the Alliance lacked a relevant and compelling identity as a member-serving organization. The solution was to develop a more member-facing brand identity and value proposition. Thanks to the Alliance team's stellar execution of the brand strategy, it has steadily attracted new members, and within two years a quarter-million-dollar surplus had been established.

This has enabled the organization to make investments that will further strengthen its member value proposition, fueling a virtuous cycle of brand-building.

Besides excellent execution, what made this brand strategy successful? More than anything else, the key was its source. It didn't get developed at a leadership off-site event. It wasn't based on speculation about what would "sell." Instead, it flowed from insights gleaned from current members—specific members who exemplified just the kind of relationship the Alliance sought to retain and attract. To use a current business phrase, it was customer-centric.

Understanding in a deep, nuanced, prioritized way what these members valued most about their membership allowed the Alliance to build a brand identity and a value proposition around attributes that would resonate with agencies *like* them. Equally important, it allowed the Alliance to focus on delivering on these most-valued attributes (or, as marketers would say, delivering on this "brand promise") more consistently.

Looking to your own clients or funders for brand insights allows you to:

Build a brand identity and a value proposition around attributes that will resonate with others who are like them.

Focus on delivering on these most-valued attributes more consistently.

Drop or curtail less valued offerings so you can pour more resources into enhancing the services that matter most to those who matter most to you.

Sharpen your key messages and sales pitches.

And it allowed the organization to drop or curtail less valued offerings so it could pour more resources into expanding the member services that mattered most.

Long story short, the Alliance is a poster child for the power of sound brand strategy. ■

Anne Curley is president of Curley Communication, which specializes in brand clarification and related strategic planning. Before establishing her consulting practice in 2000, she headed worldwide communication for SC Johnson. Earlier in her career, she served as the business editor of The Milwaukee Journal. Over the past 20 years, she has served on a dozen nonprofit and corporate boards of directors. She can be reached at anne@curleycommunication.com.

Building Community Voices

The Alliance for Children and Families will once again offer free monthly online teleseminars on issues relating to mission-based public policy and advocacy as part of the Building Community Voices program.

The 2007 events will feature nationally recognized presenters and leaders that will help engage nonprofit human service board, volunteers, staff, and community leaders in effective mission-based advocacy.

Building Community Voices is a program that includes a series of strategies designed to respond to the critical barriers to effective advocacy and to build on previous values-based advocacy experiences. The Building Community Voices project activities focus on educating, training, and supporting Alliance member boards and volunteers to become stronger advocates and engage more readily in the democratic process.

january
Getting your Board on Board with Advocacy

february
Which Ones? How Organizations Decide Which Public Policy Issues to Address

march
Community Partnerships: How Collaboration Can Advance Advocacy Efforts

april
Aligning Advocacy Interests of Board, Staff, Volunteers and Constituents

may
Using the Media to Achieve Your Advocacy Goals

june
Civic Participation of Board Members and Volunteers

{ PROGRAM UPDATES FOR 2007 }