



A Lesson in 'Lifestyle Branding'

Agency taps a marketing trend to begin remaking image of foster parenting

by Anne Curley

You think your agency's got a branding problem? I don't want to be a downer but, if you're like many social service agencies, you've got at least two branding issues you need to be chipping away at.

The obvious one involves how the public perceives your agency. The more formidable challenge arises from how the public perceives the people you serve.

True, this is not normally framed as a branding issue. But think about it: The outdated, incomplete, sometimes wildly inaccurate images people carry around in their heads of the mentally ill, foster children, and residents of central city neighborhoods, to cite just three examples, are akin to the exaggerated fears and stereotyping that decimate a consumer brand from time to time. (Has anyone eaten at Jack in the Box lately?)

While it may seem superficial to treat such serious matters as branding problems, we've all acknowledged long ago that perception is, in some respects, reality. Rebranding isn't the whole solution. But it can be a catalyst.

Take the need to increase the quantity and quality of available foster parents. That was the challenge confronting the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center of Wisconsin in early 2006. It acts as a service

bureau for the state's 72 counties, providing a variety of support services including advertising. What many of its clients need more than anything else is a greater abundance of caring, responsible, patient adults to take in displaced children. But how to permanently increase the hit ratio in advertising for them?

The problem, of course, is that most people would sooner gobble a steady diet of undercooked fast-food burgers than run the risk of taking in The Child From Hell as featured in their fantasies about foster care. If ever there were a prime candidate for rebranding, foster parenting certainly qualifies.

Having a hard time relating the concept of branding to an activity like foster parenting? In the marketing world, they call it lifestyle branding. From mobile-home living and drinking wine from a box to joining a motorcycle club, a growing number of activities that once raised eyebrows are being repositioned in much more positive lights through concerted marketing efforts. So why not apply the same strategy to foster parenting?

We began this odyssey where all good

rebranding begins: by gaining a deep understanding of the target market. In this case, we conducted an online survey of the foster care coordinators in all 72 counties to identify the common characteristics of effective long-term foster parents—in other words, people who are good for the children they care for and who enjoy the experience enough to stick with it.

We used their insights to develop a profile of the type of person we were targeting. We then asked a representative group of coordinators to each select the foster parent from their county who best fit the profile. This yielded a group of 10 "perfect-fit" foster parents.

With the help of the county coordinators, we had formulated a hypothesis as to what ideal foster parents would say were their primary motivations. This educated guess took the form of a list of 20 reasons such as "Enjoy the companionship," "Believe we have an ongoing duty to share our blessings," and "It's very satisfying to help birth families reunite."

Using phone interviews, we conducted deep-dive conversations with the 10 individuals chosen. These included a forced-



choice ranking exercise that identified three top reasons for continuing as a foster parent: “Feeling we are making a difference in the lives of these kids adds meaning to our own lives,” “Very satisfying to serve as a stabilizing bridge to a permanent placement,” and “Feel called by God to serve in this way.”

Most of the time during each 60-minute interview was spent probing the thought process behind these driving motivations. We asked: Why is that so important to you? What are some examples? How did that make a difference? As we dove deeper together, interviewees often were able to articulate thoughts and feelings they hadn't fully processed before.

The rich insights that surfaced allowed us to develop a rebranding strategy. It included the following elements, among others:

Brand essence (i.e., when you boil it all down, the soul of the brand): Personal impact.

Brand identity (i.e., the set of associations you seek to create and maintain): Foster parenting is for people who...

1. ... feel called to care for vulnerable children and teens. (There's a seed of desire for this that already exists within them, that sprouts with the right cultivation and conditions.)
2. ... believe it's possible to make a lasting difference in someone's life, even in a brief relationship. (They view "making a difference" as the key to a life well lived. They value the experience of connecting with another human being on a deep level.)
3. ... have the pluck to give it a try. (What others would consider a risky proposition, they see as an adventure that adds zest and meaning to their lives.)

Value proposition Consists almost entirely of emotional benefits, including...

1. ... the personal growth that comes from connecting with other human beings on a deeper level than society typically operates at.
2. ... the profound satisfaction that comes from seeing you have

changed someone's life for the better, even if only in a small way.

3. ... the undercurrent of excitement that flows from unpredictable calls to help unknown children and families.
4. ... and, for God-centered people, the peace of mind that comes from knowing you are heeding God's call to care for those in need.

Recommended brand position (i.e. the part of the brand identity and value proposition to be actively communicated for the foreseeable future):

Foster parents are people who believe it's possible to make a lasting difference in someone's life, even in a brief relationship—and have the pluck to give it a try.

That "give it a try" message is an important component of the marketing strategy. In speaking with our perfect-fit foster parents, it was clear that one big inhibitor for many people who have expressed a desire to emulate them is the fear of taking on a commitment that they would feel terribly guilty walking away from if it didn't suit or if circumstances changed.

Our recommendation was to position the commitment as akin to signing on for a stint in the Peace Corps. If people know their "tour of duty" runs for, let's say, two years—with the opportunity to re-up, of course—they have a far different mindset when they hit a rough patch than if they feel there's no end in sight.

Given the amount of time it takes to train a foster parent and the high level of turnover that already exists, foster care

coordinators were understandably leery of this idea. But it didn't take long for most to realize that people who are suited to the job will likely hit their stride within the first two years and keep going, while those who struggle might actually hang in longer and overcome their initial negativity.

My favorite recommendation is the recruitment campaign's copy line, which combines an oblique "tour of duty" reference with the primary motivations we want to tap. "Live deeper, love wider, leave bigger," it invites.

County foster care coordinators embraced the branding recommendations and the resulting campaign, which sparked a 400 percent increase in Web site traffic and a roughly 50 percent increase in telephone inquiries, according to Marilyn Boeldt, director of development for Adoption Resources of Wisconsin, an Alliance for Children and Families member agency that established the resource center under a contract with the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services.

"Beyond the excellent results, we were also really pleased with the process," Boeldt adds. "I was concerned about getting consensus among 72 counties around anything, but the county coordinators felt they had a genuine opportunity to provide input on the front end, which gave them a greater sense of ownership on the back end." ■

If you would like a copy of the branding research and recommendations, send me an e-mail at anne@curleycommunication.com. Colleen Ellingsen, Adoption Resources of Wisconsin's founder and executive director, has graciously agreed to make this work available to other Alliance members.



Anne Curley is president of Curley Communication, a Milwaukee-based consultancy that specializes in brand management and strategic planning.

Curley is a member of the Alliance's Executive Consultant Select Group. She can be reached at anne@curleycommunication.com