

## **Brand Effectiveness Key to Membership Growth**

The visibility, awareness and effectiveness of your organization's brand directly impact your ability to recruit and retain members. If your organization isn't the first thing member prospects think of when they turn to industry issues, there's work to be done.

But where to start?

As popular wisdom has it, knowing and admitting you have a problem is half way to solving it. In this case, that means doing a little member research to determine how your members and prospective members view your organization through its brand. This can take one of several forms, including a quick poll on your website, a phone survey, an e-mail or electronic survey, or a paper/mail survey. Regardless of the format, the recipient list should be equal parts members and prospects, to get both perspectives and spot any disconnects between those that know the organization from the inside versus what the brand alone presents to the outside world. The included questions should be formulated so that the responses returned are actionable, and give you some indication of their perceptions of the brand and the organization behind it, based on their actual experience with you, as customers, as members, as industry participants.

Reading the results in a timely fashion is important, as the cyclic nature of non-profit schedules creates peaks and valleys in the brand perception and awareness level, depending upon what time of the year it is, and how high the level of activity involving members is at the time you launch the survey. For organizations that have even more volatile years, it may be necessary to do two sets of surveys at different times of the year and compare the results to get a good reliable read on the level of awareness you can count on.

The results of your survey are one source of data, but there are other sources that while less formal or quantifiable, are just as valid in getting a read on your brand awareness and effectiveness. These include interviews with Board members, committee members, volunteers, chapter presidents or directors, vendors, other related professionals, including members of related associations, and members of ASAE.

Once all this data is collected, it needs to be interpreted accurately so that the actions you take drive your brand efforts in the most effective direction possible. Some items will be readily apparent if the surveys and interviews were constructed correctly. One good tool you can use to read your results is to retrieve the set of brand characteristics from the marketing archives, and see how many of your responses line up with those characteristics. If your responses, including the open-ended comments, use some of the terms and attributes that make up your organization's brand, then you've got a good solid start on reading your data correctly and rating a good score on your brand effectiveness. Conversely, if very few or none of the responses include those attributes on the list, there's a good chance there's a disconnect between what you're trying to convey with

your brand, and how it's being perceived by the various populations it's designed to serve.

Now that you've got a read on how well you're doing, how do you go about improving? The answer, much as it's been overused by too many of us in today's litigious society – it depends. It depends upon what your data tells you, and every case is different. However there are some common scenarios and a few valuable remedies to match them.

**Scenario #1 – Our brand registers very low on the surveys for memorability.**

Typically this means that your customer base doesn't remember your brand in response to a question designed to illicit a favorable response unprompted. Your organization isn't top of mind for them as relates to your products or services, and someone else's brand is. That could mean that your exposure frequency is too low, they don't see enough from you to keep memorability high enough. It could be that a competitor has captured some key emotional connection to the customer that you have not, despite an inferior product or service – they're not as good, but customers remember them because they're “out there” more. This can be remedied with some increase in exposure to key audiences – your top buyers should hear more from you in a positive light to reassure them that you offer the product or services that give the best value. Putting your brand in front of them for positive reasons, like a price discount, a new offer that really saves money, rebate eligibility or other product or service related reason other than to sell them something should go a long way toward remedying this issue. It will boost memorability without seeming like you're overselling them, a positive cognitive light that will cement the brand in the uppermost memory of the customer.

**Scenario #2 – Our brand rates favorably and has high memory retention among customers, but neither do as well among prospects.**

Usually, this indicates that your product or service has to be “seen to be believed” – it's value is best seen at delivery or in the transaction, rather than prior to receiving it. This is a sticky problem that has to do as much with promotional direction and relevance as anything else. Your customers know you and have experienced your value, been satisfied with the product or service upon and after delivery and the reputation of the brand was reinforced positively. Prospects, on the other hand, only know you by your “public” face – advertising, packaging, direct marketing, sponsorship associations. The brand unfortunately has little carriage by word of mouth, based on the fact that satisfied customers are not waving your flag and passing on the good word to prospects themselves. Prospects only get a read based on what you tell them. Look to your research and find those key hot buttons of your best customers, and promote those attributes to prospects more heavily. Also, compare your reading on prospects versus customers in other areas of your brand – you may find another disconnect in their perceptions that could cause this effect, and you can remedy both with a shift in your promotional or creative approach to highlight those key elements more heavily. Align your creative with those highest ranking attributes of your best customers, and the prospects should get the best, most relevant perception of your product.

These are just two of the possible outcomes to this type of analysis. In Part II, we'll outline some additional outcomes and the directions they indicate you should make adjustments. Suffice to say that if you're brand is aligned with your message and your audience, you've got a strong package for success.