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Build an Emotional Connection to Your Brand

BY J.B. DAVIS

In normal times, associations leverage a wide variety of strategies to attract, retain and expand relationships with members. Over the last few years, branding has risen to the top of that list.

In the best of times, associations compete on three distinct branding fronts: They compete with direct competitors, with indirect competitors and within the wider consumer branding landscape. For example, the American Bar Association vies for its members' share of time and money with state bar associations, with organizations offering similar products and services, and also with enterprises like single-issue advocacy groups, who are not "competitors" but nonetheless compete for a share of lawyers' minds and wallets.

The ABA's efforts, like those of other associations, play out within a world where Americans are time-pressed and over-messaged. Adding to the din are the fragmented media landscape, micro-segmentation and the tens of thousands of new consumer products that are launched every year. Simply put: It's harder than ever to reach the people you want to reach with the message you want to send.

Building Good Brands in Bad Economies

Even in normal times marketing is challenging. Because these aren't normal times, however, marketing today is even more difficult. Many organizations expect the recession to adversely impact their operations, some of them severely. What's more, even if things turn around this year, many economists predict a permanently altered economy.

Although the down economy makes marketing more difficult, that doesn't mean brand building should fall by the wayside. In fact, brand building in economic downturns is a well-established practice, according to Harvard Business School Professor John Quelch. "It is well documented that brands that increase advertising during a recession, when competitors are cutting back, can improve market share and return on investment at lower cost than during good economic times," he wrote in a February 2008 article for *The Financial Times* of London.

Smart businesses know that recessions come bundled with branding opportunities. Whether smart associations know the same thing remains unclear. “Charitably speaking, most associations don’t approach branding in a disciplined, systematic way, and those that try to do so tend to do it from a narrow marketing perspective,” Oren Harari, a graduate professor of management at the University of San Francisco, wrote in a recent *Association Management* article. “They focus on logos, slogans, color schemes, online sales tools, public relations campaigns, ad rollouts and such.”

Although Harari’s observation is debatable, even if most associations had moved beyond a “brand = logo” mentality, they would still fall short in the long term. That’s because it’s no longer enough to have a strong brand. To truly reap the benefits of branding, associations must establish an *emotional* brand that fosters connectivity and even stretches toward advocacy.

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The ‘Sweet 16’ of Emotional Branding

The benefits of emotional connectivity are both anecdotal and empirical. For anecdotes, look no further than brands like Apple and Amazon, which have strong emotional components and could arguably launch a branded toothbrush that would do well.

Consider a recent survey from McKinsey & Company: It reported that brands offering both tangible and intangible — both practical and emotional — benefits had a 10 percent greater return on investment than those offering only tangible benefits.

While the benefits of emotional connectivity are easy to see, an emotionally connected association brand is difficult to build — but not impossible.

To create emotional connections with your members and prospects, use these steps — the “Sweet 16” of emotional branding — to build your brand from the ground up:

- 1. Ensure Baseline Understanding:** Ensuring that staff and board members have a solid understanding of “branding 101” creates a common vocabulary and lays the groundwork for subsequent efforts.
- 2. Understand Emotional Triggers:** Just as a survey that asks members to rate current activities misses the opportunity to uncover unmet needs, any methodology that does not identify key “triggers” of emotional connectivity misses brand-building opportunities, according to McKinsey, which noted in its survey results that “the key to building distinctive brand equity is to identify and deliver on the two or three key triggers of the product/service experience that stand out” in building a stakeholder’s overall impression.
- 3. Establish a Frame of Reference:** Understanding what stakeholders think of when they think of you is essential, as your realm of competition might be wider than initially thought.
- 4. Establish Points of Parity:** Before you can claim your place in the market, you must establish where you hold parity positions, according to branding expert Kevin Keller of Dartmouth.
- 5. Establish Points of Difference:** Being different isn’t enough. Being different in a way that’s relevant to your members isn’t enough, either. What is enough? You must build *long-term relevant differentiation* without the millions of dollars that Gatorade, Walmart and other leading brands bring to the party.
- 6. Validate:** Without some form of quantitative or qualitative research, your positioning might be market-informed, but not market-validated. Understanding where your brand is today provides a rough guide to where your brand could go tomorrow.
- 7. Consistently Communicate:** Although it’s sometimes thought of as the end game, communication — a must-have for functional attraction — does not immediately or necessarily facilitate emotional connectivity.
- 8. Ensure Aligned Operations:** Branding is everyone’s business. For example, without the IT department’s buy-in that ease-of-use is a key brand attribute — and an essential emotional trigger — your Web site will never deliver on the brand promise.
- 9. Manage the Brand, Not the Brand Campaign:** The brand must be embraced throughout the association in order to create emotional connectivity. Similarly, efforts will only be successful over the long term if they are initially and consistently positioned as an ongoing activity, rather than as a one-off re-branding “campaign.”
- 10. Balance Collective with Personal Benefits:** One association commentator noted recently that, “the good of the order and members’ personal benefits are often competitive and may be the source of considerable association tension.” That tension presents an opportunity for emotional connectivity, as the chance to appeal to a higher calling is inherently emotional.
- 11. Be Industry-Appropriate:** Some associations will have an easier time creating emotional connectivity than others, because some industries are inherently more emotional. Compare the national Parent Teacher Association Web site with that of the Healthcare Information and Management Systems Society’s. Because both are industry-appropriate, the PTA site looks and feels softer, more emotional. That doesn’t mean, however, that there isn’t an opportunity for HIMSS and other associations like it to position themselves emotionally.
- 12. Launch Your Brand Internally:** From simple staff meetings that educate employees about your branding initiative to sophisticated branding campaigns that highlight over the course of many months what individual staff members are doing to build the brand, internal branding is an often overlooked — but utterly essential — component of creating



emotional connectivity. The strongest brands derive their strength from the inside.

13. **Identify Brand Zealots:** Association professionals have an existing resource with which to build emotional connectivity: brand zealots. Think of the consumers who have Apple stickers on their cars and write “best of” lists for Amazon. When you identify your consistent conference attendees,

your regular e-mailers, etc., you’ve found a cadre of allies who already are emotionally invested in building your brand.

14. **Leverage Zealots:** In a recent *Strategy + Business* magazine article, authors Horacio D. Rozanski, Allen G. Baum and Bradley T. Wolfson — all with marketing consultancy Booz Allen Hamilton — wrote, “helping brand zealots achieve their full brand experience, allowing them to get together and channeling their actions in favor of the brand could become effective in guarding and extending brand value and in winning an increasingly demanding competitive race.” In other words: Once you’ve identified brand zealots, use them.
15. **Deliver Consistently:** Whatever your members’ emotional triggers are, make sure you’re consistently meeting their needs. Securing great speakers for your annual meeting, for example, may be undermined by inconsistent response time to member e-mails, which may hit an emotional button for some members that makes them question whether the association really values them.
16. **Repeat:** It cannot be forcefully stated enough that once you’ve started building emotional connectivity, you’ve done just that — started. Emotional branding is an ongoing organizational competency, not a one-time initiative. ■

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