

HOW TO COCREATE Your Nonprofit Brand *with* Your Stakeholders

by Christine Vallaster and Sylvia von Wallpach

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SOCIETAL CHANGES RELATED TO THE CONTINUOUS DEVELOPMENT OF NEW SOCIAL media determine the conditions under which organizations operate today. Stakeholders have free access to information about organizations that are of relevance to them, and have the means to get actively involved in and even shape these organizations' branding efforts.¹ These developments require organizations to be ever more transparent and accessible—especially in societally relevant, nonprofit contexts, which attract immense stakeholder interest and voluntary stakeholder involvement.² The understanding that brands emerge through continuous social interactions and practices among multiple, networked stakeholders³ is missing in the nonprofit literature. This article aims to shed a light on these dynamics, outlining possible implications and practice ideas.

Nonprofit literature generally acknowledges the tendency toward more stakeholder involvement, and approaches the phenomenon from both managerial and stakeholder perspectives. Literature on constituent participation, for example, highlights the relevance and importance of citizen participation and empowerment in community-based organizations⁴ and the need to

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"establish governance mechanisms permitting constituents to participate in the shaping of the organization's mission, vision, and strategies."⁵ Literature on participatory management and stakeholder democracy advocates different degrees of stakeholder participation in formerly company-internal processes.⁶ Literature on stakeholder and community engagement discusses strategies to engage stakeholders⁷ and related innovation opportunities.⁸ Within the vast literature on nonprofit-related coproduction, another perspective focuses on the involvement of citizens in the provision of their own welfare services (e.g., child care).⁹ Finally, nonprofit literature also adopts the concept of cocreation in arguing for a "move from sole creation to co-creation" and to "develop more inclusive processes,"¹⁰ in which stakeholders are no longer only a passive audience but active agents of cocreation.¹¹ Although nonprofit literature overall has clearly witnessed a paradigmatic shift, nonprofit branding literature still largely advocates a traditional, managerially oriented perspective.¹² Continuing to treat nonprofit brands as consistent and congruent bundles of components characterized by some stable essence that serves as a basis for identification and differentiation, though, might no longer suffice to differentiate brands from competitors or to attract and bind stakeholders that are of utmost importance to the survival of nonprofit organizations (e.g., funders, clients, volunteers, community groups, citizens).¹³

In these times, nonprofit brands need to be more adequately defined as dynamic social interactive processes involving a multiplicity of stakeholders¹⁴—that is, "any individual or group inside or outside the organization that shows an interest in a brand and actively participates in brand-related discourse."¹⁵ In line with recent branding literature, these interactive branding processes are (a) "cocreative" (in the sense that they consist of ongoing discourses among multiple stakeholders that require access to and transparency of information on company-internal processes and structures,¹⁶ and provide involved stakeholders with "actualized value" that "is subjective and varies as a function of individualized experiences"¹⁷); and (b) "strategic" (in the sense that they shape a brand's mission, vision, goals, and objectives,¹⁸ allowing

organizations and their stakeholders to jointly decide what they want to achieve and how¹⁹).

Contrary to the core assumptions of management-oriented approaches to nonprofit branding brought forward by traditional brand-oriented nonprofit literature,²⁰ nonprofit brands and their meanings are no longer "manageable" in the conventional sense—that is, unilaterally determined by nonprofit brand management.²¹ Managing nonprofit brands requires acknowledging multiple stakeholders' involvement in processes and structures related to brand development²² and understanding organizational reality in all its "discomforting complexity, conflict, ambiguity and flux."²³

Conditions for Brand Strategy Cocreation to Occur

A first condition is the existence of strong relationships between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders, characterized by reciprocal commitment,²⁴ transparency, and access to information on formerly company-internal processes and structures.²⁵ High levels of voluntary commitment from the stakeholder side are especially likely if stakeholders have a strong stake in the brand and expect to receive high levels of subjective value from brand-related experiences.²⁶ Nonprofit brands face a dynamic reality these days: It is wise to treat nonprofit brand strategy cocreation as a continuous and dynamic process involving multiple stakeholders; be open to the influence of multiple contexts; and address the new particularities that affect the management of nonprofit organizations and their intangible assets.

Values also matter here. Today, nonprofit organizations need to approach value management differently. Values actually emerge, and are constantly negotiated, through processes of strategic branding and their related everyday (and at least partially) routinized practices. Constant joint performance and (re-)evaluation of values-in-use are an important condition for brand strategy cocreation.

Also important:

- Organization–stakeholder relationships—characterized by reciprocal commitment, transparency, access, and joint values-in-use—are

a precondition for brand strategy cocreation to occur.

- Stakeholders are more likely to engage in voluntary brand strategy cocreation if they expect to receive subjective value from the brand experience.

Our work has revealed that nonprofit brand strategy cocreation strongly involves the “actions, interactions and negotiations of multiple actors.”²⁷ Diverse stakeholders—such as (for instance, in a child care center) team members, parents and their children, the local authorities funding the institution, and the wider community (such as parents living in the neighborhood)—are continuously involved in defining the relationships among one another. These efforts result in routinized processes of strategic branding and temporarily stable strategy manifestations that shape the organization and its intangible assets while helping to fulfill the expectations and obligations underlying various organization–stakeholder relationships.



These processes of strategic branding in action are reenacted by involved practitioners, and help ensure the nonprofit brand’s continued existence on a daily basis. And although it might sound like a contradiction, adopting a process-oriented perspective on brand strategy development means embracing the possibility that no final outcome will ever be reached. That’s good news.

All of this brings a different perspective on nonprofit brand management, shifting away from a highly rationalist prescriptive to a social constructionist reflective approach, with the possibility of identifying new ways of maneuvering a brand within nonprofit contexts where stakeholders heavily influence the brand strategy cocreation process.²⁸

NOTES

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