

Our Boards in Our Brands: *An Aspiration*

by Jeanne Bell

One of the oft-mentioned roles of nonprofit or philanthropic board members is as ambassadors, but that entails a lot more than memorizing the mission statement or an all-purpose elevator speech.

ONE OF THE MOST USEFUL NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT books of this year is *The Brand IDEA: Managing Nonprofit Brands with Integrity, Democracy, and Affinity* by Nathalie Laidler-Kylander and Julia Shepard Stenzel.¹ As an executive director working systematically at the re-branding of the organization I lead, the authors' insights into the particular value and role of the nonprofit brand could not be timelier. What I didn't expect was how much the book's concepts would challenge me to think differently about the composition and focus of the nonprofit board of directors,

JEANNE BELL is CEO of CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.





What if each board member took on the core identity of the organization as his or her own leading up to, during, and well beyond board service?

including my own. I serve on multiple boards, have numerous boards as clients, and report to a board of directors, yet struggle to define and tap the full purpose of a nonprofit board. I am certainly not alone. Many have written eloquently in these pages in search of the board's value beyond the fiduciary—David Renz and Judy Freiwirth, to name just two governance thought leaders. Though Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel did not set out to write a governance book, their elevation of the significance of nonprofit brands and their nonprofit-specific framework for brand management may yet provide a very useful way to think about who serves on our boards of directors and what orientation they can best bring to that most ephemeral of leadership roles.

To explore the power of brand as an organizing principle for boards of directors, I have selected three of *The Brand IDEA*'s core concepts and considered their implications for how we compose our boards and orient their individual and collective work, finding the conceptual elements of brand and brand management to be strikingly germane to what the board as a collective and its individual members need to embody, continuously understand, and extend broadly across an organization's constituencies.

1. Brand Definition

"An identifier and concept that imparts information and creates perceptions and emotions."²

2. Brand Value

"We [...] have observed [...] a paradigm shift in the way nonprofit actors perceive and understand brand. This shift has led to a view of brand not as a fundraising tool but as a critical strategic asset, one that embodies the organization's mission and values and supports broad participative engagement and collaborations that maximize impact."³

3. Distinction between Nonprofit and For-Profit Brand Management

"The brand IDEA differs from for-profit brand management in three fundamental ways: first, brand is focused on the mission rather than on consumers; second, positioning is used to gain organizational clarity and to support collaboration rather than to

gain competitive advantage; and third, control is replaced by participative engagement."⁴

Brand Democracy and the Board's Purpose

The authors describe brand democracy as in place when "everyone develops a clear understanding of the organization's core identity and can become an effective brand advocate and ambassador. Every employee and volunteer authentically and personally communicates the essence of the brand."⁵ How much time have we wasted in our sector helping board members memorize mission statements, or, more typically, lamenting how long and unmemorable they are? What if, instead, the request of board members was to deeply understand the current and aspirational brand of the organization and to be the über-ambassadors for it? What if each board member took on the core identity of the organization as his or her own leading up to, during, and well beyond board service?

That is the essence of brand democracy: being part of the core identity of an organization is no longer limited to specific people on an organizational chart or to finite term limits—it can't be contained that way. So instead of reading reports at monthly meetings about the *staff's* communications efforts, for instance, board members would be a part of the data set: blogging, tweeting, and making public appearances themselves. In this vision, the board is an invaluable multiplier of the staff's voice, and because its members' skillful ambassadorship is volunteer based, it has a special credibility and resonance all its own. Taking this idea to its fullest, the monthly or quarterly board meeting as the core place where board members "show up" becomes increasingly anachronistic. If board members are the agents and models of brand democracy, their true value is out in the field every day. Perhaps board meetings become focused primarily on equipping members for their fieldwork ahead.

Brand Identity and the Board's Composition

The authors write, "When the brand is anchored in the mission, values, and strategy, the identity becomes the internal reflection or collective

perception of *everyone* in the organization, and captures the very nature or *raison d'être* of the organization itself [italics mine].”⁶ If we really mean everyone—not only paid staff—then the implications of brand identity for board composition are significant. It’s my experience that many potential board candidates will feel aligned with the mission of an organization—able to say with conviction that they care about climate change or youth access to the performing arts, for instance. But what if the request of board members is something much deeper than that? What if the request is not only that you care about the cause but also that you embody the organization’s values and can discern and articulate the particular value of its chosen strategies? If it is the latter, I suspect the potential pool of appropriate board members for a given organization gets quite a bit smaller, and, moreover, I suspect the board candidate screening approach becomes more similar to that of senior staff in the depth of alignment sought than to the classic board recruitment matrix, with its requisite attorneys, accountants, and community power brokers.

Indeed, Laidler-Kylander and Stenzel spend considerable time on the centrality of values to brand and brand identity: “This idea of living the values is connected to how authentic an organization and its brand are perceived to be.”⁷ This suggests two things: first, that organizational values have to come “out of the closet” and mean something every single day to everyone in an organizational system; second, that a frank discussion of values has to be the *first* conversation with potential board members—and non-alignment a deal breaker for service—rather than arising from the orientation processes for already appointed directors. I can imagine a more cautious interpretation here—the argument that organizational values are distinct from personal ones. But from the perspective of board members as the ultimate brand ambassadors, I disagree. If an organization’s values feel academic at best or anathema at worst to a board member, how can she embody and express the brand’s identity in all of her organizational ambassadorship? I don’t think she can. If they are academic to her,

she will likely avoid any explicit expression of values in the course of her ambassadorship; if they are anathema to her, she might even actively contradict them in the course of her ambassadorship. In either case, the organization’s brand is fundamentally undermined.

As a leader in the midst of re-branding at a forty-year-old organization, to me the authors’ assurance that it is not uncommon for the external image of an organization’s brand to lag behind its more rapidly changing internal brand identity is comforting.⁸ But here again, from a board composition perspective, what if board members were chosen especially to shorten that lag? What if, in board recruitment, we sought people who were so attuned to the aspiration of the brand that their board membership accelerated the closing of the gap between internal identity and external perception? Given how many organizations across all fields are in states of mild to severe disruption, this becomes an exciting board recruitment criterion: how credibly and enthusiastically would this candidate embody and extend the aspiration of our brand? Imagine the real danger of the alternative scenario: the staff continues to craft the new internal identity and the board propagates itself with members identified with a brand gone by. Given typical board member terms of six years plus, the *internal* lag in brand clarity could be seemingly interminable and have serious consequences for the board’s utility in strategic thinking and resource development.

Brand Affinity and the Board’s Judgment

The notion that a mission statement “keeps a board grounded” as it contributes to strategic thinking and decision making is in dire need of replacement, and I think brand is extremely useful here. This quote from one of the authors’ interviewees resonated immediately: “We are becoming much more explicit about Breakthrough’s methodology, about our approach, and not just the issues we care about and our end goals, but being clear with ourselves and with others about who we are and how we think, that this is our methodology, this is what we

The notion that a mission statement “keeps a board grounded” as it contributes to strategic thinking and decision making is in dire need of replacement, and I think brand is extremely useful here.

I would place my bet on a brand-embodiment board member over a dispassionate power broker to identify and cultivate brand-aligned donors, who logically would be more likely to become lifetime donors.

want to do.”⁹ We gather that their mission, per se, has not changed, but how they approach it has, and thus how they want to be understood has. That is brand. I think of the implication for the board as having to do with the quality of their strategic judgment individually and as a collective.

The authors explain brand affinity as having two elements: “Brand Affinity comprises two sets of actions. First, armed with a clear understanding of the theory of change and brand identity, the organization identifies partners, reaches out, and uses brand to attract them. Second, brand Affinity includes using the brand to enhance the effectiveness of these partnerships in achieving mission and maximizing impact.”¹⁰ If a critical element of a board’s job is to identify new partnerships (and here I would include identifying long-term donors and future board members, as well as collaborators), the board members’ judgment in parsing which potential partners are a brand match is essential. I have seen far too many executive directors managing relationships forced upon the organization by a board member who doesn’t respect the notion of nonprofit brand. The request of board members is more nuanced in this vision; their entire network of relationships couldn’t possibly be brand aligned. So the request is that they are continuously discerning what relationships they can forge or steward for the organization that optimize brand affinity.

wonderful, and he or she can be invaluable to an organization; but the idea that status or professional skills should trump brand alignment is, I believe, a costly compromise that organizations have been making for far too long. To take the critically important issue of fundraising, for instance, what Simone Joyaux has written persuasively in the *Nonprofit Quarterly* is that we are looking for long-term donors: individual giving success is measured in the lifetime value of a donor, not in “one-and-done” gifts.¹¹ I would place my bet on a brand-embodiment board member over a dispassionate power broker to identify and cultivate brand-aligned donors, who logically would be more likely to become lifetime donors.

• • •

Looking back over the work my colleagues and I have done together to evolve our organization’s programming and brand, I see all of the elements of *The Brand IDEA* in play, though of course we didn’t have the authors’ very helpful language for what we were doing. As I write, the board members who have stayed and changed with us are in the process of recruiting a new cohort of board members. *The Brand IDEA* has given us a powerful framework and inspiration to invite people onto our board with as much passion as we have not only for our mission but also for the particular ways we aspire to achieve it—that is, for our brand.

What about the Money?

I can imagine resistance to this notion of brand as the organizing principle for the board, especially where it concerns money—namely, who is going to raise it and who is going to oversee it. If we are disciplined in composing our boards to brand, will we have enough people to participate in fundraising and to exercise the board’s fiduciary responsibility effectively? Like the board meeting as the board’s primary venue for “showing up,” the beliefs that only power brokers can raise money and only certified professional accountants can achieve real financial literacy are outdated. To be clear, if a power broker or CPA is brand aligned, that’s

NOTES

1. Nathalie Laidler-Kylander and Julia Shepard Stenzel, *The Brand IDEA: Managing Nonprofit Brands with Integrity, Democracy, and Affinity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014).
- 2.–10. Ibid., 35; 19; 29; 11; 66; 71; 81; 101; 100.
11. See, for instance, Simone Joyaux, “‘Donor Fatigue’ an Excuse for Poor Fundraising Practices,” *NPQ*, March 15, 2013, www.nonprofitquarterly.org/management/21961-donor-fatigue-an-excuse-for-poor-fundraising-practices.html.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 210206.



The latest news and analysis about the nonprofit sector from the *Nonprofit Newswire*

■

Regular feature articles

■

Subscription information for the print magazine

■

For more information from the *Nonprofit Quarterly* go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org