



Building the Nonprofit Brand From the Inside Out

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What do these world famous brands have in common?

Yes, each is profitable, recognizable, and popular. Each has remained so over the long-term even during a challenging economic environment amidst incredible competition. Each has created value for their stockholders. How have they accomplished this? By consistently delivering and communicating value to their customers. Their *brand* is a result of a complicated value chain that links together thousands of employees, suppliers, distributors, advertising agencies and media with a core belief system that ultimately engages the customer.

That's all fine and dandy for the corporate world, but do nonprofit organizations have to develop their brand identity? In other words: Do nonprofit organizations need to build an authentic understanding for their participants and supporters about what the organization genuinely offers? *Absolutely!*

With growth of field twice that of for-profit businesses in the United States, competition among nonprofits is rapidly increasing across the country for contributed support and, in certain sectors, for participants (customers) who impact an organization's earned revenue. Expressing only "need" to supporters and delivering lackluster service to participants no longer cuts it. Nonprofits that consistently communicate *and deliver* value to participants and supporters are rewarded with the resources to achieve their mission-driven goals. These successful organizations connect together a value chain that creates a unique and compelling brand identity that communicates why someone should invest in their work and use their programs and services.

What is a Nonprofit Brand?

A Nonprofit Brand is the shared emotional perception participants and supporters hold in connection with the programs and services a nonprofit offers. Scott Bedbury, author of *A New Brand World*, describes a brand as:

“...the sum of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the off-strategy... It is defined by the accomplishments of your best employee—the shining star in the company who can do no wrong—as well as by the mishaps of the worst hire that you ever made...”

As Bedbury points out, brands are intangible – successful brands are not controlled but guided by a group of individuals who are passionate about creating value. A terrific logo, great looking media materials, and a catchy tag line do not make a great brand. What is important to understand is that *great brands are about the people who build great organizations* – the nonprofit brand is a value chain that aligns your organization’s mission to the results your board, staff and volunteers create for your participants and supporters.

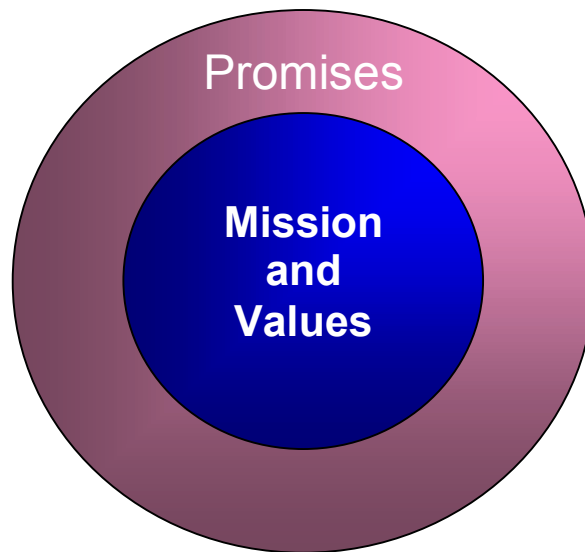
Four Building Blocks of the Nonprofit Brand

Through our work with nonprofit organizations and foundations, Creation In Common has developed a brand model to help organizations identify the components in their value chain, assess how these components are currently functioning, and create strategies to improve their brand identity. The model consists of the following four building blocks:

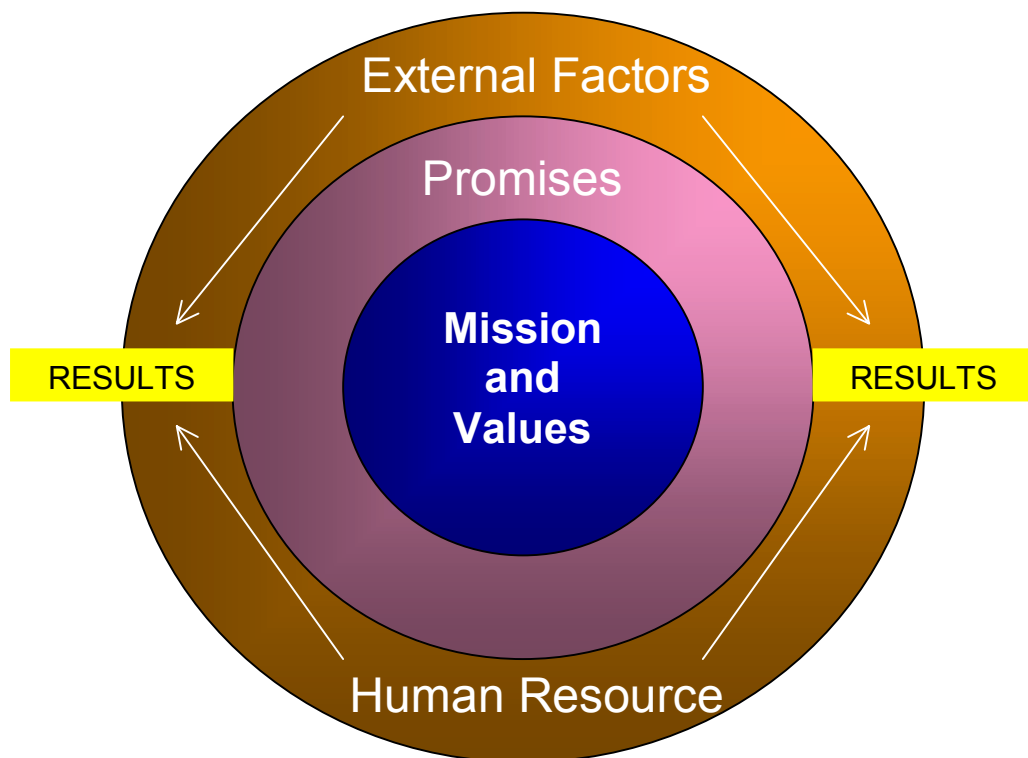
Mission and Values: Cultivating a shared understanding among your board and staff of why your organization exists and the guiding principles you plan to follow cannot be overstated. Unfortunately, mission and values are only words and in general leave room for interpretation. Left alone, they lack meaning if not put into practice.



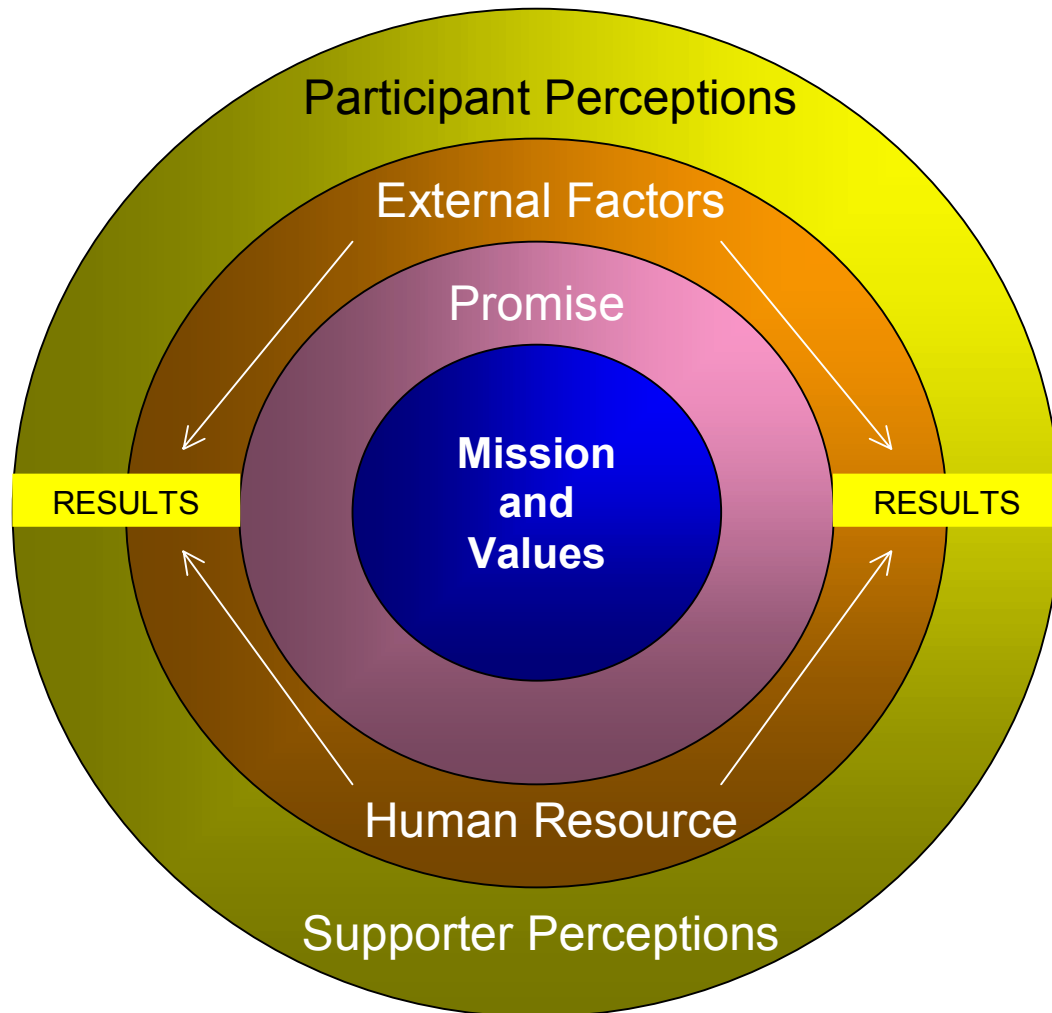
Promises: Key to activating your organization’s mission is a set a promises. In this case, a promise is a declaration your organization makes to itself, your participants, and your supporters about how you plan to act on your mission. Here your board and staff need to interpret the mission of the organization and state your agenda in the form of goals, objectives, and priorities. The most meaningful promises are based on an objective assessment of the capabilities of your organization as well as research into the needs of your participants and the value your supporters wish to see you deliver.



Results: Your organization’s human resource (board, staff, and volunteers) and the external factors they manage must be taken into consideration when the organization is trying to create results based on the promises you have made. A breakdown often occurs between these promises and your human resource’s ability to deliver. This is where a nonprofit brand loses most of its potency. If you are unable to “walk the talk”, your organization is left with two options to avoid reinforcing a negative brand: 1) reframe your promises in terms of your current capabilities, or 2) acquire and develop board, staff, and volunteer capabilities that can effectively and consistently deliver on the promises you have made. Delivering on results in light of adverse external factors such as a poor economy, changes in institutional giving guidelines, and new laws and regulations place greater demands on your human resource to respond to and manage these factors so as to ensure your results are aligned with your promises.



Participant and Supporter Perceptions: Ultimately, your brand is defined by how your participants and supporters perceive the results you have created. But they can misinterpret even the best results that are in direct alignment with your organization’s mission and promises. In addition to consistently delivering value, your organization must foster a positive *brand environment* that consistently communicates the value you are delivering.



Fostering A Positive Brand Environment

To begin fostering a positive brand environment, your organization needs to identify the following:

Brand Message – The core idea that you want to communicate to your participants and supporters about the value your organization creates.

Brand Voice – What the brand message sounds like when it is delivered. During Creation In Common trainings and workshops, we often ask our participants to identify their organization's theme song. The responses we get are very good indicators if their organization's brand voice is soft, brash, steady, deep, etc.

Brand Touchpoints – These are the different ways the brand message is communicated to participants and supporters. For example, a receptionist at the lobby information desk, a brochure outlining programs and services, a fundraising campaign case statement, a social worker conducting participant in-take, a special event, a staff member addressing a member's concerns or the organization's annual report.

It is through brand touchpoints that the value you create is recognized. Touchpoints are also the best place to start when you are assessing your human resource capability to deliver on your promises. Furthermore, you can successfully guide your brand by managing your touchpoints as they frame the perceptions your participants and supporters will have about your organization's work. As in value delivery, your human resource is central to value communication.

During this recent economic downturn, the question of how value is delivered and communicated by nonprofits has become critical. The large for-profit businesses mentioned earlier carefully monitor their value chain to ensure that, even during a difficult economy, what they promise is consistently delivered and communicated. Considering your organization's brand, no matter the size and scope of your organization or the limited resources you have available, is essential to your stability and long-term health.

Carlo M. Cuesta has over 15 years experience helping nonprofit organizations build their image from the inside out. As managing partner of Creation In Common, Carlo has led client engagements with the McKnight Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, Pillsbury United Communities, and The Saint Paul Foundation.

Creation In Common provides services that help nonprofits and foundations develop a set of organizational promises and build the capabilities of their human resource to consistently deliver on those promises, as well foster a positive brand environment. For more information, please contact us at 651-647-4443 or carlo@creationincommon.com.

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