

How Does Your Brand Measure Up?

Most cultural organizations are not used to considering the strengths and weakness of their “brand.” The term brand is not part of the nonprofit vernacular, but is more commonly associated with products in the world of retail business. Nevertheless, cultural organizations have a brand identity, and it is synonymous with their organizational identity and the quality of their products. As in the corporate world, cultural organizations have much to gain from cultivating a strong brand identity, including increased loyalty and income.

We’ve found that evaluating your marketing by these points can offer an excellent way of understanding marketing strengths and weaknesses, and can also help guide thinking about how to best use the full repertoire of marketing tools. Following are ten traits shared by the world’s strongest brands:¹

The organization excels at delivering the benefits customers truly desire.

Have you attempted to uncover unmet consumer needs and wants? By what methods? Do you focus relentlessly on maximizing your customers’ product and service experiences? Do you have a system in place for getting comments from customers to the people who can effect change?

¹ Adapted from “The Brand Report Card,” by Kevin Lane Keller, *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2000, pp 147-157.

The product stays relevant.

Have you invested in product improvements that provide better value for your customers? Are you in touch with your customers’ tastes? With the current market conditions? With new trends as they apply to your offering? Are your market decisions based on your knowledge of the above?

The pricing strategy is based on consumers’ perceptions of value.

Have you optimized price, cost and quality to meet or exceed customers’ expectations? Do you have a system in place to monitor customers’ perceptions of your brand’s value?

The organization and the product are differentiated from that of the competition.

Have you established points of parity with competitors? Have you established points of difference?

The product quality is consistent.

Are you sure that your marketing programs are not sending conflicting messages? Are you adjusting your programs to keep current?

The products and services portfolio and hierarchy make sense.

Can the organizational brand create a seamless umbrella for all the products and services in the portfolio? Do the products and services hold



individual niches? How extensively do they overlap? In what areas? Conversely, do the products maximize market coverage?

The organization makes use of and coordinates a full repertoire of marketing activities to build brand equity.

Have you chosen or designed your brand name, logo, symbol, slogan, packaging, signage and so forth, to maximize awareness of your brand? Have you implemented integrated push and pull marketing activities that target customers? Are you aware of all the marketing activities that involve your organization and its products? Are the people managing each activity aware of one another? Have you capitalized on the unique capabilities of each communication option while ensuring that the brand and its meaning is consistently represented?

The organization's managers understand how the brand is perceived by consumers.

Do you know what customers like and don't like about your organization and its products? Are you aware of all the core associations people make with your brand, whether intentionally

created by your organization or not? Have you created detailed, research-driven portraits of your target customers? Have you outlined customer-driven boundaries for product growth and guidelines for marketing programs?

The marketing is given proper support, and that support is sustained over the long run.

Are the successes or failures of marketing programs fully understood before they are changed? Have you avoided the temptation to cut back marketing support in reaction to a downturn in the market or a slump in sales?

The company monitors its "brand equity."

Have you created guidelines that define your organization and your product and how the brand should be treated? Do you conduct periodic brand audits to assess the health of your brand and to set strategic direction? Do you conduct routine tracking studies to evaluate current market performance? Have you assigned explicit responsibility for monitoring and preserving brand equity?

Why Brand Analysis Works

Why is brand building an important exercise? Neil and Philip Kotler, in *Museum Strategy and Marketing* – a must-read for every cultural marketer – put it this way:

“Before a museum or any other organization can determine which communication and promotion tools to use, it has to have an image or message for a product, service, experience, or organization to promote. This image must be something that consumers will respond to, find appealing, or want to purchase or participate in. An image of a product, service, or organization (sometimes

called a brand image) is also a shortcut to attracting attention and building familiarity and trust.”

“Some museums, like Boston's Museum of Science, have devoted considerable resources to creating a brand image or identity that attracts people to the museum not just for blockbusters but anytime, as a place to spend free time, have fun, or have a great experience.”²

² G.D. Finke “Brand Awareness, Museum-Style: Boston's Museum of Science Uses Branding to Boost the Bottom

“An image or brand identity is created after considerable consumer research...The image should be simple, direct, appealing, vital, and memorable. Once a brand image becomes familiar, it becomes associated in the consumer’s mind with a set of positive expectations and benefits (quality, reliability, trust, anticipation of future benefits, and so on.).

“Museums have to compete with entertainment-centered popular culture and leisure activities and organizations. Museums have to go after broad audiences rather than narrow segments. And they have to be accessible and relevant in people’s lives.”³

We’ve seen Kotler’s point proven over and over. This Kotler quote speaks eloquently to every organization’s need to test its mission, and exhibitions/programmatic scope with potential visitors, members and donors: a central element in deciding success or struggle is the image of the institution. We often use the The Strong Museum in Rochester, New York as an example. The Strong was early on considered an ‘extra’ museum in Rochester, certainly not a major destination. It was founded as a doll/dollhouse museum, and contained three floors of glass cases of dolls, dollhouses and American domestic items ranging from kitchenware to sewing machines. It had a small and devoted following, but that audience and membership base was not large enough – nor was its mission broad enough – to secure the operating funds necessary to create a visitor-friendly museum. Through research that included focus groups in Rochester and in rural and suburban communities as far away as Corning or Buffalo, we tested the current collection and various concepts for expanding the mission. American domestic life emerged as

the theme that was an amplification of the original mission, and proved to be of interest to the public. It allowed, as well, for an expansion of thinking about exhibitions and programs, and made a major capital campaign highly feasible and successful. A clear new image, linked directly to the founding mission, emerged. This mission took the Museum from “old” to “exciting.” Today, The Strong Museum is better known than any other Rochester museum; its monthly attendance hovers around 55,000. Another \$12 million campaign is underway for additional expansion. If The Strong Museum had stuck to its founding image and not looked at the bigger opportunity to realize its mission and invigorate its image, it would not be the national success story it is today, and far fewer visitors would be exposed to its collections and exhibitions.

Kotler’s quote concerning the Boston Museum of Science tells of another once-small, once-undervalued museum. Fifteen years ago, Boston cultural participants rarely remembered that the Museum of Science existed. With a clear image in place, however, it quickly grew both through funding success and new audiences.

This is why we recommend all cultural organizations work carefully on image, especially prior to launching a capital campaign. Once an image is in place, it telegraphs exhibition and programmatic content, interest and visitor age groups to all potential audiences – long before they come through the door. It announces the kind of experience they are likely to have and how often they might want to go. It telegraphs the “importance” of the destination, what the institution means to the community, and why it should be supported. That’s too important to be left to chance.

Line.” *Visual Merchandising and Store Design*, Oct. 1996, pp. 138-142.

³ Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler, *Museum Strategy and Marketing* (San Francisco, Ca.: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1998), 219

