

## Branding – The Key to Successful Special Events



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Contributed By Deborah Spector

A senior services agency increased its annual campaign by 180 percent, improved relationships with major stakeholders, secured national corporate sponsors, increased visibility and developed a greater “esprit de corps” for the staff.

Magic? Luck?

These benefits were the result of a branded special event.

We already know that special events are powerful experiential marketing tools. They bring an organization face-to-face with its target audiences, and set the stage for emotional connections. Without them people may not know or care about an organization.

I use an integrated model that includes events during the annual campaign, major gifts, capital campaigns and the recognition of bequests. To be successful the organization needs to have a brand that resonates with its audiences.

### **Nonprofit Branding**

A brand means owning a position in a person’s mind. According to Marty Neumeier, the author of *The Brand Gap: How to Bridge the Distance Between Business Strategy and Design*, a brand is a person’s gut feeling about a product service or organization.

A nonprofit’s brand is a source of a promise to the clients, donors, volunteers and other stakeholders. Everything the organization does should be focused on enhancing delivery against its brand’s promise.

Branding creates strong relationships, loyalty and an awareness of a nonprofit’s good works. A brand differentiates an organization from others,

communicates commitments, establishes a distinct position in the mind's eye of target audiences and builds equity.

## **Branding and Special Events**

Okay, but what does this have to do with events? Branding will give you ownership of your event and help your organization meet your objectives. Your event will carry your distinct look and feel, have the power and strength of your organization's branding and will create an event that your target audience "must attend."

Special event branding creates an experience and/or memory that participants will not forget. And, done properly, the event will carry the brand promise of an organization and add to the public knowledge of its mission, vision and values. Events help bridge the gap between what a nonprofit does and what people think you do. Special events help you share your story and your brand experience with your audiences.

Start with your planning committee. Make sure everyone knows the organizational objectives and how these relate to the event. For example, the senior services agency created an annual roast. The objectives were to raise visibility of their services to seniors, raise funds for programming for their clients, and create better relationships with the public and private sector.

Challenge your committee to create an event vision. What effects do you want your event to have? What memories and understanding do you want your guests to have? What commitments would you like from the attendees? Beyond donations, the senior services agency builds a growing group of advocates for senior issues. And, they use the annual roast to introduce volunteer opportunities for their corporate sponsors, including home repair and meal delivery.

Make sure that the visioning sessions are interactive. Capture all ideas and suggestions. Keep the dialog going until your committee members "wear" the vision.

Then, turn your vision thoughts into graphics and words. The senior services agency had recently gone through a name change and branding exercises. They put their style guide to work to ensure that the event resonated with their new logo, colors, graphic guidelines and words that best described their services, values and commitment to partnerships.

The idea of a yearly roast, at which honorees are playfully praised and “put on the hot seat” by friends and family, captured the imagination of the event committee. This put a “face” on the event and made the dinner more enjoyable than a formal dinner with speeches. The fun-filled roast gave attendees insights into the family life and personal history of the honoree, and provided an opportunity to laugh with the founders, politicians and business executives who were roasted.

The “roasting” of significant members of the community became part of the event’s branding. The special event became a major link to the agency brand promise through the committed volunteers working on the event, the attendees, and the corporate sponsors who recognized the value of supporting an agency with such a recognized annual event.

A volunteer graphic designer and board member designed the first invitation. Members of the community were invited to do the design work in subsequent years. This became a sought-after pro-bono opportunity. Signage, an event web site, promotional materials and enriched e-mailers all capture the same look and feel.

Each year the branded annual event grows on the brand power from the years before. The post-event feedback speaks to the successes of the branding and points to the areas that need improvement.

The roast became the agency’s major volunteer-driven activity. The branded event was the driving force of the annual campaign and positioned the nonprofit as a resource on senior issues. Socially conscious companies, both local and national, gravitated to the organization knowing that their commitments would be recognized and celebrated at the yearly roast.

Sometimes, event chairs and committees feel that their event must have a new look and feel. They tend to see repetition of logos and graphics and messages as boring. They do not “link” the event to the organization’s branding initiatives to ensure consistency and repetition of the brand and brand values. When this happens, the event loses the energy and power of its branding efforts.

Don’t forget, organizations with brand strength attract passionate volunteers, committed stakeholders and dedicated staff. Always make sure that the event adds to the value of your brand and helps your organization achieve its objectives.

When the event is over and the evaluations are analyzed, celebrate your success with your staff, board and volunteers. Take a deep breath and sit down to prepare for next year!