DESIGNING BRAND EXPERIENCES

In the digital age, how can social change brands effectively align organizational strategy with the designed experiences they create, to deliver meaningful value, deepen audience engagement, and achieve greater impact?

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It takes great focus and clarity for brands to rise above the din of the crowd and be heard in today’s information-saturated world. And for social change organizations, the challenge is even greater. Because when the message is about a better future, possibly somewhere far away, mission-driven brands must also create a sense of urgency to act on issues that may seem far removed from our lives. They may need to explain complexities that can be difficult to understand and embrace. And when they are working to solve problems that are so entrenched, they often must close “the hope gap” by demonstrating tangible progress and results if they are to sustain our engagement.

Fortunately, changes over the last few decades have provided us with both the environment and the insights necessary to take on these intertwined challenges. The rise of networked technologies and digital communications, the maturation of the design field, and a recent awakening within many nonprofits about the value of their brands have combined to provide new opportunities to increase the effectiveness of the social change sector.

The challenge, then, is to understand the environment in which social change brands exist and apply this understanding to help us design solutions that offer the best chance to maximize impact.

The Rise of Brand in the Nonprofit Sector

It’s no secret that over the years, brand has had a bit of a tortured existence in the nonprofit sector. However, more nonprofits are getting past their brand skepticism (if not outright resistance), and have been re-examining their relationship with “the B-word.” By making smart adaptations to traditional business-centric brand principles, organizations such as The Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Stanford Social Innovation Review, and The Communications Network have contributed to help evolve the role of brand within nonprofits, developing a mission-driven, participatory framework more in keeping with the sector’s values.

This new way of thinking, articulated in Nathalie Laider-Kylander’s and Julia Shephard Stenzel’s landmark book The Brand IDEA: Managing Nonprofit Brands with Integrity, Democracy, and Affinity, is perhaps summarized best in the book’s introduction by Christopher Stone, President of Open Society Foundations: “A brand is a powerful expression of an organization’s mission and values, that can help engineer collaborations and partnerships that will better enable it to fulfill its mission and deepen impact, and it’s a strategic asset essential to the success of the organization itself.”

Understood this way, a nonprofit’s brand offers the potential for far more than just good messages and visuals. It’s the DNA of a social change organization’s ideas, expertise, relationships, resources, and experiences, and guides organizational culture by bringing people together around a shared vision to make it easier to create shared value.

Figure 1
How Do Nonprofit Brands Work?

Digital Spotlight
Nonprofit Branding In The Digital Age

Watch a free webinar from Matt Schwartz on brand strategy for nonprofits, and how to translate organizational strategy into effective online brand experiences

changeagent.com/network.org/brand-experience
If we accept this idea—and we should—then we must also consider how social change organizations can most effectively translate brand nuance and complexity into something more tangible. How can we create real experiences that make it easier and more enticing for people to participate in creating this shared value? And more important, how can we make sure that our solutions continuously maintain the integrity of our brand and deliver meaningful experiences that sustain audience engagement?

Translating Organizational Strategy

It can be daunting to fully understand what some nonprofits do—not just for the outside world, but sometimes even for those who work inside them! Countless activities and moving parts all work together to advance a mission. But how do they relate to one another, and to what end? Brand strategy has long been a useful tool for helping organizations increase clarity and focus to better understand themselves and their audience. Done right, it provides an important foundation for expressing mission, vision, values, and key messages with greater consistency.

For social change organizations, many of which take on complex, systemic challenges where progress may be more difficult to see, brand strategy has an even bigger role to play. It must also connect people more deeply to how change actually happens. It must help social change brands educate us on the nature of the challenges, detail the different roles they play in addressing them, and explain how we can work together and what to expect along the way.

This calls for a comprehensive brand narrative that creates a strong through-line from mission success all the way to the details of engagement.

The benefits of a process that creates a clear brand strategy to articulate a narrative this nuanced are profound when it comes to organizational strategy. The risk, though, is that months of discovery and self-analysis produce strategy that sits on a shelf and is not properly integrated into an organization so that it is felt at every level of experience people have with the brand.

So how do brands make these abstract concepts and processes more tangible, meaningful, and valuable? Well, as branding expert Marty Neumeier says, this means “you gotta design.”
Think about how much of our existence is built on design. There’s a reason humans live in such a thoroughly designed world—we’re highly visual creatures and design is how we make sense of it! Countless designed experiences every day, many of which we are barely aware of, create context and connect with our emotions, greatly affecting our perception of value and therefore of meaning. And design—both its process and its outcomes—is all about relationships and context.

Brands themselves are one of these designed constructs. Dating as far back as our use of heraldry to identify with a tribe or clan, brands are powerful concepts that help give greater meaning to our lives. In many ways, they encapsulate what we value, and conversely, what we do not value. And as the design discipline is all about working in context, for modern brands to design experiences that connect with these deeper feelings of value and meaning, the people who contribute to designing them must first understand the many contexts in which the brand exists.

An effective design process accomplishes this by making sure that the outcomes of our collective efforts are aligned with what we believe will effectively engage people to help them realize the value they seek. But what kind of value, exactly, are we referring to?

Modern brand theory organizes brand value in three categories. Each brand has its own mix of these, depending on the type of brand it is.

**Tangible value** is the easiest to understand: things we can see, touch, or empirically quantify, such as how a brand works and its measurable results. **Intangible value** is, of course, less tangible: how a brand makes us feel or what meaning it adds to our lives. **Aspirational value** is the most abstract: projections of who we hope to become or what we’d like to make possible as a result of our relationship with a brand.

**Figure 2**

*How Is Value Assigned?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Subjective</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand-Controlled</td>
<td>Audience-Controlled</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TV</strong></td>
<td><strong>IV</strong></td>
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<td><strong>AV</strong></td>
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*The more tangible the value, the more objective and the more controlled by the brand it is. Intangible value and aspirational value are more subjective. Their meaning is determined by the audience, and therefore the chance for disconnect is greater.*

*Brand experience workshops are an excellent way to make your strategy tangible.*
As the theory goes, the more tangible a brand’s value, the more easily it can be understood. Conversely, the more intangible the value, the less easy it is to define and the more outside of a brand’s control it is. For social change brands, which often deal in large amounts of intangible and aspirational value, the challenge then is to use the power of design to consistently deliver value on all fronts and create tangible experiences that deepen our engagement with their missions.

**Designing Better Experiences**

Design has often been described as “strategy made visible.” It’s what helps make it possible to experience a brand’s value—online, in print, and in person. As brands are not static things, these experiences occur across time, which means that to consistently deliver value across the lifetime of a person’s relationship with the brand, we must fully understand where, how, and why value is created—as well as the context in which experiences happen between the audience and the brand, physically and conceptually.

Which is exactly where a well articulated brand strategy provides enormous benefits.

For social change organizations to create experiences that bridge the gap between mission and motivation, a well-articulated strategy is not just an ideal starting point to think about brand, it is also an essential through-line of the design process. Since design is a highly collaborative, co-created process, brand strategy greatly improves the ability of designers and non-designers to more effectively frame challenges, opportunities, and projects. By translating organizational strategy into a clearly articulated positioning and messaging framework, brand strategy helps stakeholders make better decisions to advance the strategy throughout the design process and more objectively evaluate its outcomes.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of digital communications, where the entirety of people’s interactions with a brand occur through a screen. To create these experiences, cross-functional teams of content strategists, user experience designers, visual designers, content creators, and technologists must all work together to translate a brand’s value through things like content taxonomies, interfaces, and system architecture. By designing through a clearly-defined brand strategy that articulates the kinds of experiences we’re trying to create, people with different perspectives are more able to have productive conversations in a shared language about what such an experience might be like. We’re also likely to be more collaborative in applying our collective experience, expertise, and opinions to create it, resulting in a better working relationship and better outcomes.

**Putting Theory into Practice**

Ultimately, every organization engaged in helping to bring about social, economic, and environmental change has its own combination of beliefs, culture, methods, and more. And each of these unique brands stands for something bigger than itself—something that has different meaning and value depending on who’s receiving it.

When the brand strategy and design processes are united, they provide a powerful lens through which to understand the complexity and nuance of these dynamics and articulate them with greater clarity, meaning, and empathy. Together, they help a social change organization better understand itself so that its efforts are more focused and aligned; then more effectively apply design’s ability to translate ideas, concepts, and value into tangible experiences so that when audiences engage with their brand, it stands up, stands out, and stands for something.

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