

# From Traditional to Breakthrough Nonprofit Branding

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*“Brand is not the name, the tag line, or the pretty colors. . . . The brand is the set of expectations and beliefs the marketplace has about what you do.”<sup>1</sup>*

—DAVID PLACEK, PRESIDENT AND CEO, LEXICON BRANDING,  
AND BOARD OF DIRECTORS, NATUREBRIDGE

*“Our brand is our key asset. We don’t sell widgets; we have a brand and a community tied to it.”<sup>2</sup>*

—EMILY CALLAHAN, VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING  
AND COMMUNICATIONS, KOMEN FOR THE CURE

The world now boasts more than 2 million nonprofits, fueled by a 35 percent increase in the number of organizations in the United States and Canada in the past decade alone. In this complicated philanthropic marketplace, people are overwhelmed by a deluge of overlapping messages from a vast array of organizations—which are often difficult to distinguish.

How can you help your organization stand out among this long list of choices? How can you maintain and grow a vibrant community of supporters through unpredictable political and economic ups and downs? How do you become a charity of choice? The answer lies in building a breakthrough nonprofit brand.

## WHAT IS A BRAND?

A brand is a collection of perceptions about an organization, formed by its every communication, action, and interaction. It is what people collectively say, feel, and think about your organization. In short, it's your reputation, identity, and good will with stakeholders and in the community.

A strong brand can be a nonprofit's most valuable asset. It can carry an organization through good times and bad as well as predispose people toward a personal and emotional connection to the group it represents. Because it is linked to reputation, a strong brand drives tremendous economic, social, and political gains for its organization. In fact, in most cases, brand accounts for more than 50 percent of a nonprofit organization's market value.<sup>3</sup>

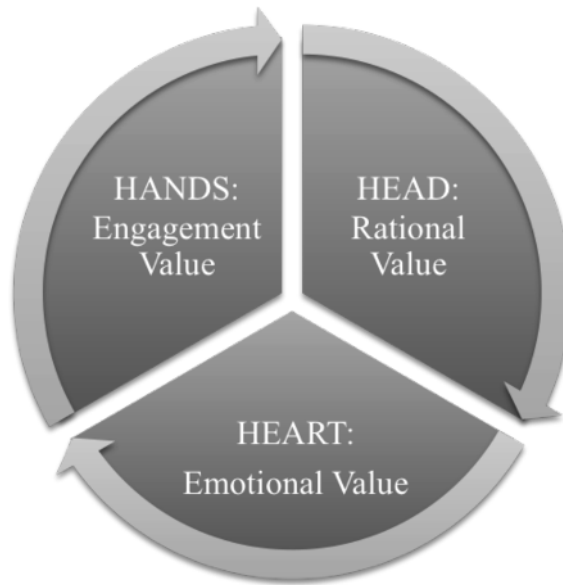
You have probably noticed the growing global recognition of the value a strong brand can provide to a range of entities, from countries and individuals, to political parties and major multinational corporations, to the local corner store. So it is not surprising that some nonprofits are consciously strengthening their organizations by building compelling brands. This process creates deeper, longer-term, and more loyal relationships with their constituents—and, when it is done with care and consistency, will inspire others to join in. It results in the building of a breakthrough nonprofit brand.

## BREAKTHROUGH NONPROFIT BRAND

A breakthrough nonprofit brand (BNB) articulates what an organization stands for: the compelling, focused idea that sets it apart and is meaningful to its supporters. An organization that cultivates a BNB puts its constituents at the heart of its identity. It makes the brand personally and emotionally relevant and creates a sense of community around unifying values, commitments, and concerns.

A breakthrough nonprofit brand has a three-dimensional value proposition (see Figure 1.1):

1. *Convinces the head:* People respond to an organization's need for support only after they understand what it stands for and see how it can be relevant and meaningful to them. Effective nonprofits rationally articulate a unique and differentiated idea that explains what their



**FIGURE 1.1** Three-Dimensional Value Proposition of Breakthrough Nonprofit Brand

organization does better than others. Then, they go further and demonstrate how this core concept is relevant to their supporters.

2. *Touches the heart:* A BNB goes beyond institutional survival to serve a higher purpose. It puts a larger cause and the outcomes they seek ahead of its organizational needs. While this approach may seem risky, it can act as a magnet for those who are passionate about the issue at the core of a nonprofit's mission.
3. *Engages the hands:* People believe what they are told only if their experience is consistent with that message. Stakeholders want the chance to get involved with the entire organization. When asking for support, offer a variety of ways to engage them. Knowing that people like to be around other people who share the same beliefs and care about similar issues, a BNB creates a sense of community, both inside and outside the organization. It unites groups of strangers in an experience of kinship by fostering shared experiences and commitments.

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Brand building is not a haphazard process. A BNB is strategically focused and thoughtfully built. As you will see as this book unfolds, a high-performance nonprofit carefully defines its brand and what it means to constituents. It uses the brand to prioritize and make decisions about its operations. And it brings the brand to life by aligning mission-based programs, development activities, and communications outreach around it.

With the backing of the CEO and senior leadership, brand building can become the catalyst for continual self-assessment and innovation. It is a must-do for creating a unique organizational identity that is infused with passion and trust. Forward-looking senior leaders ensure that this brand-centric philosophy is embraced by the whole organization. They leverage the brand to strengthen donor loyalty, recruit top executives, rally staff members, meaningfully engage volunteers, drive diversified funding streams, and, ultimately, make a greater social impact.<sup>4</sup>

### TRADITIONAL NONPROFIT BRANDING

Every nonprofit has a brand—regardless of whether it is a priority. As more nonprofits try to set themselves apart, branding is an increasingly hot topic. As suggested in studies by the Association of Fundraising Professionals and the authors, a growing number of nonprofits want a breakthrough brand, but many are not quite sure what such a thing is, how to do it, or how to ensure that the resources invested will benefit their organization.

Traditional thinking is that a brand is more or less just an organization's logo or suite of communications materials. Some nonprofits develop brand usage guidelines that prescribe fonts, color palettes, and design parameters. More sophisticated traditional branding exercises get closer to the heart of the brand by providing a clear statement of values and a unified set of messages that express the organization's identity. Yet, most still lack a compelling, overriding idea that drives strategy and infuses every decision, activity, and communication with a deeper and distinctive purpose.

When nonprofits conduct traditional branding exercises focused on enhancing communications and stimulating fund raising, the result is typically new packaging, which has the potential for moderate short-term gains. However, when these efforts do not yield significant, long-term

revenue growth or attract media attention, the organization typically experiences a wave of disappointment and confusion. Ultimately, questions are raised about how other organizations, often with a simpler design and messaging, could have developed the lucrative breakthrough nonprofit brand position the traditional brander aimed to achieve.

Kids Help Phone, a Canadian nonprofit, is one such BNB with a straightforward logo and tagline: being there for kids. And yet, Kids Help Phone is recognized internationally as a leader in the delivery of anonymous, bilingual phone and online counseling for kids. The charity services more than 3,000 communities and handles in excess of 2 million calls annually. It has articulated and lived a brand that has attracted more than 10,000 volunteers in communities throughout Canada, as well as dozens of leading government, education, nonprofit, and corporate partners, including four companies that have been partners for 20 years.

How did they do it? The answer lies in the difference between traditional and breakthrough nonprofit brands.

## TRADITIONAL VERSUS BREAKTHROUGH NONPROFIT BRANDING

Breakthrough nonprofit brands know that their brand identity must outlive individual management teams and economic fluctuations to become an enduring embodiment of their organization's essence. This requires a profound shift in philosophy, as well as a sophisticated approach to ensuring that what they stand for is communicated and lived through every stakeholder interaction. You recognize a BNB when you experience one. There is a discernible difference in the way it walks and talks, a palpable shift away from traditional branding practices:

*A shift from campaign to commitment:* In the traditional view, branding equals a new look, logo, or language and is often expressed in conjunction with an annual campaign. A BNB aligns its brand meaning—and every brand expression—with an aspirational idea and higher cause. It uses that bigger purpose to tell an enduring story that helps unify its actions from year to year. With this shift, nonprofits can avoid the common pitfall of appearing to put style before substance. The breakthrough approach positions the nonprofit as a hero

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pursuing solutions that advance the cause and as a convener inviting others to join the movement. This is new thinking. Even the American Heart Association (AHA), a large and innovative organization, only in the past decade recognized itself as a brand.

*A shift from communicating activities to benefits:* There is an old saying that activities tell and benefits sell. Rather than just reporting on activities, a BNB focuses its communications on the benefits and outcomes that deliver value and address values. This involves making a rational case for the value of an organization's work to the individual and the community. It includes making a personal, emotional connection by addressing constituents' values, aspirations, and concerns. The most effective nonprofits take it a step further by inviting supporters to experience the brand in action as a primary benefit of membership. By issuing compelling, personally relevant offers, a BNB makes association with its brand a top choice over all other alternatives.

*A shift from transactions to relationships:* A traditional fund raiser or marketer emphasizes annual numbers and dollars raised. A BNB invests in and rewards staff for building long-term relationships. It takes the time to engage in a meaningful dialogue with donors. This ongoing conversation helps illuminate what the organization means to its supporters and what their involvement says about them to others. An effective nonprofit builds trust and long-term loyalty by meeting or exceeding supporter expectations, by listening, meaningfully responding, and doing what it says it will do. It goes beyond the easy, one-time ask and works to create mission-aligned donor experiences that delight and engage while building sustainable revenue streams. It creates a true community of believers.

*A shift from being well known to well owned:* Being better known does not equate to being better understood or valued. Mass awareness is helpful, but it does not necessarily lead to support and even less surely to love. A BNB appreciates the importance of awareness and fund raiser but spends just as much time engaging internal and external communities around the cause. It believes in the power of many and meaningfully engages a critical mass of people in its cause. Inclusive, not exclusive, it creates owner-based relationships with constituents; rather than experiencing themselves as mere names on a list,

supporters feel pride of ownership and view the organization as an extension of themselves and a means to achieve goals they value. The most successful nonprofits distribute power to shape the brand through tools, resources, and training that encourage creative engagement. Meaningful two-way engagement accomplishes far more than any controlled message from the top ever could. By empowering an army of supporters who call the organization their own, a BNB causes people to take another look and creates waves of new recruits eager to commit to the cause.

*A shift from organizational silos to integration:* In traditional settings, the marketing or communications team is singularly responsible for branding. Although marketing is critical in shaping and presenting a brand, brand building and marketing are not the same. A high-performance nonprofit uses brand as the force behind everything that an organization does, making it the central management pre-occupation for the CEO, board, executive team, and all staff and volunteers. Brand is at the heart of governance, operations, and mission achievement. Because a BNB views its brand as synonymous with the organization itself, care for the brand belongs to everyone. Breakthrough nonprofit brands make a concerted effort to break down internal silos and bring the organization together for operational effectiveness. All-out efforts are made to ensure that decisions align with the brand's meaning and represent a clear, consistent message to current and prospective supporters. This creates a sense of cohesion and camaraderie both inside the organization and throughout its extended community.

*A shift from conventional to innovative thinking:* Doing things the way they have always been done does not position an organization for the future. A BNB asks the hard questions, does the research, and takes calculated risks in embracing big, bold ideas and innovation. It makes strategic investments and hard trade-offs, cutting legacy programs that no longer fit to free resources needed for achieving audacious goals. To ensure harmony with the organization's core identity, all potential actions are assessed according to how well those initiatives reflect the brand. Then, the organization dares to live its brand meaning in ways that are innovative and different, creating a new definition of

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leadership in its field. BNBs know that the excitement and challenge will grab people, inspire commitment, and stimulate forward momentum. Uncomfortable with complacency, BNBs believe that “if we always do what we’ve always done, we’ll always get what we’ve always got.”

*A shift from market competition to cooperation:* Traditional nonprofit brand strategy generally is to become the biggest, richest, or furthest-reaching organization. Although all nonprofits must carve out a meaningful and differentiated niche, a BNB also partners with other organizations, including government, businesses, and other nonprofits working on similar societal challenges. Since it is almost impossible for one organization to fight for a cause single-handedly and win, a BNB doesn’t try to own an issue but rather finds the space within a cause movement in which it can best deliver. It reinforces that position and maximizes its effectiveness and credibility through the ways it brings its brand to life. A clear brand identity facilitates cooperation by defining the strengths an organization brings to its relationships, as well as areas outside its core capabilities where new partnerships could be particularly fruitful.

*A shift from program maintenance to property management:* Although focus is important, it isn’t a mandate to do just one thing. BNBs know oversimplification can be a detriment because it can stifle innovation and leave value on the table. With an intensive brand focus, it is possible—and often necessary—to segment audiences and to stand for something relevant to each of them. This is possible through stand-alone campaigns that are logical extensions of the overarching organizational brand. While filtering out disparate programs that do not fit the organization’s master brand framework, a BNB invests in subbrands or brand extensions that are distinctly managed yet remain strategically integrated with the overall organization. They can synergistically strengthen the parent (or master) brand, build emotional and lifestyle appeal for different target audiences, and create unique sponsorship opportunities for corporate partners.

*A shift from viewing branding as a cost to a strategic investment:* While some nonprofits may view brand building as too expensive and best suited

to large organizations with ample resources, BNBs of all sizes know that it is one of the most cost-effective, sustainable ways to strengthen and sustain any organization. Branding does not have to be prohibitively expensive for nonprofits precisely because smart branding is about strategy, not costly ad campaigns. In addition, nonprofits have the advantage of being able to engage highly skilled volunteers, obtain professional support pro bono or at reduced fees, and use the insights in this book and other resources as a guide. As the case studies will demonstrate, almost any charitable group can create deeper, more meaningful brands that stand the test of time. However, building the brand is only the first step. The experiences of BNBs show that disciplined and consistent brand execution is required for the biggest return on investment.

### **Addressing the Skeptics**

The growing interest in nonprofit branding has sparked debate. Critics are suspicious about its value and wonder whether charitable organizations should invest in a realm traditionally associated with corporations. Wary of the costs tied to brand development, skeptics question whether branding is anything more than a facade used to manipulate donors. Others see it as the current flavor of the month.

Their hesitation is understandable. Even the high-performance nonprofits featured in this book have wrestled with these concerns at some point. As U.S. Fund for UNICEF's Kim Pucci explained, "When I first joined UNICEF, brand was a dirty word. I had to edit it out of all of my material."<sup>5</sup> Today UNICEF's brand is at the heart of a dramatically revitalized organization.

Yet, brand building is not a panacea. However powerful branding can be, it can't solve basic organizational challenges. Branding enhances the work of a strong organization; it won't fix poor-quality programs or services, change indecisive leadership, or stick without institutional commitment. As Gregory Boroff, the Food Bank For New York City's former vice president, External Relations, emphatically explained, a brand will not take hold without a well-run organization with solid programs and services. It also can't be sustained without a financial investment in its development and implementation.

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While a brand can point the way forward, it can't fix an organization overnight—especially one that has frequently changed its strategy and direction. Typically, boards are impatient to discover the underlying reasons for organizational challenges, but that can take time. So decisions are made quickly, and they often aren't the right ones. Often, a new CEO or executive director is brought on and is eager to set a new direction. The new CEO may have strong new ideas about the brand, yet consistency over time is vital to the success of any branding effort.

Trying to redesign an entire brand strategy using only internal resources can be challenging for many nonprofits. As College Forward's executive director, Lisa Fielder, noted, branding has been vital to the organization's growth. They didn't have the expertise or resources to do it on their own. The agency that helped provided not only direction but also important understanding about what a brand is and can do. Few nonprofit organizations have enough perspective to handle all aspects of brand planning without outside counsel. Most organizations that try that approach fail to realize the full potential inherent in the brand-development process.

Branding can be a winning strategy to raise image, strengthen relationships, build loyalty, grow community support, and achieve important social goals. Yet smart branding takes time and shouldn't be viewed as a short-term quick fix.

## **SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF BREAKTHROUGH NONPROFIT BRANDING**

Making the leap from a traditional brand to a breakthrough nonprofit brand requires new thinking and new ways of doing things. Table 1.1 provides a checklist for the shift that takes place in moving from traditional practices to living the principles of breakthrough nonprofit brands.

The goal of this book is to equip you with the insights and tools to accomplish this shift—a road map of the seven fundamental principles used by BNBs. The principles that have set breakthrough brands apart are not simply additions to the traditional views of branding; they represent the emergence of an entirely new way of thinking. A brief preview of the principles that are overturning previous approaches to communications, fund raising, and organizational development follows.

**TABLE 1.1 TRADITIONAL VERSUS BREAKTHROUGH TERMINOLOGY**

<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Breakthrough</b>
Organization	Cause
Transaction	Relationship
External	Internal and External
Users	Owners
Supporters	Community
Monologue	Dialogue
Messages	Conversations
Information	Stories
Static	Dynamic
Look and Feel	Experience
Simple	Complex
Own	Share
Direct	Quarterback
Command and Control	Empower
Status Quo	Risk Taking
Reach	Engage
Return on Investment	Return on Involvement
Marketing at	Connecting with

### **Principle One: Discover the Authentic Meaning of Your Brand**

Vision, mission, and values should rarely change, but operating principles and practices must constantly evolve. Changing organizational and marketplace imperatives should be reflected in the way any organization's purpose is articulated and lived. A brand is the bridge between an organization's unwavering mission and its evolving strategies. It is the embodiment of the focused, compelling idea at the heart of the organization's identity. By articulating what an organization stands for, its brand enables it to connect with constituents' core values. It brings them together around common interests and shared hope, aspirations, and beliefs. The authentic meaning of your brand provides the focus and framework for building your organization's strategies. It acts as a filter to determine what your organization will and won't do.

### **Principle Two: Embed Your Brand Meaning across the Organization**

A BNB embeds its brand meaning into every organizational function, from people management to information technology systems. It aligns its

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mission-based services, communications, development activities, and operations with the brand. By integrating the brand across the organization in meaningful ways, it eliminates silos, creates information-sharing channels, and cultivates shared agendas. This principle provides a road map for embedding your brand's essence into your operations and strategies.

**Principle Three: Rally Internal Brand Ambassadors**

Frequently, nonprofit organizations focus on branding as an external marketing function. Yet, potential supporters are often introduced to nonprofit brands through contact with internal constituents such as staff and volunteers. A breakthrough brand continuously attends to the way its brand is expressed through the actions and attitudes of its internal stakeholders. Breakthrough nonprofit brands carefully craft communications tools and training, and they use storytelling, rituals, and symbols to create a sense of community. They create an authentic and shared internal brand culture that builds loyalty, cultivates champions and ambassadors, and attracts and retains dedicated employees and volunteers.

**Principle Four: Develop 360° Brand Communications**

Effective nonprofits build brand identities that are clear, relevant, and engaging for all stakeholders. A breakthrough nonprofit brand is an excellent storyteller. It finds authentic, compelling stories that paint mental pictures of who the organization is, the value and values it represents, whom it seeks to attract, and the benefits for those audiences. Utilizing a variety of integrated communications, including both online and off-line tools, the effective brand dynamically expresses its essence and connects with constituents in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them.

**Principle Five: Expand Your Brand by Mobilizing an External Community**

A BNB acts as a connector. It builds external communities, knowing that a critical mass of the right people mobilized behind its work is the most effective way to propel its cause. A BNB maintains a constant focus on listening and provides a host of opportunities for supporters to interact

with the organization in ways that align with its core brand meaning. It learns from every supporter interaction and responds through continuous improvement. This approach builds lasting and trusting relationships and mobilizes communities. Breakthrough nonprofits build their brands by providing meaningful benefits, delivering results, and creating a sense of belonging in a like-minded community.

### **Principle Six: Cultivate Partners to Extend Your Brand Reach and Influence**

Collaboration is essential. A truly breakthrough nonprofit brand values strategic alliances that offer access to new expertise, relationships, and assets. By joining with others, these high-performing organizations create win-win partnerships that reach new audiences and build loyal communities around the cause.

### **Principle Seven: Leverage Your Brand for Alternative Revenue and Value**

Charities can generate alternative revenue streams by mixing entrepreneurship, service delivery, savvy marketing, and creative fund raising. Increasingly, nonprofits are applying for-profit business concepts to address social and community challenges. The more innovative are using their brands to market their core competencies, develop new products, create aligned businesses, and forge licensing deals and merchandise—allowing them to cultivate new funding streams, drive greater awareness, and realize new value for their cause.

## **BREAKTHROUGH NONPROFIT BRANDS**

There are thousands of worthwhile causes, served by millions of nonprofit groups. This diversity is reflected by the case studies in this book (see Table 1.2). The organizations profiled address a variety of social issues, serve diverse constituents, represent a spectrum of geographic areas, range broadly in size, and run the gamut from storied organizations to those that were founded relatively recently. Yet, they share one distinctive trait: Each excels in living many of the seven highlighted principles.

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TABLE 1.2 BREAKTHROUGH NONPROFIT BRAND CASE STUDIES

	Organization	Subsector	Revenue, 2008	Year Established
1.	American Heart Association	Health	\$ 681 m	1911
2.	College Forward	Education and youth	\$ 900 k	2003
3.	Food Bank For New York City	Human and social services	\$ 60.4 m	1983
4.	Goodwill Industries International	Human and social services	\$ 3.3 b	1902
5.	Memorial Healthworks! Kids, Museum	Education and youth	\$ 600 k	2000
6.	Inspiration Corporation	Human and social services	\$ 3.5 m	1989
7.	Kids Help Phone	Human and social services	\$ 12.2 m (Canadian)	1989
8.	NatureBridge	Environmental education	\$ 12 m	1971
9.	Stratford Shakespeare Festival	Arts and culture	\$ 57 m (Canadian)	1953
10.	Susan G. Komen for the Cure	Health	\$ 350 m	1982
11.	U.S. Fund for UNICEF	International development	\$ 486 m	1945

## SUMMARY

- A brand is a collection of perceptions about an organization, formed by its every communication, action, and interaction.
- Branding is the strategic work of discovering a focused, compelling big idea that conveys what an organization stands for that is unique and differentiated—and relevant to its core constituents.
- Effective brands create an emotional and personal connection that brings people together around shared interests, values, and aspirations and inspires action.
- Breakthrough nonprofit brands (BNBs) are strategically focused and thoughtfully built.
- Breakthrough nonprofit brands are well owned, well understood, and celebrated. They walk and talk differently than traditional nonprofit

brands. They share ownership of the organization's essence and put their constituents at the center of their brand.

- An organization wins mindshare, loyalty, and resources by authentically conveying personal relevance, demonstrating social impact, and identifying reasons for belonging. Breakthrough nonprofit brands thrive by appealing to the head, heart, and hands.

