Why is branding for nonprofits important? Best practices, strategies, and examples

Category: Branding
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Why is branding for nonprofits important? For most people, a nonprofit organization isn't the first thing they'll think of when they consider the word "brand". We often associate brands with large for-profit enterprises and organizations, like Apple, or Nike.

A brand identity can often seem like a tool used to increase profits and revenue. After all, the stronger your brand, the more visible and engaging your company is. However, while nonprofits aren't selling a product or service, they are "selling" something.

Every nonprofit is selling an idea, a goal, and a vision of a better world. They need to be persuading enough to attract volunteers, donors, and funding. This means they still need to make an emotional connection with their audience, and cultivate loyalty with a strong brand.

If you look a little closer at the nonprofit sector, you'll see evidence of branding everywhere. The World Wildlife Fund, Amnesty International, and Habitat for Humanity all have a clear mission statement, visual identity, and tone of voice.

Today, we're going to explore why a strong nonprofit brand is so crucial to success, and how nonprofit leaders can build more effective brand assets.



Why is branding for nonprofits important?

So, why is branding for nonprofits important?

The truth is that any organization, regardless of whether it's selling products, services, or ideas, needs an effective brand. A brand is how you make a deeper connection with the right audience, and inspire action in your community. Even people have brands, just look at Oprah Winfrey or Elon Musk.

In the past, many nonprofit organizations saw branding as a tool for communication. Nonprofit executives used strong branding to increase visibility, and demonstrate what they stood for to their community, just like for-profit organizations.

Branding was a tool to help manage the external perceptions of the organization. While this is still true today, branding for nonprofits has evolved. Today, many nonprofits see their brand

as a strategic tool to maintain focus on a social mission, and attract passionate supporters.

Branding for nonprofits is now crucial to ensure they can:

1. Stand out

We don't often think of nonprofits as organizations with competition. But there are millions of nonprofit organizations worldwide (1.8 million in the US alone).

Strong branding is crucial to ensure you can differentiate yourself from other similar organizations working to support the same causes. It's how groups highlight their organization's work, values, and unique impact on the world.

A good nonprofit brand strategy ensures you can attract brand ambassadors, and convince supporters to fund your efforts, rather than focusing on other alternatives.

2. Increase trust and loyalty

Nonprofit organizations are reliant on consistent community support. They're not just selling a product or service once. They need their followers to commit to constantly providing them with the funding and resources they need.

Effective nonprofit branding increases trust and brand loyalty, ensuring the organization's mission resonates with the right people, and drives them to action.

Not only does a good brand encourage loyalty among supporters, but it also activates stakeholders, volunteers, and employees who support the organization's growth.

3. Access more funding

Just as a good brand in the for-profit sector can help to increase revenue, through well-crafted marketing materials,

high levels of brand awareness, and improved engagement, branding in the nonprofit sector has a financial impact.

A strong brand allows organizations to connect with different audiences in compelling ways, improving their chances of attracting multiple donors.

When a nonprofit organization tells a compelling story with their brand strategies, they actively encourage community members to show their support with additional funding.



Branding strategies for nonprofits

We've answered the question: "Why is branding for nonprofits important?" Now it's time to think about how nonprofits can build effective brands. A nonprofit brand strategy will usually feature similar elements to any other brand strategy.

You still need a compelling visual identity, color palette and logo. Your brand should still have a specific tone of voice, personality, and ethos. However, the exact process of building

a brand can be a little different.

Here are some key branding strategies for nonprofits:

1. Use your mission to identify your audience

Any organization's brand should be built to reflect the needs, interests, goals, and pain points of their target audience.

However, for nonprofits, a deep understanding of what drives potential donors is particularly crucial. Before you can build a strong brand identity, you need to understand exactly who you're trying to reach, and why they'll be influenced by your mission.

Start with reviewing your mission and vision statements.

While for-profit brands often base their mission on what they know about their audience, non-profit organizations need to determine what they're trying to achieve first, then identify the people who are most likely to share their values.

For instance, a nonprofit like "Save The Children" will more likely appeal to parents, whereas an organization like the World Wildlife Fund will appeal to those with a deep love of animals.

Based on your mission, create a "customer persona" of your ideal donor. What will their values and interests be? What are their demographic, behavioral, and psychographic characteristics?

2. Go beyond the visual identity

The visual elements of a brand will always have an impact on its audience. Your color palette or color scheme, logo, and even the graphic design of your website and promotional materials are emotionally evocative and influential. They help

you to stand out in a crowded market.

The American Red Cross's bright red cross logo certainly helps to drive brand awareness. However, there's more to activating your audience than grabbing their attention.

A nonprofit needs to go beyond the visuals to craft a compelling personality, and messaging that resonates with their community.

Think about how you convey the purpose of your organization in everything from your social media posts, to the content on your website. Consider how your taglines, your company's name, and even your actions reflect your brand's mission.

The chances are your messaging, and community outreach strategies will be more likely to drive donations than your logo or color palette alone.

3. Double down on differentiation

As mentioned above, just like for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations operate in a competitive landscape. There are countless nonprofit organizations out there, and no-one can afford to support all of them – even if they share similar goals.

When a donor or volunteer decides to share their money or time, what should convince them to choose you over so many worthwhile causes?

Perhaps your fundraising efforts are particularly innovative. You might go beyond things like charity runs and coffee mornings to run livestreams and social media challenges.

Maybe there's something different about the work you do.

Perhaps you're an animal rescue organization that specializes in placing pets in foster homes, rather than crowded shelters. Maybe your food bank has already fed thousands of starving

families, by leveraging partnerships with local grocery stores and supermarkets.

4. Create clear branding guidelines

Whenever we're working with an organization at Fabrik Brands, regardless of whether they're for-profit, or nonprofit, we emphasize one thing: consistency is key.

This is perhaps particularly true for nonprofits. While rebranding and brand refreshes are common in the for-profit sector, as companies adapt to the changing preferences of their audience, they're less common in the non-profit world.

After all, your mission will always remain the same. Ensuring brand consistency will help to strengthen the connections you have with future and current supporters.

With that in mind, create guidelines that outline the elements of your brand. You can create a brand style guide that showcases your color palette, logo, and other visual components.

You might also have an editorial guide that looks at how you convey your brand personality to your audience, and what your brand voice should sound like.

Look at how UNICEF and similar organizations consistently convey the same message, tone of voice, and image in all of their marketing materials.

5. Be an incredible storyteller

Your message is everything as a nonprofit brand. Successful nonprofit branding needs to touch the heart and convince the head at the same time. This means becoming an effective storyteller.

The messages you send to your audience, through your marketing

campaigns, and brand guidelines should convince the head with clear, transparent, and easy-to-understand language.

Make sure you’re frequently showcasing your impact, answering supporter questions, and demonstrating how donation money is spent. Use facts, and data to validate why your donors and community should trust you to use their cash correctly.

At the same time, find ways to ignite the passion of your community. Tell clear and authentic stories about the people, communities, or groups you’ve served. Share insights from your volunteers, and don’t forget the importance of visual storytelling.

Video campaigns sharing messages from real people often have a significant impact in the nonprofit world. Just look at this example from Mama Hope:



Best practices for branding a nonprofit organization

Effective branding is crucial for every organization, regardless of whether their goal is to “make a profit”. For nonprofit organizations, however, branding can be particularly important.

After all, you’re not giving your “customers” anything in exchange for their time, support, or funding, other than the chance to support a worthwhile cause. This means you need to convince them, with your brand, that they’re using their resources the right way.

Here are some best practice tips for branding a nonprofit organization.

1. Create messages for each audience segment

Just as for-profit organizations need to create distinctive brand messages for investors, employees, and customers, nonprofit organizations need to consider the different groups they’re trying to reach.

Your donors are just one segment of your target audience. The messaging you craft for them will likely be different to the messages you use in nonprofit marketing strategies designed to attract volunteers, or shareholders.

While the mission you convey will be the same, the key points you focus on may differ. For instance, a brand like Oxfam may use a different marketing strategy to ask people to donate belongings, to the one they use to ask for financial donations or volunteers.

Think about the various factors that might convince people to support your organization in different ways, and adapt your

messaging accordingly.

2. Use real people in your marketing materials

79% of consumers say user-generated content highly impacts their purchasing decisions. Even for-profit brands regularly infuse real people and their stories into their marketing strategy.

As a nonprofit, user-generated content, and real-world stories are particularly important, because they validate that you're making a significant impact on the world. Your donors can't see evidence that their money is doing something by just looking at a product or service.

They need you to show them that their efforts are valuable. Share case studies on your website and through your social media campaigns. Constantly highlight the messages of other donors and volunteers in your program.

These real stories will have a more significant impact on your audience, by demonstrating how you're authentically pursuing your vision.

3. Engage and communicate with your audience

Once again, engaging your audience is important regardless of what type of business you run. However, it's particularly crucial to an effective nonprofit branding strategy. Donors, volunteers, and investors expect the nonprofits they support to keep them informed.

Don't just occasionally share messages about your latest accomplishments in your social media campaigns. Think about how you can constantly connect with your community.

Some of the strategies you use might include:

- Creating a newsletter to share updates on your social impact and activities on a regular basis. You can even draw attention to recent blog posts, accomplishments, and new donors.
- Using social media to share stories about the people or communities you serve, your volunteers, and the latest changes in your landscape.
- Sending SMS marketing messages to update your audience and thank them for their continued support on a regular basis.
- Hosting events that educates your community about what you're doing, while also providing entertainment, like the Children in Need show.
- Creating regular Q&A videos on social media and other channels to answer the questions of your most important supporters.

4. Don't forget to be active offline

These days, most of the methods you use to raise brand awareness and engage supporters will take place online. Many successful nonprofit organizations have a strong presence on social media and other digital channels. But it's important to think about your offline impact too.

Provided you have the right resources, make sure you're making an impact in your local community and the areas you serve. Events are an excellent way to do this. You can even consider working with local companies, and asking for their help with sponsorships.

You could also host "open door" days, when donors and supporters can congregate in person, and learn more about the work you're doing, without having to visit your nonprofit website.

Building social awareness offline, as well as online, will help you to form deeper relationships with your community, and unlock new avenues of funding.

5. Remember to innovate

Success in nonprofit branding often revolves around differentiation. To set yourself apart from countless other organizations in your field, you need to be willing to innovate. People remember organizations that do something “different”.

With that in mind, constantly look for ways to shake things up with your marketing campaigns and promotional strategies. Ask your staff members, board members, and volunteers for their opinions on how you can attract more attention.

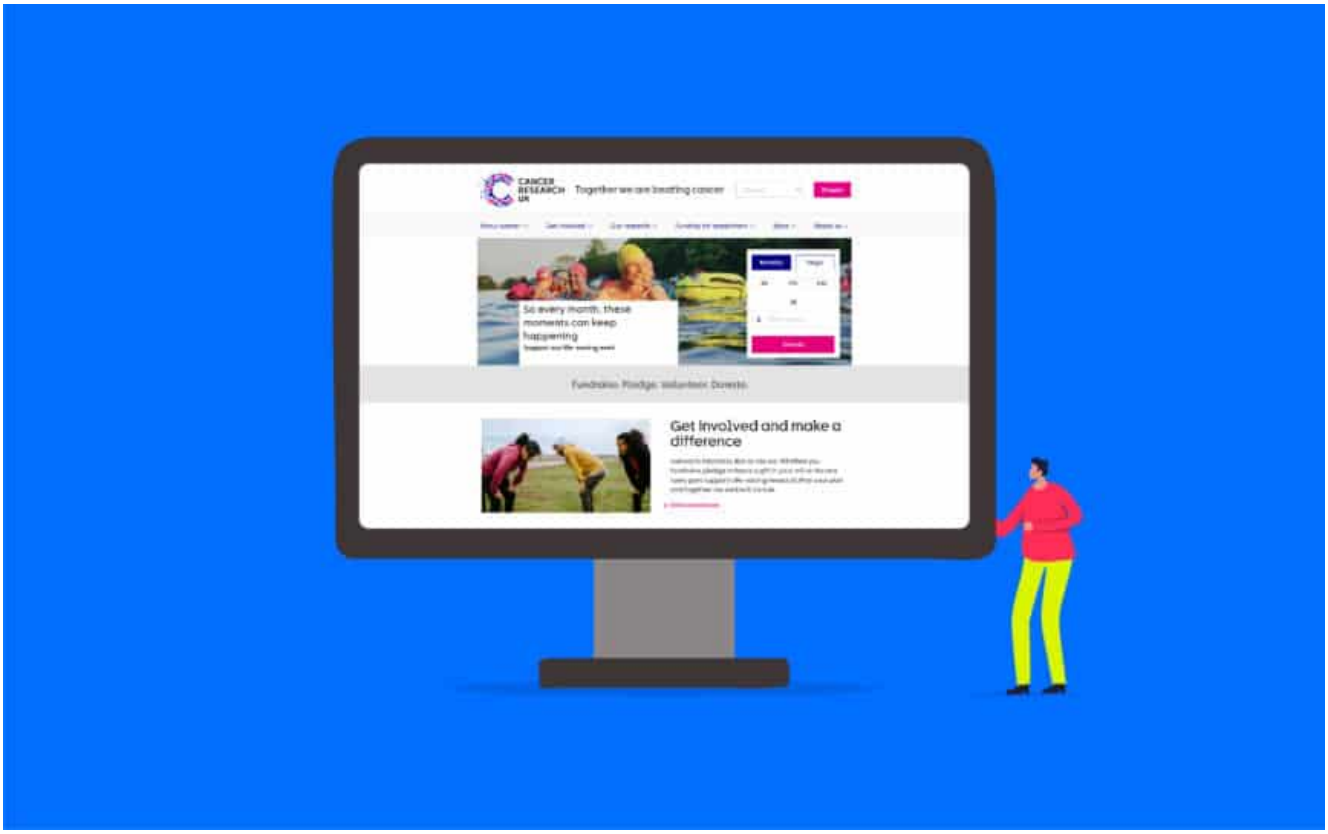
You could consider creating a social media challenge, like the “Ice Bucket Challenge”, or investing in new technologies like virtual reality. Experimenting and innovating is a great way to draw more natural attention to your organization.

It can even help to boost brand awareness, by encouraging publications and news companies to cover your events and the activities you promote.

3 nonprofit branding examples to learn from

If you’re still uncertain about the power of nonprofit branding, or you’re not sure how to build a brand for your social enterprise, it can help to look at some examples. There are plenty of great examples of nonprofit innovators out there.

Here are just 3 worth mentioning:



1. Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is well known for its strong, distinctive branding, used consistently across all mediums and channels. The organization has one of the most interesting nonprofit logos around, featuring a number of circles, to convey the idea of research, lab work and community.

Perhaps one of the most compelling parts of the Cancer Research brand is the message they use in their tagline. Initially, they started with “Together we will beat cancer”. Now, the message is, “Together we are beating cancer”.

This demonstrates how the organization has begun to effectively achieve its goals with the support of its target audience. It shows donors they’re actually making an impact.

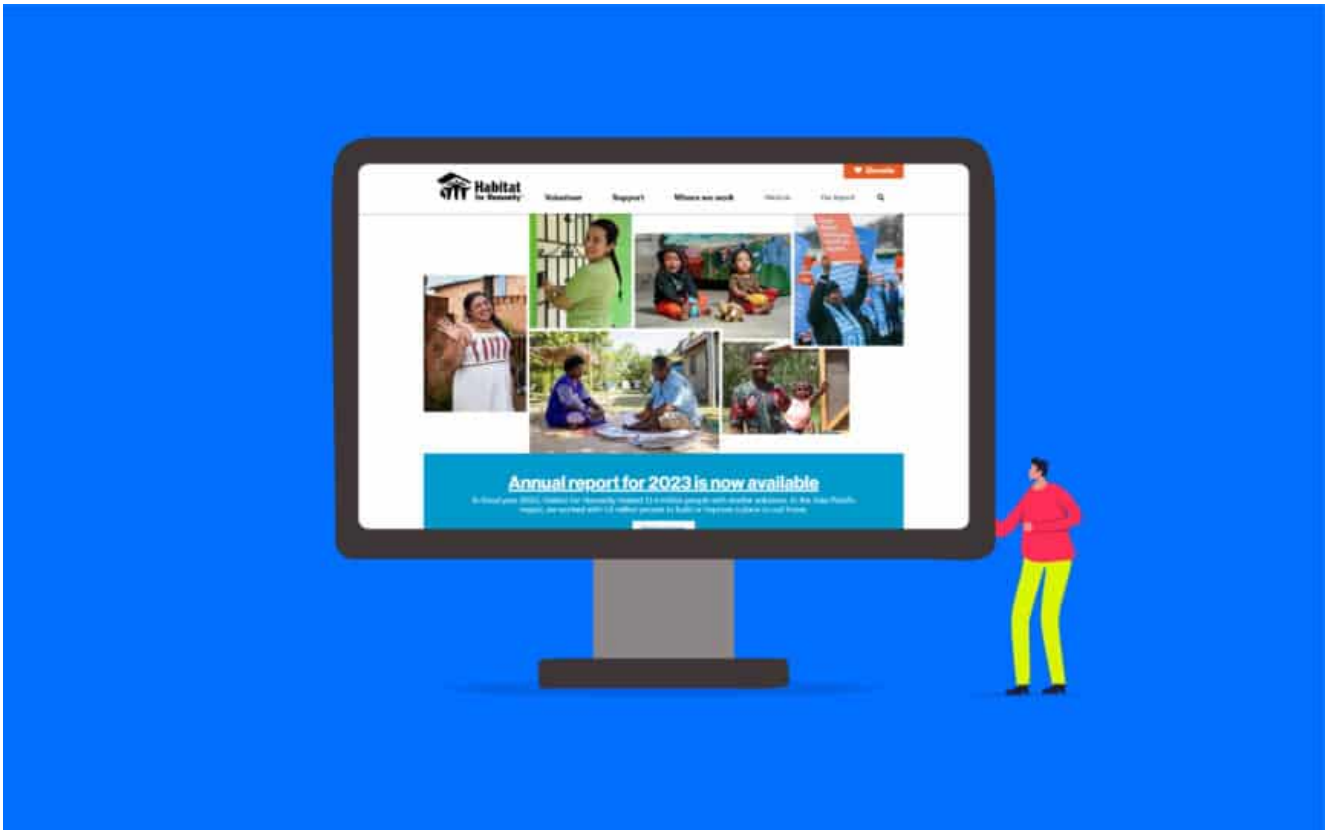


2. World Wildlife Fund

The World Wildlife Fund is another of the most impressive nonprofit brands in the world today. Its unique logo is recognized across the globe, and has remained consistent for years. Part of what makes WWF so compelling is its commitment to clearly communicating with its audience.

The WWF website outlines exactly how donor money is spent, and draws attention to the incredible things they've already accomplished.

The team also regularly shares stories about not just its activities, but wildlife in general, to help inspire and engage potential donors and volunteers.



3. Habitat for Humanity

Habitat for Humanity is a nonprofit organization with a worldwide impact. The group's logo is simple, but compelling, drawing attention to ideas of community spirit.

The group is extremely active across all channels, both online and offline. They have their "ReStore" locations in the U.S., to help raise money by selling used goods. They also host regular events and fundraising campaigns, building homes for those who need them.

Habitat for Humanity also commits to keeping their volunteers informed, showing them exactly how they can get involved, and how their work impacts the community.



Nonprofit rebranding examples: The power of a rebrand

As mentioned above, nonprofit rebranding is slightly less common than for-profit rebranding. While many non-profits update their logos and straplines over the years, they maintain very consistent imagery, names, and messaging, to resonate with their audience.

However, there are times when a rebrand can be necessary to ensure you're sending the right message. One example of this is "Sight Scotland".

Previously known as "Royal Blind", this 225-year-old organization discovered their current name and branding was making it hard for them to reach the right supporters and community members.

They recognized that the term "blind" didn't cover the range of sight conditions they supported, and decided to change

their brand accordingly. The team at Fabrik Brands worked with the group to create a new name, and a fresh look that more effectively conveyed their mission.

The name “Sight Scotland” demonstrated to community members that the group was about more than just “helping the blind”, they were focused on supporting everyone with vision issues.

Don’t underestimate the power of nonprofit branding

Hopefully, this article has answered the question “Why is branding for nonprofits important?” Ultimately, nonprofits still need a strong brand to engage their community, drive donations, and differentiate themselves from other organizations.

Building an effective nonprofit branding strategy is crucial to activating your community, and sharing your message and vision with the world.

If you need help building or refreshing your nonprofit brand, seek the support of the experts. Reach out to Fabrik today, to see how we can help you engage your supporters.

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