Healthcare System Branding Some Rules of the Road by Eric Brody

While brand-building fundamentals tend to be the same across many industries, Health Care Systems, with their many facets and multiple audiences, possess a unique set of challenges and requirements. Based on our work within this industry, here are some "Rules of the Road" starting points for health care system branding.

**Leadership must take the lead**

Mounting skepticism regarding health care, combined with increased information, transparency and choice available to consumers demands that CEO's and their leadership embrace branding as a strategic tool to proactively build and nurture relationships. At the end of each day, these " measurable outcome" relationships determine the extent to which you're building a successful Health Care System brand.

**Start with your strategic plan direction**

Any "system level" brand work needs to be grounded in reality. And this grounding starts with your strategic plan direction. Business initiatives such as expanding into new geography, introducing new service lines and merging with another entity will impact your brands value proposition. Starting with "the business" allows you to get a sense of how your brand, as the face of your health care system, must/can relate to its audiences.

**Consider the importance of your external and internal audiences**

Externally, there are local communities and patients, the media and politicians. Internally, there are doctors, nurses, staffs and volunteers, boards and foundations - who will make or break you brand-building effort. Ultimately, they both need to understand and connect with what your system brand stands for and how it relates. So as you map out your program, determine the critical milestones requiring buy-in and the balance of inside/outside buy-in essential to keep moving forward - on time and on budget.**Analyze where system-audience relationships exist, today and into the future**

Have you historically focused on building relationships with the system brand or the individual hospitals and facilities that provide care? Consider these answers in the context of your strategic plan and annual business goals, e.g. creating a seamlessly integrated "continuum of care" or an affiliation of specialists. Analyze the pros and cons of each possible branding system scenario and then determine the one(s) that best address audience’s needs – balanced with your past practices, and future vision.

**Formalize your brand agenda**

All system staffers, physicians and associates (e.g. foundation, board, and community advisory board members) should have a clear and consistent understanding of what makes your brand unique and special. Commit your intended brand purpose, promises, personality, positioning and unifying brand idea to paper for all to help shape and embrace. This document, your Brand Charter, should then be the starting point for all brand actions and communications.

**Audit, monitor and refine the myriad ways you express your brand**

Consider all the ways your brand speaks to its audiences. All impart messages about your brand. To ensure that your brand consistently shines through, you need to audit all of these different touch points to gauge their effectiveness at conveying an "on-brand" message. With the results of your audit, and with a new Brand Charter in hand, you'll be able to objectively refine to ensure consistent reinforcement of brand promises and personality.

**Brand from the inside-out**

Branding is all about building relationships to fuel business growth. And these relationships start inside your system. Your organization must be aligned to deliver your brand promise day in and day out through the actions and interactions of your staffers and physicians. Every single touch point through which your local communities and patients experience your health care system brand should reinforce its vision. Consistency is key to alignment, and things like up-front education and training, senior management stewardship and ongoing middle management responsibility and accountability will help ensure success.

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1. Explain what "branding" is, the 'value' of branding, and if it plays a role in strategic planning. If it plays an important role, defend your position.