

Staying on Brand

Perception is Everything

“What is brand? It is the construct that stakeholders hold about the identity, including the character, of a nonprofit organization. It is the sum total of perceptions about what a nonprofit stands for, what it does, and how much social impact it is thought to achieve. Brands are connected to reputations.” (Peter Frumpkin, 2015). I find this definition to be an eye-opening, precise description of a word that most of us take for granted at this point. We all know the vitality of branding. So, why then are there so many nonprofit regional theatre companies throughout the country, who struggle each year with unfocused season planning and a vague idea of who they are and what they are setting out to achieve? There are four main topics that jump out of Frumpkin’s definition of *brand*: Identity/Character, Perception, Social Impact, Reputation. I will focus individually on each term, dissecting the entire concept of brand, while supporting my theories with examples from other lessons in LA 802 as well as a bit of literary theory from Mark Fortier’s book, *Theory/Theatre*. I will utilize the concept of semiotics to take us even further into the basic psychology of human beings and how we consciously and subconsciously translate images and experiences in our daily lives.

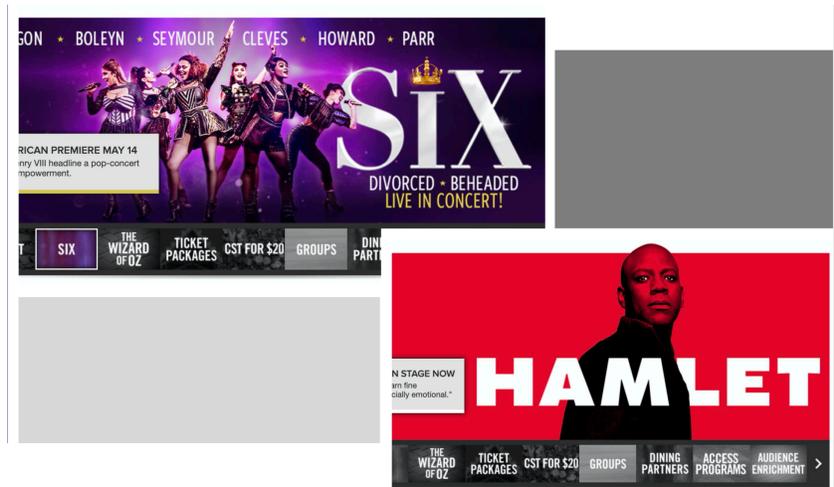
Identity/Character

Possibly the most obvious aspects of brand involve an organization’s name and visual marketing. An organization’s name, marketing style and season selection (the types of shows they produce) all have a direct impact on who patrons and donors believe them to be. We live in a society obsessed with identity and visibility. What television and movies began, social media has taken to an entirely new level. Apps like Instagram allow people to communicate with images only. Marketing has become no longer just a way to get the word out. Instead, is an art form in which new concepts are manifested in the hopes of upholding a constant presence in the minds of the country. “—your organization’s name is often the first thing donors see when they become aware of your nonprofit.” (Penney, 2018) In Penney’s article, *Telling the Tale of a Nonprofit Name Change*, she goes on to explain the importance of the history of non-profit’s name and how donors often have a personal connection or comfortability with it. Penney both highlights the importance of an effective name while warning us that a name change can have both positive and negative effects. As a non-profit, regional theatre company, our title is vital. We choose the language that we will be known by. Theatre Companies like Chicago Shakespeare Theatre and Lookingglass Theatre Company have titles which give information and support their brand with a few words. Chicago

Shakespeare tells you where they are located and what their main focus is in a brief name. It's no doubt simple, but greatly effective. I find this to be the goal when choosing the name of a non-profit. Richard Bieber, Producing Artistic Director of FUSE Productions in State College, PA describes the goal of company's name as "getting potential donors and audience members the most information in the most succinct possible way." Lookingglass Theatre Company has chosen a name around their groundbreaking, renowned production of *Lookingglass Alice*, which has continued to be a huge influence in the type of work done by this Tony Award winning, non-profit, regional theatre. The name reflects the whimsical story telling of the company while telling the audience that they are holding up a mirror to those who are brave enough to buy a ticket. We know that Lookingglass is producing work which surpasses basic live entertainment and goes on to something much more innovative and unique.

Chicago Shakespeare is a great example of a regional theatre who is currently checking all of the boxes required to maintain a strong brand. Along with a simple, effective name, Chicago Shakes's marketing and season selection are in constant support of their overall brand. Included is a screenshot of the first two advertisements currently

on chicagoshakes.com. These are the first two images that potential donors, volunteers and audience members will see when they go to the CST website. What does the choice of these two shows say about the theatre and what does the style of marketing say about these productions? We see with



the two shows selected that CST is a company committed to producing both Shakespearian Classics and groundbreaking new Musicals. This automatically sets them aside from companies who are strictly focused on only Shakespeare. This shows that CST has their mind in multiple places at once and is involved with the creation and development of new works as well as keeping the classics alive.

The design of the advertisements also tell us a lot. The bold colors right away give the productions a contemporary edge. CST is breaking the connotation that Shakespeare is stuffy and boring. They are promoting a humanistic and unapologetic Shakespeare who makes an audience excited about seeing these epic, historic stories. Finally, what I find to be the most effective quality of this marketing is the people. We

have recently passed through a very exciting time of technology which has made huge impacts on the success of live theatre. However, as we continue into a period of time where the norm is technology, live theatre is becoming an escape from it. After a day of staring at an iPhone screen, a TV Screen, a laptop screen, the theatre is the one place we can go to experience real human connection and remind us where we came from and who we are. CST uses this to full advantage by including photographs of the actual humans in the show, on the poster. The humans they have chosen tell us even more about the company and their commitment to diversity, assuring that the actors on stage reflect the community in which they live. As Andrés Tapia states in his article, *The Inclusive Leader*, “A diverse talent mix also can spark greater creativity and propel innovation that can help organizations distance themselves from their competition.” (Tapia, 2016).

Perception

“Semiotics, or semiology is the student of signs-those objects by which humans communicate meaning: words, images, behavior, arrangements of many kinds, in which a meaning or idea is relayed by a corresponding manifestation we can perceive” (Fortier, pp14). In Mark Fortier’s book, *Theatre/Theory*, Fortier explore the concept of Semiology through the concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Peirce and Roland Barthes. Saussure speaks of semiotics in two parts: the signifier and the signified. That is the physical object and the concept or idea invoked. This can take almost any shape. Signs are signifiers. Colors are signifiers. Facial expressions are signifiers. This leads into Peirce’s statement that “a sign is always a sign for somebody” (Fortier, pp 16-17) By accepting Pierce’s theory that everything is a sign, we can draw a conclusion that in the decision making of a non-profit regional theatre, everything matters. Humans are constantly drawing conclusions from everything they see. There is no neutral area. There is never a decision made which simply allows the organization to move on in the exact perception as it did before. Each decision made, changes the way the organization will be perceived by potential donors, volunteers, staff and audience members. We will find out in the next section that this is not restricted to simply marketing and name but carries over to all aspects of your organization, including mission, philanthropy and decision making. As David Cooperstein says, “one way advertising is merely one part of the process.” (Cooperstein, Sept 17, 2012) This raises the stakes for every decision made in your organization. In everything we do we should ask ourselves, *What is the story we are telling?*

Social Impact

As stated in the last section, semiotics and human perception is not limited only to these more obviously visible marketing aspects of an organization. Indeed, it is every single choice made which effects the

identity and character of the non-profit. Because of this an organization is always consciously or sub-consciously building its brand. A non-profit is brand building each time they run any kind of fundraising campaign. A non-profit is brand building each time they hire a new staff member. A non-profit is brand building with each event they decide to throw or not throw. Each decision effects the brand. Everything matters. It is not enough to simply fundraise. It is important that you are soliciting gifts in a way which supports your brand and that the funds raised are used in the correct way. On Bloomerange TV Episode #33, Rebecca Gregory Segovia discusses the difference between a multi-channel fundraising experience and a omni-channel fundraising experience. Omni-channel, being the goal, is the idea of using multiple channels for fundraising while assuring that each channel exists under the umbrella of a larger concept or campaign. This allows your fundraising efforts to work together in order to achieve a common goal, while assuring that they all support and highlight each other's achievement. An omni-channel fundraising campaign allows the organization to be more in control of the coordination of the donor experience, assuring that brand remains the center of all fundraising efforts.

Similar to fundraising, an organization's commitment to philanthropy speaks volumes and should be directly connected to their brand. Chicago Shakespeare's vision is broken down into four categories: Bold Theatricality, Creative Learning, A Global Theater, Partner in Innovation. The "Creative Learning" section of this mission speaks to CTS's commitment to "robust education programs that support personal development and career preparation for teachers, artists, arts managers, students and lifelong learners alike." Chicago Shakespeare is making a difference in the community in which they live by reaching students around the city and allowing them to develop essential skills by being involved with Chicago Shakespeare Slam or CPS Shakespeare. CST's commitment to students and their families appears through these programs as well as their season selection, student matinees and teaching resources. CST leads by example using funds acquired to help the community in which they are located.

Reputation

"In a perfect world, nonprofits would easily be able to control and construct their brands to drive support and resources. But creating a strong brand is long, hard work; it is a more subtle process than merely creating a new logo or tagline." (Frumpink, Oct 2, 2015) Frumpkin goes on to discuss the requirements for maintaining a brand. It is not an overnight fix and requires patience. Building a brand takes time and consistency. Clarity over time is important. Investing time and money into the organization is key. Building a reputation is a steady climb and not an overnight cinderella story. In Lesson 13 we learned about the principles of practice and ethical leadership. Live theatre is community based at its core. Strip away the

spectacle and live theatre at its most basic level is a group of people. Groups of people who form opinions and expectations based off of experiences with our organizations. A good reputation is hard to build and a bad reputation is almost impossible to escape. That is why it is essential to for an organization to operate under consciously ethic standards.

The National Council of Nonprofits' article, *Ethical Fundraising*, opens with the following statement, "Transparency inspires confidence. Beyond what the law requires, nonprofits can demonstrate their commitment to ethical practices by being entirely transparent with financial information and fundraising practices." (NCONP, 2019). By remaining transparent, an organization allows people to feel comfortable and part of things. Your company becomes an old friend that you trust because you know so much about them. This old friend has proven for years that they can be trusted to make ethical decisions. There is also a bit of an attraction that occurs to any individual or organization who allows themselves this type of openness. Brené Brown speaks about this concept in her TedTalk, *The Power of Vulnerability*. To remain vulnerable is frightening at first but the payoff is grand.

I sat down with NYC Personal Trainer, Entrepreneur & Social Media Influencer, Jillian Paige, to discuss her experience with building and maintaining a brand. Her discoveries highly support this desire for vulnerability. Jillian states: "The more honest I've been about who I am, the struggles I go through, and the things I believe to be true, the more I've understood my brand and helped my audience to understand my brand. It has helped me streamline my business's purpose to be truly candid about my human experience. Honesty, specificity and openness attracts the right people to my community and dissuades the wrong people from it. When I write something general or vague, it doesn't get a lot of engagement. I believe that my audience can feel when not even I am excited about my content and just posting something to post. When I sit down to write a post, I think about what is moving me that day and how I can make it digestible and helpful for my followers. If you're speaking from your experience and the heart, that is palpable to your audience. We crave authenticity and love when others are humble and honest, especially in this bizarrely perfect social media environment."

Jillian's comment not only highlights the importance of openness and honesty but dives much deeper into the human psyche and what we want. From the beginning of times, human beings have been on a constant journey for truth. We find this truth with our eyes, ears, minds and hearts. We wake up every day and exist in a world of constant advertising and overstimulation. As we continue into a period of time where the norm is technology, perhaps live theatre is becoming an escape from it. After a day of staring at an iPhone screen, a TV Screen, a laptop screen... perhaps the theatre it the one place we can go to

experience real human connection. This is so important. At the end of the day, while we ponder over marketing, mission, season selection, name, we have to remember we are first and foremost people. We are people who are doing a specific thing for a specific reason. It is important that we ask ourselves every day:

Who are we?

What do we do?

Why do we do it?

Until we know exactly who we are, it is impossible for other people to know who we are. Until we get specific with the story we are telling, it is impossible for others to connect with it.

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