

Branding for Nonprofits: New Research, New Insights

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Recently, I interviewed Nathalie Kylander, adjunct lecturer in public policy at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a research fellow at Harvard's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations. Kylander, along with Hauser Center Faculty Director Christopher Stone, are authors of an in-depth research study on the role of brand in the nonprofit sector. With a feature article on their findings originally published in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), I wanted to further the discussion by digging a little deeper into some of their insights. Kylander is also an adjunct assistant professor of international business at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, and has been researching nonprofit brands for more than a decade.

Rahim Kanani: How did you first get involved with the world of non-profit marketing and branding, and why did you decide to embark on this research, now?

Nathalie Kylander: In 2002, my former marketing professor and mentor at Harvard Business School, John Quelch and I were having lunch and he mentioned having been struck by a report by Edelman PR that showed that nonprofit brands were trusted by more people, particularly in Europe, than commercial brands.

Having worked for Medecins Sans Frontieres prior to business school, John knew I was interested in nonprofits and he underscored the fact that hardly any research had been done on the subject of nonprofit brands. He convinced me to quit my day job and join him in researching and writing ten case studies that we published as a book a few years later. In fact, I have been studying nonprofit brands ever since. Following my work with John, I entered a PhD program at the Fletcher School, where I now teach, and wrote my dissertation thesis on Brand Equity in International Nonprofit Organizations. A number of follow-up publications with my dissertation chair and friend Bernard Simonin followed, and in 2010, I was contacted by the Hauser Center to see if I might work on a research project commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation on the role of brand in the nonprofit sector. I couldn't resist!

I feel incredibly fortunate to have been part of the Hauser Center research team and to have had the opportunity to extend my research in this direction. It was one of those, "I can't believe they want to pay me for doing this" moments.

Rahim Kanani: In the Stanford Social Innovation Review feature article on your research, you discuss how brand management is not simply about fundraising and consistent colors, but that strategic branding can ultimately drive broad, long-term social goals, while strengthening internal identity, cohesion, and capacity. What's one example of how this works in practice for the non-profit sector?

Nathalie Kylander: Our research team, including Chris Stone, Sherine Jayawickrama, Johanna Chao Keilick and Alex Pittman, talked to 73 individuals in 41 organizations and we were struck to find that a shift was occurring, that the nonprofit sector was at an inflection point in terms of the way people perceived and talked about their brands.

Traditionally, brand was essentially viewed as a communication and fundraising tool, but we found that a new paradigm was emerging where brand was increasingly being considered in a strategic way, fundamentally anchored in the mission and values of an organization and critical at every step in the theory of change of an organization.

We also found that the role that brand played internally was as critical to many of the organizations we interviewed, as the external role of the brand. Internally, a strong brand drives cohesion and helps an organization build the capacity and skills to implement its social mission. Externally a strong brand results in trust among its many constituents, be they donors, beneficiaries, partners, or otherwise, which enables the organization to have greater

impact. What makes a brand strong though is the close alignment between internal brand identity and external brand image, what we call brand Integrity.

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is a good example. It has a portfolio of activities and partners, with programs spanning advocacy, market transformation, community-based conservation and climate change. Yet it is known for species conservation and its brand image is closely tied to the beloved panda logo. The WWF addressed this challenge by focusing its mission and vision statements, and developing internal story themes to help align the brand identity and image to help the panda convey the breadth of the organization's work without compromising both clarity and emotional pull.

Rahim Kanani: Did anything particularly surprise you about your research findings?

Nathalie Kylander: I was surprised by the enthusiasm and support for brands and the recognition of the important role they can play for many nonprofit organizations. I was used to talking to nonprofit practitioners who tended to be somewhat hostile to both the terminology and concept of brand, dubious about the effectiveness and even the desirability of using brand management at all.

I remember someone back in 2004 being adamant that his organization certainly did not "do" branding. During this research study, we did find brand skeptics and we certainly took their concerns seriously. Indeed, it is thanks to the skeptics that we were able to highlight the key sources of pride in the sector that helped us develop what my colleague Chris Stone brilliantly coined as [Brand IDEA framework](#), but the supporters of brand outweighed the doubters.

I am also constantly surprised, amazed and inspired by the many individuals working in the nonprofit sector that I had the pleasure to speak to over the past 18 months. These practitioners are dedicated, highly skilled and incredibly brilliant and visionary. Having worked in both the for profit and nonprofit sector over the past couple of decades, I feel that the expertise and capacity of many individuals in the nonprofit sector now exceed those of the for profit sector, something that might always have been true in the past.

Rahim Kanani: Does the role of brand in the non-profit space differ between sectors, or even between organizational size and capacity?

Nathalie Kylander: The role of the brand in both cases is very similar. A brand is a psychological construct held in the minds of all brand audiences, a promise, a short-cut for decision making if you will. Strong brands in both sectors enable organizations to build trust, gain resources, and establish partnerships and access.

But it is the complexity of both the goals and the audiences that nonprofits have to address that makes the brand perhaps even more critical in the nonprofit sector. For profits have a clear goal, as their name suggests, that of making profits, by satisfying their customer's needs and wants with products and services that are perceived to be better than their competitors. Nonprofit organizations on the other hand have missions that are complex to achieve, difficult to measure directly and typically require a number of partners. Nonprofits also have many "customers" or stakeholder groups that are critical to their success. The brand has to help nonprofit organizations at every step of their theory of change and also motivate donors, staff, volunteers, beneficiaries and partners.

I am often asked the question whether brand is more important for larger organizations than smaller ones. The answer is no. Brand, as conceived in terms of a strategic approach, is equally important to both small and large organizations. As Ingrid Srinath, Secretary General of CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, said to us, "You are a brand whether you like it or not....you're going to leave some impression in a person's mind [and] it's your choice whether you want to actively manage that impression or whether you want them to come to their own conclusions of what they think about you. It doesn't matter whether you're a one person advocacy organization or a transnational INGO."

Rahim Kanani: Now that you've established a rigorous analytical framework in this space, as you look

ahead, what's the future of non-profit branding?

Nathalie Kylander: My hope is that the [Brand IDEA framework](#) will be both helpful and relevant to a broad cross-section of organizations and nonprofit practitioners. Our goal is to spark a change in the way the nonprofit sector thinks about the role and potential of brand and to help practitioners anchor their brand identities in their organizational values and missions. We believe that the [Brand IDEA](#) can both strengthen the capacity and impact of individual organizations and help organizations embrace collaborations and partnership, as well as strengthen the impact of the sector as a whole. The future of nonprofit branding is bright and I hope to continue to participate in it.

[@rahimkanani](#) | [G+](#) [Rahim Kanani](#) | [Personal Contact](#)