

# Beyond The LOGO

## The importance of branding for parks and recreation professionals

By Sophia Young

*When* something goes wrong, such as a programming-related schedule mix-up or an altercation between park patrons, it affects an organization's reputation and overall brand. Strong brands are more resilient than weak brands, especially when something is amiss, which is why agency leaders must be mindful of their department's standing.

According to Brian Hill, project manager for Waters Edge Aquatic Design, an engineering firm based in Kansas City, Kan., after a major mishap, "that reputation sticks with you no matter how quickly you fix it."

Regardless of whether employees are aware, all parks and programs already have a brand and reputation. However, by taking control of the narrative to build trust or equity in the established brand, department leaders can get ahead of tough situations and recover more quickly from snafus.





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## *Understanding Brand*

Hill recognizes that branding is more than a logo, and that it is also tied to identity and reputation. “Branding is who you are, your mission and goals, and why you are here,” he says.

Ameerah Palacios and Linda Mather agree.

Mather, director of marketing for Rueckert Advertising and Public Relations and adjunct instructor of marketing at Hudson Valley Community College (N.Y.), says a logo is a visual identity, but the overall brand entails much more. “A brand is who the organization is with its values, vision, and mission, and how it’s perceived by its target audience.”

“It is a recognizable visual identity, reinforced with messaging, that helps the community and stakeholders understand the goals,” says Palacios, a national senior strategic-communications lead for HDR, a global engineering and architectural-design firm based in Omaha, Neb. “It’s the nexus of visuals, experience, and beliefs coming together to build the brand promise.”

If a logo is only one element of branding, and branding can be associated with reputation, mission, vision, and goals, then how should leaders define marketing? Palacios believes branding is the foundation and “marketing is the execution of the customer experience that creates moments of delight and discovery of the brand promise.”

Strong branding efforts can improve the quality of a park, facility, or program, and according to Palacios, they can even help activate a space or give a facility a meaningful purpose. “Branding can also help make seemingly mundane activities seem fun.” With a strong brand, a simple cleanup event, marketed as “the ‘gathering of park superheroes,’ for instance, can create a reason for people to dress up and celebrate,” she says. “We’re all looking for something that helps us connect and remember we’re not alone.”

Prior to working at Waters Edge Aquatic Design, Hill

was the aquatic manager for Wichita Parks and Recreation (in Kansas). As an industry professional, he experienced a paradigm shift in his thinking, mindful of branding in his daily duties. “I now needed to think about people from the outside looking in,” he says.

He received training about ways to properly use the city’s brand in his management role. “It was helpful, and it clicked with me,” he says. “However, not everyone was great at the execution.” He was able to recognize when other departmental programs “did things that did not tie back to their identity of who they were” and were inconsistent with the messages and images they put forth.

While his aquatic programs and facilities were subject to the city’s branding guidelines, he still found ways to brand a different identity for aquatics. “When you are part of the city, you are government, so you will never be separated from that. We are providing a service, and some citizens will critically ask why their taxes need to help pay

for the service they don't utilize," he says. "When you are commissioned or a non-profit, your funding sources look a bit different. It is important to show differentiation in that. Yes, we are part of the government, but we are the fun part."

Palacios serves on the Parks Alliance of Louisville, a Kentucky nonprofit with a mission to drive equitable investment into public parks to elevate the community's well-being. She says the bold vision of Great Parks for All "is backed up with bold branding. You see the colors that are vibrant and saturate you. The nonprofit delivers on that brand in their engagement in communities that have been underserved by giving them a voice and boldly forging new ground together with community."

When visiting the website for the Parks Alliance of Louisville, it's clear the visual aspects of the brand generate excitement. The high level of interest is most noticeable in supporters' t-shirts and bags, which demonstrate brand consistency in their designs. Palacios says it becomes a feeling of "these are parks I would want to visit."

"It's how the audience perceives the organization, and how it makes them feel," says Mather. "When an organization has an authentic, honest brand, it creates credibility because consumers believe it will keep its promises to them. A strong and positive brand provides a great customer experience consistently, which creates trust over time."

That feeling of trust measures the brand's strength. The stronger the brand, the more equity it has. That equity is important in case the brand's promise is jeopardized.

## *Brand Resiliency—Weathering Crisis*

Tracy Schario, external communications department chief for MITRE, a not-for-profit technology company, says that brand equity involves an ability to withstand criticism and crisis, and is important because "that means your customers, your employees, and others are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

If something goes wrong, believers who have come to trust the brand will more easily forgive the organization for its mistake. That's not the case with a brand that does not have as much equity or a strong reputation.

The people who talk about an organization become its influencers. "All those key audiences and stakeholders come to your help to build and influence your reputation," says Schario.

And it is wise to ensure the narrative remains positive because "when people expect the worst, they are going to find the worst," says Hill.

"You can feel bad branding as soon as you see it and experience it—[it] leaves you with a negative association or disconnect almost instantly," Palacios says. "It's like your brain stops, and you can't put all the elements together."

Attitudes correlate with or transfer into brand equity, which can lead to greater autonomy over the fate of programs and activities. In research on citizen-based brand equity, university professors Manuel P. Teodoro and Seung-Ho An found that trust and satisfaction were greater when brand equity was favorable. They also acknowledge that the public might not necessarily need to understand the agency to perceive an agency's brand favorably or unfavorably. Teodoro and An write, "Just as a commercial product's brand image may differ from the product's reality, so may a public agency's. Every agency has a brand insofar as it is perceived at all by the public, whether or not it is actively engaged in branding."

Taking control of the narrative to mindfully engage in branding is doable, and, arguably, it is critical.

For Hill, Wichita's parks and recreation department had dedicated marketing staff, but the aquatic programs and facilities did not, which meant he was unofficially in charge of the aquatic brand.

"No matter which pool you would visit, you would get the same experience from the staff." He made it a point to be consistent in the way the staff provided excellent customer service among the various facilities and programs to build trust in the aquatic brand. "The staff are part of the identity. I could foster the work culture, align our work with the goals and mission, and do consensus-building."

While Hill relied on the marketing team to look over program flyers to ensure they met the city's brand standards, he lived out the brand through operations to build equity and trust. He did what he could from where he was, and he controlled what he could control. "I needed a marketing person to look and make sure the wording was the same, fonts are the same, and the color graphics made sense. And from an operations standpoint, it was my duty to be consistent with staff."

"After a brand is established, all employees at all levels should 'live the brand,' which means everyone in the organization is on board with the brand established and follows the core values of the company through their behavior," says Mather.

As if branding were contagious, Hill believed that, if he lived out the mission and vision of the city within his own aquatic programs, the staff he oversaw would live it out, too, ultimately reaching the end-user in a positive way.

Reaching that end-user through positive experiences is important for the bottom line. "If customers consistently have a great experience, they will share their experience and others will want to have the same great experience with your brand," says Mather. "However, if consumers have a negative experience, news will unfortunately travel fast, and potential customers will choose to do business elsewhere."

A core value of the city was transparency, according to Hill, which he drove home in his program operations.

“We were very open about repair work, programming, and any cost increases months ahead, giving people reasons as to why. We didn’t want to have anything hidden. We did a lot of engagement digitally, such as sharing our lifeguard training or showing maintenance staff power-washing the pool. It really was about information showing what we are doing.”

Mather says, “If a brand is perceived positively, it will impact staff morale positively. Being aligned with a reputable company increases productivity, enthusiasm, and engagement. One of the best outcomes of a branding process is having a cohesive team of employees who believe in a shared vision and move forward together to ‘live the brand.’”

While having a cohesive team with a shared vision takes great leadership and time to develop, Palacios agrees that staff and the brand go hand in hand. “Your employees are your brand ambassadors and the first place people will look to see if you’re delivering on the brand promise.”

### *From The Inside Out*

One way to assess if a brand is weak is to gauge staff enthusiasm. “The lack of a brand in an organization can feel like there is no rallying cry or item that unites them, leaving a lack of belonging in some cases,” says Palacios.

Look to foster brand influencers within the staff and volunteers by encouraging a positive work environment and user experiences. When something goes awry, they will be the first to defend the brand, giving it the benefit of the doubt and hopefully saving its reputation so the parks and programs can continue to serve the community.

Also, look to foster brand ambassadors who understand the importance of the visual aspect of the brand when



it’s used on social media, signs, program flyers, letters, booklets, or anywhere the brand lives visually. Fostering these ambassadors means equipping them with useful materials and guides.

“Templates, talking points, and training are key to helping build the army of brand ambassadors in an organization. It takes time, and it takes an investment of intentional communication and systems that create consistent results,” Palacios adds.

“This can be a struggle, and the larger the organization, the harder it is,” says Mather. “However, communication is the key to make sure everyone is using consistent branded messages. Mixed messages can confuse the customer, and no one wants to do that, so if consistent messages are discussed organization-wide, most team members will follow the brand and work toward a common goal.”

An organization might not be large enough to employ a dedicated marketing person to monitor branding, but this should not stop smaller agencies from tasking a team member with brand oversight.

Tony Montgomery, partner and graphic designer for RDG, a planning and design firm based in Des Moines, Iowa, recommends designating a champion who “has the courage to hold each brand user accountable for proper use.”

“From an internal brand and marketing perspective (owner of the brand), it’s important to establish brand and marketing standards,” he says. “The brand messages will change



and evolve over time, but it's important to ensure that these are planned. It's also critical to periodically evaluate the breadth of messaging to ensure consistency and effectiveness."

Developing a branding guide for staff to follow is doable and does not need to be elaborate. Working for a large city, Hill recalls attending meetings and trainings about branding; they used lengthy documents that detailed the themes and fonts. Something of that magnitude is not always necessary for small organizations. Having the basic branding standards written down is an effective tool to control consistency in the brand's narrative. It is important to be clear with staff about how to appropriately represent the brand in materials and messages.

Mather says providing a branding guide is essential. "It's the set of rules that define the overall look and feel of your brand that your audience can recognize."

According to Montgomery, the important items to include in a branding guide are the appropriate typefaces, colors and textures, the logo, and examples of how the brand and logo could be misused. Mather says the guide should include "your brand story, key messages, fonts, color palette, logo usage, tagline, brand voice, as well as imagery/


graphic elements." She also says examples of the website, digital ads, letterhead, and brochures can be included.

Palacios agrees that examples of how the brand should and should not be used are basic elements of a branding guide. "It should also establish the best points of contact to collaborate with as the brand needs to evolve or for special use cases such as cobranding or new platforms for the brand which require creative interpretation."

Branding will not disappear if it is ignored. There is a reputation and equity in the brand that will exist whether someone in the organization is mindfully controlling the brand's narrative. Fostering the brand in a positive light ensures that, if a crisis or issue arises, a strong sense of trust will remain.

Hill advises, "It is essential for success in today's world. The sooner you can get focused on it, the better things will be." **PRB+**

*Sophia Young is a member of the Public Relations Society of America—Kansas City Chapter—and holds a master's degree in public administration and an undergraduate degree in communication studies, and is the communications manager for Waters Edge Aquatic Design.*



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