

# On Board

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## Branding Your School

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*What in the world is a brand? Does your school have one? Does your school's brand impact its effectiveness? Can a brand be developed? If so, how can your board bring leadership to the process? This brand new issue of ON BOARD is designed to help your board explore the interesting and important topic of school branding. Enjoy!*

Walt Disney. Starbucks. Wal-Mart. Do these names trigger any impressions, memories, or attitudes? Each of these companies works hard



want to 'brand' their product or service favorably in the minds of consumers in order to obtain and keep loyal customers.

Just what is a 'brand'? A common assumption is that a brand is a company logo, a product trademark, or a product name. It is true that brands have an identity; usually visual or auditory (think "golden arches"). However, an organization's brand is much more than a logo or identity symbol.

Scott Bedbury, author of *A New Brand World*, defines a brand in the following way: "The sum of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the off-strategy. It is defined by your best product as well as your worst product...For every grand and finely worded public statement by the CEO, the

to establish itself in the mind of its customers. In fact, these companies spend millions of dollars each year to ensure name recognition. More importantly, they

brand is also defined by derisory consumer comments overheard in the hallway or in a chat room on the Internet. Brands are sponges for content, for images, for fleeting feelings. They become psychological concepts held in the minds of the public, where there may stay forever. As such you can't entirely control a brand. At best you only guide and influence it."

Another take on branding is provided by Hugh Davidson, author of *The Committed Enterprise*: "A brand is the external expression of an organization's internal values." Both of these definitions imply that slick slogans, advertisements, or logos may help provide brand identity, but they do not necessary create the desired attitude about, or loyalty to, an organization, product, or service. Every business is branded in the mind of its customers by the experiences each customer has with the product or service offered. The brand ultimately reflects the core values of the organization and the perceived value to the customer.

### More thoughts about branding...

In a very interesting book entitled *The Power of Cult Branding*, authors Matthew Ragas and Bolivar Boeno explore organizations and individuals who have some of the most powerful

brands in the world. They identify nine premier ‘cult brands,’ so named because of the fanatic loyalty and commitment they command. Apple computer, Volkswagen Beetle, Star Trek, Harley-Davidson, Oprah Winfrey, and Jimmy Buffett are among the nine. An interesting list!

According the Ragas and Boeno, the leaders of these brands understand and exemplify seven features, or ‘golden rules,’ that elevate their product or service to ‘cult brand’ status:

- *They understand that consumers want to be part of a group that is different.* Cult brands understand the need of individuals to belong, to be a part of a group. At the same time, leaders of cult brands know that people want to belong to something that stands out by being special or unique in some way.
- *Their inventors show daring and determination.* The leaders of cult brands are willing to take big risks on ideas in which they believe. They are willing to stick with their vision in spite of critics and naysayers.
- *They sell lifestyles.* Cult brands become pervasive in the lives of their customers. They connect with the passions and dreams of people, providing opportunities for fun and enjoyment.
- *They listen to the choir and create cult brand evangelists.* The leaders of cult brands identify those who are most loyal to their product or service and then listen carefully and constantly to their feedback. This process helps create a ‘choir’ of loyal people who sing the praises of the product to others.
- *They always create customer communities.* Leaders of cult brands make their product come alive by providing fellowship opportunities that bring customers together through special events, activities, and conversations.
- *They are inclusive.* People want to feel special and be part of something unique, but they also need to feel welcome and



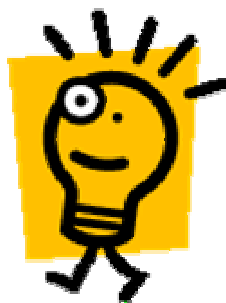
important. Cult brand leaders go to great lengths to welcome anyone who is drawn to their brand community.

- *They promote personal freedom and draw power from their enemies.* Cult brands play to people’s desire for flexibility, nonconformity, and choice. Leaders of cult brands help their customers rally against ‘the enemy,’ i.e. the product, service, attitude, or ideology that stands in the way of the values and vision represented by the brand.

Here are some “cult brand” questions to consider relative to your school... *What about your school distinguishes it from other schools in the community? Who are your school’s ‘evangelists’ and how do you nurture this loyal group of satisfied customers? How are you encouraging the sense of community among students and parents? In what ways are you intentional about listening to your school’s customers and receiving feedback from them? What are the things you do to help new students and parents to your school feel welcome and important?*

Scott Bedbury has been a key developer of branding strategies for many major companies and products, including Nike and Starbucks. In his book *The New Brand World*, he observes that successful brands share several common features. These include:

- *Simplicity.* The brand is easy for customers and potential customers to understand.
- *Patience.* Leaders allow enough time for the brand to take hold and don’t expect or seek instant success.
- *Relevance.* The brand is meaningful to the organization’s constituents.
- *Accessibility.* The product or service is easy for people to find and use.
- *Humanity.* People relate to the brand as authentic and real, rather than contrived or condescending.
  - *Omnipresence.* The brand is ‘everywhere.’ Through a variety of strategies, the product or service is highly visible and recognized.
  - *Innovation.* The corporate culture promotes continual improvement and innovation, so that



the product or service attracts new customers and continues to satisfy long-time customers.

Here are some questions to help you think more about Bedbury's list of common brand values...  
*Is your school's brand easy for people to understand? What makes your school especially relevant to those it serves? How visible and recognizable is your school within the local community? What innovations or improvements have taken place recently to attract new students and to satisfy those with long-term allegiance to the school?*

### What does all of this mean for your Lutheran School?



Books and articles about branding are interesting to ponder. But, is the concept of branding important for Lutheran school leaders? Here are a few possible implications

about branding and Lutheran schools that are worth discussing and testing:

- *Your school has a brand.* Whether efforts to develop and nurture it are intentional about it or not, your school is branded in the minds and hearts of its constituents.
- *Your school's brand is subject to the perceptions of its stakeholders.* You can influence these perceptions, but ultimately the brand and brand loyalty you desire must be earned by delivering on promises made and by exceeding expectations.
- *Your brand is more than a visual symbol.* It is the sum total of each individual's experience with your school. The school's logo, slogan, mascot, or colors help establish a brand identity, but these things do not, by themselves, create the brand.
- *Your brand is more than a marketing brochure.* Marketing plans and campaigns are important. They help inform people and can influence attitudes about the school program. Ultimately, however, the brand won't rise above the values that drive the school ministry.

- *Your brand can be customized.* Efforts to influence brand and to create brand identity can be customized to the needs and expectations of various constituents.

### Things your board can do



All school leaders – board, administration, pastors, faculty and staff - share responsibility for developing and sustaining the school's brand. As part of its governing responsibilities, appropriate roles for the school board in the branding process include:

- Providing leadership to ensure the school staff realizes the importance of the school's brand on its success.
- Focusing on 'big picture' issues such as how the school is perceived by people in the congregation and community and how to articulate the brand that is desired and needed for school success.
- Monitoring and assessing the school administration's brand development efforts.

One aspect of the school program worthy of



special attention by board and administration is the school's admissions process. No activity holds more potential for

promoting and branding the school than the process of recruiting and admitting new students. This is a great opportunity for receiving feedback from perspective parents and students about the reputation, perceptions, and concerns about the school. And, while the true test of satisfaction comes from experience over time as a student or parent, the admissions process is also a great opportunity to initially influence brand perceptions by building personal relationships, sharing helpful information, and providing assistance.

## *For Further Discussion*

Describe the brand you believe your school has and the brand you would like it to have. How do these differ? In what ways does your school's brand differ among its various customer and constituent groups? What values do you believe are at the core of your school's ministry? How consistently are these values experienced by those your school serves?

## *For Further Study*

The books referenced in this issue of ON BOARD are excellent resources for continued thought and discussion about the importance of branding: *The New Brand World*, written by Scott Bedbury and published by Penguin Books; *The Committed Enterprise*, written by Hugh Davidson and published by Butterworth/Heinemann; and *The Power of Cult Branding*, written by Matthew Ragas and Bolivar Boeno and published by Prima Publishing.

## *P.S.*

Are you gearing up for interviews with candidates for administrative or teaching positions? The Northern Illinois District of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has made available on-line a helpful document entitled “Interview Resource for Boards and Call Committees.” It can be accessed at [www.ni.lcms.org/callprocess\\_interviewguide.pdf](http://www.ni.lcms.org/callprocess_interviewguide.pdf).

Don't forget to contact the District, Synod, and church-wide offices of both the L.C.M.S. and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (E.L.C.A.) for helpful assistance in the search and selection process. In addition, the professional education organizations for both church bodies – The Lutheran Education Association and the Evangelical Lutheran Education Association – are also great sources for ideas and resources.

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