

Brand Matters: A Cautionary Tale

by Elana Centor and Gary J. Stern

Warren Buffet famously said, “It takes twenty years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you will do things differently.”¹

Few nonprofits have lived that experience more than Susan G. Komen for the Cure. The damage to their reputation is permanent. Headlines about it are forever accessible in a Google search.

*“Disaster! Komen Loses Nearly Half Its Walkers Following Last Year’s Scandal”*²

*“A Painful Betrayal”*³

*“How To Destroy A Reputation In Less Than A Week: Komen And Planned Parenthood”*⁴

What these headlines from *Gateway Pundit*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes* are talking about is how the organization’s “...reputation as a staunch protector of women’s health suffered a grievous, perhaps mortal, wound this week from the news that Komen, the world’s largest breast cancer organization, decided to betray that mission. It threw itself into the middle of one of America’s nastiest political battles.”⁵ Once one of the most respected nonprofits in the world, Susan G. Komen squandered that goodwill by not living their brand.

Branding and positioning: You can’t have one without the other

It takes a certain courage for organizations to go through the difficult and time-consuming process of positioning and branding. David Ogilvy, one of the original “Mad Men” (*Time* called him “the most sought-after wizard in today’s advertising industry”⁶) described the process as determining your organization’s “*intangible sum*.” The equation is: who you are + what you believe in + how that is expressed = a meaningful positioning and brand identity for your organization.

In *Positioning, The Battle for Your Mind*, Jack Trout and Al Reis remind us that the essence of positioning is sacrifice—you can’t be all things to all people. But you need to be the right things to the right people. Courage means knowing who the organization is, knowing what you most deeply believe in, and staying true to the brand promise you make.

Defining your brand

The moment anyone starts talking about branding, ask what they mean. And if you ask four people, you’re likely to get six definitions. Since there isn’t just one definition that organizations rely on, the key is to make sure your organization has a common language when it comes to working on branding. One of our favorite definitions for branding comes from Kristin Zhivago, author of *Rivers of Revenue: What to Do When the Money Stops Flowing*. “Branding,” according to Zhivago, “is the promise you make and your brand comes from the promises you keep.”⁷

Brands aren’t static

Say yours is an arts and technology magnet school that provides alternative learning experiences to all high school students in a particular city. You must attract at least 200 students district-wide to stay open. Your enrollment is falling

At a glance

Your organization’s reputation may be its most precious asset. Authors Elana Centor and Gary J. Stern help you understand:

- How branding and positioning are related
- How brand is defined
- Why brands are always evolving
- The importance of keeping your brand “promise”
- When it is time to revisit the organization’s brand

Positioning and branding are long term and strategic. Your organization needs to ask about its brand promise as a routine part of ongoing board deliberations.

short and through research you learn that potential students believe the school is exclusively for “troubled” youth in one particular neighborhood of the city vs. “talented, edgy” youth in all parts of the city. This school needs to revisit their brand promise and reposition the organization with their target audiences in order to succeed.

Keep the brand promise

To survive and thrive, an organization must make and keep their brand promise through every single interaction with every single person. It should become an automatic question before any decision, major or minor: “Does this keep our brand promise?” If you can’t say *yes* with absolute confidence, then the decision could potentially damage your organization’s brand.

To revisit the brand promise, stop and take a deep look at *who you are, what you believe in and how that is expressed*. Every decision should reflect the organization’s positioning and build brand identity.

Is it time to revisit your brand?

Any decision that would alter your organization’s positioning and brand calls for participation by the board. Depending on your governance philosophy this may mean:

- A board and staff task force with final decision-making by the board.
- A board liaison to a staff-led process in which the board has opportunities for input before a final decision by the CEO.
- Other types of board engagement or approval authority when the organization may be altering its positioning and brand.
- Asking the “brand promise question” as a routine part of ongoing board deliberations.

Positioning and branding are long-term and strategic. Who you are, what you believe in, and how you express your organization’s identity and beliefs create the organization’s reputation. This critical asset takes years to build, and as we recently witnessed, represents a fragile promise that must be carefully kept.

¹ *Encarta Book of Quotations*, St. Martins Press, 2000; page 151

² *Gateway Pundit*, June 20, 2012, <http://www.thegatewaypundit.com/2012/06/disaster-stl-komen-foundation-loses-30000-walkers-following-scandal/>

³ *New York Times*, February 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/03/opinion/a-painful-betrayal.html>

⁴ *Forbes*, February 3, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/daviatemin/2012/02/03/how-to-destroy-a-reputation-less-than-a-week-komen-and-planned-parenthood/>

⁵ “Uproar As Breast Cancer Group Ends Partnership With Planned Parenthood,” by Gardiner Harris and Pam Belluck, *New York Times*, February 2, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/us/uproar-as-komen-foundation-cuts-money-to-planned-parenthood.html?_r=1

⁶ As reported in Wikipedia, September 24, 2010, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ogilvy_\(businessman\)#cite_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Ogilvy_(businessman)#cite_note-0), in the October 12, 1962 issue of *Time*

⁷ <http://www.zhivago.com/revenue-growth-services>

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