

## Maximizing Impact Through Brand Leadership

Branding may not be the first thing on a nonprofit's mind, but telling a story that creates a lasting impression is critical to gaining the support that the organization needs to continue its mission. It becomes even more important in an increasingly competitive landscape, where more organizations are competing for limited resources – both financial and human.

On Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, Haverford hosted a panel discussion featuring some of the region's top nonprofit minds to discuss branding and its role in a nonprofit organization. The lively conversation covered several important aspects of branding in the nonprofit world. The panel featured:

**Marcus Allen**

CEO, Big Brothers Big Sisters  
Independence Region

**Hon. Rence Cardwell Hughes**

CEO, American Red Cross  
Eastern Region

**Stephen S. Tang**

President and CEO,  
University City Science Center

### Value Proposition – Getting Your Message Out

Every nonprofit organization asks people to pay attention, to spend their time and energy, to lend their experience and relationships and to invest their personal and financial capital. How do you make sure you're talking about your organization and its impact in the right way?

**Hughes** – Brand is everything. Fundamentally, The Red Cross stands for one thing: we help. In reality, the Red Cross is actually complex, with five different lines of business. The challenge is for us to get the community not to think about the five businesses, but to think when you see the Red Cross what does it mean to you and how does that translate.

We have a bible of what you can do with the brand, but I made it personal for me. I wear red 99 percent of the time so people can see me and see the mission. As people think about your company and when they hear the name, what pops to mind – what resonates? What do you give in 30 seconds or less to people that grabs them?

**Allen** – Coming to Big Brothers Big Sisters, when people hear the name they understand the name but don't really know what we do. There was this education we had to figure out – how do we get people to understand what we do? My understanding of how to be a successful nonprofit CEO was we needed to grow our visibility and get as many people as possible to have a good feeling about Big Brothers Big Sisters whether they knew what we did or not.

My job is to differentiate us throughout the city, and I do that through letting people get to know me. I had to get out there myself as a leader because I think people tend to give to people first. Some missions have been around for a while and people aren't necessarily giving to those missions. Why not? They don't feel good about the brand or the leader. In the nonprofit space, I believe you need to have well-respected, consistent, community-involved leader.

People come to your mission for different reasons, so the elevator speech may not be authentic for everyone. At a board retreat, we started letting board members practice our mission statement because they are volunteers with passion for the organization. People ask: "how do you get 35 board members on the same page?" We play to their strengths. We want as many of our board members, employees, clients to be ambassadors and acknowledge and recognize them for that.

**Hughes** – Part of your challenge as the leader of a nonprofit is find out what drives your board members' passion, and help them be authentic about their story. It's finding ways to help board members learn how to tell the stories. Because they are your first ambassadors.

**Tang** – We just went through a brand refresh and the theme that we created is: "We Are All Scientists." Basically, we all try and fail and try and fail, and then we succeed and break through. That's what we do to help innovators and entrepreneurs bring a spark of an idea to create products and services and companies that create jobs and transform people's lives.

We have a different challenge because we don't have a heartstring issue. We talk about something ethereal. Innovation is elusive. You can't get your hands around it. How to create a message that's compelling for donors is yet another challenge. Here is where we play to our strength: job creation. It becomes a "Did You Know?" message – what are the stories behind companies that we can help tell?

Most people didn't grow up liking science. As scientists, we are trained to speak to a narrow group of people and speak with depth about something only a few people care about. Part of being a leader of this organization and trying to get a brand message out is to un-learn all of that, and instead bring a message of innovation and entrepreneurship into the mainstream. As community leaders, we have to subscribe to bigger mission for all of us.

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- Marcus Allen

### Personal vs. Enterprise Brand – Is There a Line?

So much in the nonprofit world is defined by the leaders of the individual organizations. How should the leader's personal brand merge with, and relate to, the brand of the organization and its mission?

**Tang** – The science center is about innovation, entrepreneurship and reaching scientists and helping them push their mission into the marketplace. It serves the mission to be thoughtful and considerate and listen well to what the innovator is saying. A part of this is also the way you present yourself. My audience isn't only the business community, it's the scruffy entrepreneur and I have to be able to reach them as well. Being approachable on all levels is important. It's about credibility and trust.

The formula that I've always used is trust equals credibility times intimacy, divided by risk. You can be highly credible, but if you aren't warm and fuzzy then you don't have much trust built in. The risk factor means that if it's a bigger ask, then you need to have extremely high credibility and intimacy for them to trust you. Because my audience is between the academic and the industry area, I think my personal brand of being more understated is more important to what we do.

**Hughes** – I never had the luxury of working in an environment – and I don't think I'd want to – where my personal brand is separate from what I do. It's all about integrity and credibility, so I don't think you separate your personal brand from the brand of the company. You have to be willing to put your personal stamp. But I don't think it's just for not-for-profits. It's all very personal. They are intimately intertwined in terms of how you relate to the community and the message you bring.

**Allen** – When you're in this position – the CEO of a nonprofit – you need to understand that the only person in the organization that people are really going to take their cues from is the CEO or the Executive Director. Whether it's good and particularly when it's bad, it's going to be on you.

When I took this job in April 2013, I found out that July that I was getting divorced. It was a total shock. My brand was always one of a family guy – that's how I wanted to be known, and it aligned with my work. I did something unusual. I met with my staff and said: I'm going through this, so if you want to let me go I understand. But we need to strategize on what could come out – what could someone say that could damage the organization. One of the things I started to do was notice what I was posting on social media. So many people have a living room seat to your life, and I think that's an advantage for people who can leverage it properly. You have to share things thoughtfully, and know that it's never going to go away. Everything that I was posting for my first two years was approved by our VP of Marketing and Communications and our PR Firm, even if it was my personal stuff and particularly if it could be political. Because it's not about me, it's about our organization.

I don't want to send a message that personal brand is more important than enterprise brand, but the enterprise brand can't be fully leveraged without a great personal brand of your CEO and its officers. That's what board members need to think about when hiring a CEO. What do you want them to represent? There are some parts of your brand that won't change, but there are smaller things that you may modify depending on the audience.

**Tang** – I was appointed last year to co-chair the National Advisory Council for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, which advises the Secretary of the U.S. Dept of Commerce. I was appointed under the Obama Administration, but now serve under the Trump Administration. There's a difference of views, and a great example of that is immigration.

We decided to take up the matter of immigration because over a third of our entrepreneurs who have become successful come from outside the country. We thought hard about how to position the issue to make it acceptable and

apolitical. The issue is that immigrant entrepreneurs create jobs for our country, so it's a positive message. I'm very active on social media. You have to be out front with an issue that ties back to your organization and you have to be brave and bold enough to express it in face of what could be negative consequences.

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### Bumps in the Road – Mergers, Affiliations, Crises

Most of the branding conversation will be positive, but in the nonprofit world there will always be bumps in the road that executives and leaders need to handle. How the leader reacts when faced with that event is equally as important as what actually happens to force that change.

**Hughes** – The very first thing is open and honest communication with your board and your staff. The hard truth is always better than a pretty lie. People can't help you when you're covering up. Assess whatever the situation is and have a clean, clear, honest communication with your Board of Directors and your team, and level-set where we are and what this is about. There will be bumps in the road and your team and your board are going to follow you. If you come with honest communication about the problem, and come with a strategy that isn't a closed strategy. You need to give people the opportunity to buy-in before you make a public statement. It keeps people loyal to you and trusting you. Some nonprofits may face events at the national level that don't have anything to do with you, but you own it because you are part of the brand. That's part of that honest, direct communication.

**Allen** – We just went through a merger two years ago, and we had been discussing a merger for years. Neither the other organization's board, nor its community wanted the merger because there was a negative perception about a Philadelphia organization going into New Jersey. Being on the board of United Way and seeing their challenges of going into New Jersey, I was able to learn from that. I had to go into communities and make sure the people knew that I've lived in these communities as well.

I first went with my personal brand, meeting with people and getting them to trust me. Then I went back and said here's our agreement, here's what we can do. After a six-month process, we did a merger. Though, the way it works for us is that it's an acquisition – which is seen as the death of something. Understanding the emotional piece as it relates to branding is important. You can have the tactical plans drawn up, but emotion trumps strategy every day of the week. We did the merger and the national office – the brand protector – changed how they do mergers across the country because of how we went through our process.

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