

ASSOCIATION BRANDING

How To Stand Out In A Very Crowded Crowd, Attract New Members, Retain Current Members And Increase Attendance At Meetings

As you know, there is an association for just about every imaginable group in America.

The good news is that virtually every adult in America belongs to some association. The bad news is that virtually every adult in America belongs to some association. The competition for new members and for getting people to attend your conferences is extraordinary.

While associations provide the foundation for great networking, learning and career advancement, there also comes a point where a person can only belong to so many different ones. To complicate matters, the economy has forced people to either search for a job or do more work at their job with less help. Consequently, there is even less time and money for people to join associations and attend meetings.

All of this leads to the big question, "**How can an association attract new members, retain current members and increase attendance at meetings?**" The answer is for the association to be seen as such a valuable entity that people would not dare to not belong or to not attend the meetings. In other words, the answer is to build a great brand. A brand is the perception of value that people think they receive from being a member of your association or attending your meetings. Obviously, building a great brand is easier said than done.

Over the past five years, I've worked as a corporate advisor with more than 400 executives at Coca-Cola, McDonald's and Marriott. One common denominator of these individuals is their relentless focus on protecting and enhancing their brands. Here are six steps to building an effective, sustainable brand. Also provided are practical examples of how each idea can be applied to a hypothetical association, the *National Association of Mosquito Smashers (NAMS)*. My hope is that you will search for ways to apply these concepts in a practical way to your association.

The Branding Process

- I. [Identify your customers.](#)
- II. [Determine what outcomes they want.](#)
- III. [Determine their one to three highest priority outcomes that you can generate.](#)
- IV. [Gear every decision and activity toward delivering at least one of these three highest priority customer outcomes.](#)
- V. [Be boringly consistent and thoroughly innovative.](#)
- VI. [Market to resonate.](#)

I. Identify your customers.

As they sing in *The Sound Of Music*, let's start at the very beginning. Your customers are your dues-paying members and people who will pay to attend your meetings. Write down a description of your customers. You may end up with a variety of categories. That's ok. Start as broad as you want. Identify all of the different types of people who would pay to be your members or attend your meetings.

For example, the customer base for the *National Association of Mosquito Smashers* might include:

- Doctors who treat people for severe mosquito bites.
- Medical researchers who study the effects of mosquitoes and how diseases are transferred.
- Parents concerned with the harmful effects of mosquitoes on their children.
- Members of pest control companies.

Do the same for your association. Write down any group that might have people who would want to join your association or attend one of your meetings.

II. Determine what outcomes they want.

For each group, write down the outcomes they want to achieve. Remember: outcomes, not inputs such as activities, products or services. An outcome is what will be different for them. An input is what your association will do for them. People pay for outcomes, not inputs. Again, be as broad as you can in writing down the desired outcomes for all of the different customer groups you serve. You will narrow your focus in the next step.

The desired outcomes for the various customer groups for the *National Association of Mosquito Smashers* might include the following:

- Doctors who treat people for severe mosquito bites.
Desired outcomes: reduce the number of deaths of severely bitten patients, reduce the number of sick days that patients experience, have patients receive care faster.
- Medical researchers who study the effects of mosquitoes and how diseases are transferred.
Desired outcomes: develop a vaccine that greatly reduces the harmful effects of mosquito bites, eliminate the capacity of mosquitoes to transfer diseases from one person to another.
- Parents concerned with the harmful effects of mosquitoes on their children.

Desired outcomes: for children to stop being bitten by mosquitoes, to be able to play outside in the summer without worrying that their children will have bites all over them.

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- Members of pest control companies.
Desired outcomes: increase sales of bug sprays, meet all federal regulations and avoid paying penalties.

Before you read any farther, write down the various desired outcomes for your diverse customer groups. You want to start with as big a picture of possible so that you can see the common themes and then whittle your list down from there.

III. **Determine their one to three highest priority outcomes that you can generate.**

You now see a host of desired outcomes that your customers want. If you try to deliver all of them, you won't effectively deliver any of them. Narrow your list down to one to three desired outcomes. Your final list may not even include anything that was on your original list. It may end up being a combination of outcomes that various groups want.

For example, the three highest priority desired outcomes that the *National Association of Mosquito Smashers* will focus on delivering are:

- a. Reduction in mosquito bites across the United States.
- b. Reduction in sicknesses caused by mosquitoes.
- c. Reduction in the costs of preventing mosquito bites.

Again, the absolute key in building a great brand is not to focus on your brochure or your locations for meetings or what food will be served on breaks. The key is to clarify what desired outcomes your association is going to deliver to your customers. This is your value-added. Delivering important outcomes is the reason why people will go out of their way to join your association and attend your meetings.

IV. **Gear every decision and activity toward delivering at least one of these three highest priority customer outcomes.**

Now that you have narrowed your list of high priority customer outcomes to three or fewer, your real work has just begun. Your job is to constantly find ways to improve these outcomes and then communicate that you deliver these results. Recently I ate at

a restaurant that called itself, "The Best Restaurant In The Midwest." Unfortunately, the food was cold, the floor was sticky, the waitress was rude and they didn't accept credit cards. The label didn't match the reality.

The first step toward improving these few outcomes is to start with your board meetings. I've attended well over a hundred board meetings both as a board member and as an corporate advisor. I've served as the president of three local chapters of three different national associations. For the most part, board meetings are a massive waste of time. Usually each person explains to the group what they have done since the last meeting and what they will be working on. Unfortunately, very little of this verbiage is connected to the three highest priority outcomes that the association is trying to deliver. Most of it is internally focused on activities and complaints. This does NOT add value to customers in a way that will increase membership or attendance at meetings.

Just as a pilot light ignites the furnace that heats an entire home, so too an effective board meeting ignites the projects and conferences that deliver value to an enormous number of people.

Step one: is to take each high priority customer outcome and have each board member answer this question, "**What three things can we change or improve that would have the greatest positive impact on improving this desired outcome and why did you select these?**"

Step two: is to break your board into small groups of four to five people. Have each person read off his or her answers. After everyone in the small group has heard each of the ideas, discuss what has been heard and narrow the list to the top three ideas from that small group. This might mean combining ideas to generate even better ones or to select a given idea.

Step three: is for each small group to read off their top three ideas to the other small groups. At this point, the entire board discusses how they can combine ideas to make even better ideas and selects the three best ideas for improving that particular high priority customer outcome.

Step four: is to do the same thing for the other two high priority outcomes.

Step five: is to look for common threads from the three sets of ideas. You will likely find that one idea cuts across two or maybe even all three high priority outcomes. At the end of the discussion, narrow your lists of activities to the three things that will have the greatest positive impact on generating the desired results.

Step six: is to develop an action plan in terms of roles and responsibilities on how you will execute these three value-added activities.

Let's go back to the *National Association of Mosquito Smashers*.

The group decides to focus on priority outcome number one: reduction in mosquito bites across the United States. Each of the ten board members writes down their three best ideas. They move into two small groups, and after much discussion the two groups come up with these six ideas:

0. Establish a **Mosquito Hotline**, where any member can contact the **NAMS** national headquarters to report unusually high volumes of mosquitoes in their area. **NAMS** then forwards this information to all of the doctors, medical researchers and pest control companies within the association. This allows the research to be completed in real-time studies, for doctors to treat patients faster and for pest control companies to eliminate the mosquitoes before they spread to other parts of the country.
1. Coordinate **Mosquito Roundtables** throughout the country. These roundtables consist of a diverse group of parents, pest control company employees, doctors and researchers in cities throughout the U.S. In order to get on a **Mosquito Roundtable** you have to be a member of **NAMS**. Each roundtable discussion focuses on how to remove mosquitoes permanently from their community.
2. Create a **Mosquito Update** website that has member-only access to the latest research on mosquitoes.
3. At the annual national conference, bring in victims of severe mosquito bites to discuss the dangers of mosquitoes and have doctors and pest control company representatives discuss the best methods for reducing the risks of being bitten by mosquitoes.
4. Have staff members of **NAMS** send press releases to major publications around the country explaining the dangers of mosquitoes, how to remove them and what can be done to keep them from returning.
5. Certify **NAMS** members to teach courses in grade schools and high schools on how to remove mosquitoes from backyards.

The board members then examine these six ideas and create the following combinations:

Ideas 1, 2 and 5: Any time high volumes of mosquitoes are discovered the word not only goes out via e-mail to members, it also gets posted on the website and is sent via press release to major national publications.

Ideas 2, 3 and 4: Videotape roundtable discussions and presentations at the national conference and post them on the website for viewing by members only.

Ideas 2, 3, 4 and 6: In addition to putting the video presentations on the website, also use them when members teach classes on Mosquito Control at the various grade

schools and high schools.

Once you have clarified a few things that will have the greatest positive impact on delivering a specific high priority outcome, put together an action plan. The most important part of this plan is to decide what you are going to stop doing. That's right, you have to decide what your association is going to stop doing in order to have the time, energy, money and resources to do the few things that will have the greatest positive impact.

The Four Clarifying Questions are:

6. **What is our highest priority customer outcome?**
7. **Why do we want to achieve it?**
8. **What three things will we do that will have the greatest positive impact on improving this outcome?**
9. **What six things will we stop doing in order to have the time and energy to do what needs to be done to improve this outcome?**

As you will soon notice, the last question is the hardest to answer because it forces you to give up some cherished traditions. However, those traditions are not of value if they are not helping to improve one of these three highest priority customer outcomes.

v. **Be boringly consistent and thoroughly innovative.**

This is where discipline becomes crucial. Dozens and dozens of times, I have seen groups clarify an important outcome, develop an action plan and put their plan into motion only to shift their focus, plan and actions within a few months. Groups that constantly shift their desired outcomes have zero chance of growing their membership base or attendance at their meetings. All groups grow or shrink due to a phenomenon known as "word-of-mouth." Members and attendees either tell other people that the association is truly a value-added or it is a waste of time. The only way to gain momentum is to stay focused on a few desired customer outcomes long enough that customers will tell other people to join your association. I encourage you to read a magnificent book called *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell (Little, Brown & Company, 2000).

However, and this is a very big however, you must constantly innovate in order to improve results in the customers' highest priority outcomes. One effective way to do this is for the board to repeat the process I described above on a quarterly basis. Keep searching for better ways to do what you're doing. With the *NAMS* example, they could keep searching for ways to have more effective roundtables, a more efficient and effective website, better relationships with major publications and so on.

Another way to be innovative is to identify changes in society that provide

opportunities to add more value to your customers. *NAMS* could exploit the advances in wireless technology in classrooms to provide up-to-the-minute information on mosquitoes to grade school and high school teachers that could be relayed to the students' parents. Within 24 hours, every member of every community endangered by mosquitoes could be warned and provided with information on how to protect their families.

VI. **Market to resonate.**

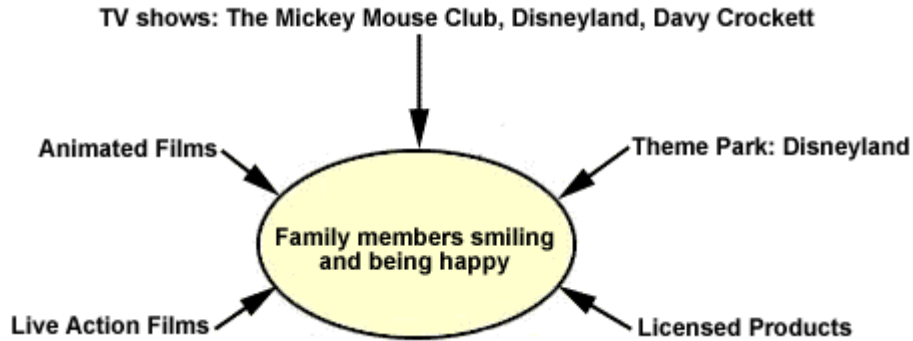
The greatest value-added in the world will not increase membership or attendance at meetings unless people know about them. The key is to "brand" each component of what you do so that the pieces work together synergistically. Synergy happens when each of your value-added components support and promote each of the other components. Name each of your meetings, programs, member services, websites, articles, newsletters, magazines, local chapters and so on in a way that customers or potential customers understand the connection between them. You want people to be able to easily describe what outcome they get as a result of being part of your association.

If *NAMS* is going to be known for eliminating mosquito bites around the country, then every one of their value-added components needs to be named in a way that delivers that message. Here are some examples:

- Call their quarterly magazine, *Mosquitoes Suck, Bite Back*
- Have a 1-800-hotline, *The Save Your Skin Hotline*
- Call the national conference theme, *Revenge of the Picnicers*
- Name their certification process, *Certified To Kill* (Ok, maybe not!)
- Call the programs at the grade schools, *Take A Mosquito Out For Lunch Today*
- At the top of each press release, put "**America's Battle Against Bugs That Bite**"
- Make t-shirts for members that say, "**We Smash Mosquitoes**"

Here's a famous example of how to build a brand: *The Walt Disney Company* in the 1950s. Walt Disney defined his customers as "family members." He determined that "smiling and being happy" was the highest priority desired outcome of family members that he could generate. Consequently, he searched for as many ways as he could think of to deliver this outcome.

The Walt Disney Company's efforts looked something like this:



Each of these ways of delivering value promoted the other ones. When you watched *The Mickey Mouse Club* television show, you would learn about the new animated films, live action films and attractions at *Disneyland*. When you went to *Disneyland*, you learned about the new films and their characters, which led you to buy the new licensed products.

Over the next five decades, the company has stayed boringly consistent and thoroughly innovative in terms of focusing on entertaining all members of the family and generating smiles and happiness. They didn't shift their focus and start making medical products for all members of the family. Over time they added Saturday morning cartoons, *Disney On Ice*, retail stores, additional theme parks, videos, CDs, and a myriad of other products and services that entertain all family members. An argument could be made that the only time *The Walt Disney Company* has hurt itself is when it has strayed from delivering entertainment for all members of the family. For example, when they started making films and television programs that would be nearly impossible for all members of the family to watch together, they hurt their brand.

On the next two pages are a self-evaluation of your current branding efforts and a template for creating a plan to build an effective, sustainable brand.

Remember the desired outcomes: **retain current members, attract new members, increase attendance at meetings and stand out in a very crowded crowd!** The tougher the environment, the better your chances are of demonstrating true value to your customers.

How Well Do You Stand Out? *The Brand Acceleration Radar Gun*

VII. Identify your customers.

1. (Yes or No) We have a written description of our various types of customers.

VIII. Determine what outcomes they want.

2. (Yes or No) For each type of customer we have identified a variety of desired outcomes. _____

IX. Determine their one to three highest priority outcomes that you can generate.

3. (Yes or No) We have clearly identified the three highest priority customer outcomes that we will focus on delivering. _____

X. Gear every decision and activity toward delivering at least one of these three highest priority customer outcomes.

4. (Yes or No) The agenda of our board meetings focuses on how to deliver better results in at least one of the three highest priority customer outcomes. _____

5. (Yes or No) The activities of our various committees are geared to improve results in at least one of the three highest priority customer outcomes. _____

6. (Yes or No) Our website clearly articulates the three highest priority customer outcomes that we work to improve. _____

7. (Yes or No) The various programs at our national meetings all focus on delivering at least one of the three highest priority outcomes. _____

XI. Be boringly consistent and thoroughly innovative.

8. (Yes or No) We have sustained our focus on these three highest priority customer outcomes for a minimum of two years. _____

9. (Yes or No) We constantly search for and implement ways to improve results in the three highest priority customer outcomes. _____

XII. Market to resonate.

10. (Yes or No) Both customers and non-customers understand the value we deliver in terms of the customer outcomes we improve. _____

Every "No" represents an aspect of your brand that warrants attention!

Building A Great Brand *The Plan Of Attack*

XIII. Identify your customers.

The types of customers we have or want include:

Customer Type #1: _____

Customer Type #2: _____

Customer Type #3: _____

Customer Type #4: _____

XIV. Determine what outcomes they want.

Our customers' desired outcomes include:

Customer Type #1 Desired Outcomes: _____

Customer Type #2 Desired Outcomes: _____

Customer Type #3 Desired Outcomes: _____

Customer Type #4 Desired Outcomes: _____

XV. Determine their one to three highest priority outcomes that you can generate.

Our three highest priority customer outcomes are:

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

XVI. Gear every decision and activity toward delivering at least one of these three highest priority customer outcomes.

What we will do to deliver each of these outcomes includes

_____ .

XVII. Be boringly consistent and thoroughly innovative.

On the following date, we will examine how we are delivering value and what can be done to improve that delivery _____ .

XVIII. Market to resonate.

The names we have for each piece of what we deliver to customers includes

_____ .

These different pieces support and promote each other in the following ways

_____ .

Dan Coughlin's newest booklet now available on this website on [The Coughlin Company Store page](#): "Enhancing Top Performers: 15 Ways To Be, Manage and

Develop A Top Performing Executive".

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