



Health Care Branding

Addressing the Branding Challenges in Today's Health Care Marketplace

By Karl D. Speak



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Consider this reality. The big guys are taking over the small guys. The small guys are banding together to become big guys. And the solo service provider now offers health care from A-Z. What makes for good business page reading, however, has not been without consequence. Organizations, once secure with their identity, are struggling to understand what version of the company emerged from the latest acquisition. Employees ask, "Who are we now?" and consumers ponder, "What can I expect from them?" A health care branding challenge has emerged.

Health Care Branding...Beyond Corporate Identity

As change becomes the status quo, health care organizations face the challenge of changing or reinventing their (corporate) brand identity. Not an easy task.

Building a strong identity in the health care category comes with a unique set of branding challenges. Consider that a successful branding strategy must address how to:

- Re-shape the consumers' perceptions of the health care organization by signaling a new future-focused strategy;
- Consolidate and coordinate existing identities;
- Preserve the equity residing with keystone health care identities and leverage those equities to build trust and equity in the new identity; and

- Incorporate the values of the organization to reinforce "living the brand."

Today's health care environment requires a branding process that goes beyond the traditional, corporate identity process. It's a process that focuses on building brand equity with health care consumers.

Brand Equity, Not Just a New Logo

Brand/image equity is the goal of every branding strategy.

Brand equity is the value of the loyalty between a consumer and a health care organization. The equity exists in the minds of the organization's constituencies (consumers, physicians, payors). And is the collection of perceptions that are associated with an organization -- good or bad.

Contrary to common belief, most organizations or products do not build brand equity with big advertising budgets. Companies build strong brands by consistently delivering quality



products/services, nurturing customer relationships and delivering consistent, meaningful messages. To build valuable brand equity, an organization must start with a solid branding strategy and involve everyone in the organization to reinforce the "promise" behind the brand.

In the traditional, design-driven corporate identity process, an organization seeking to establish "difference" develops a one-of-a-kind icon and color palette, which reflects their company personality. This is but one baby step in the journey to building brand equity.

An identity earns valuable equity when the image becomes widely known, is distinctive, and demonstrates value to the marketplace. This cannot happen -- with lasting effects -- without a vision for the brand and a consistent set of brand management practices.

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Taking on the Health Care Branding Challenge

It is safe to say that most health care organizations have a limited experience base in developing branding strategies. This manifests itself in a lack of a common definition of brand identity, confusion over the role brand plays in the organization's overall strategy, and lack of understanding the far reaching implications of a new brand strategy. For some organizations this inexperience translates into a sense of anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed by the prospect of "re-branding" the new entity.

Rest assured there is a process that can guide any organization through the branding challenge. Experience suggests that the branding process has 3 different dimensions that can make it challenging and tiresome.

- Emotions -- the nature of an identity change can be emotionally charged because of the stake people have in existing identities.
- Politics -- an identity and its hierarchical relationships has definite implications of power.
- Brand Management Experience -- translating the discipline of branding to the challenges of the health care environment requires some experience and flexibility.

At the conclusion of the successful branding process the health care organization has a framework that --

- Identifies key brand equities by linking the branding strategy to the business strategy;
- Promotes consistent brand communications, identity usage and brand management activities; and
- Moves the organization to support the brands' promise by incorporating the group's cultural values as a key element of the brand identity.

At the completion of the framework, the organization is now in a position to move forward to build brand equity with its consumers.



The Health Care Branding Process

We know from experience that all successful branding strategies start with the commitment and involvement of the executive team. Once the executive team is on board, you must work through the messy details of a branding system.

And finally the branding system must be documented in a well-understood usable framework. On the following page is a diagram of a branding process that has been adapted and used with many different types and sizes of health care organizations.



Heath Care Branding Process





Top 6 Lessons Learned from Branding Health Care Organizations

We all know that experience can contain many valuable lessons. Following is a list of lessons learned from going through the health care branding process.

- ***It is important to have consensus from the executive team on the business strategy.*** A true branding strategy synchronizes the branding identities of an organization with its business strategy. Therefore it is vital that the executive team be in a position to have consensus on the business strategy of the organization and be able to articulate it clearly. This is not as easy as it may sound. In fact it is most often a stumbling block encountered at the outset of the process. It is this lesson that necessitates the need for an executive workshop to create a common language and vision about the organization's strategy and vision for the brand.
- ***Don't underestimate the "populist" nature of existing brand franchises.*** Long standing health care organizations often times carry a franchise that represents loyalty both internally and with consumers. Caution should be used before any changes are made to existing, valuable brand identities. That doesn't mean existing identities are sacred and cannot be changed. In most cases changes in identity are necessary, but the change must carefully evolve and be presented with a sound rational.
- ***Deciding on a branding system requires careful consideration and trade-offs.*** Developing a branding system is rarely a

clean, neat process. Although a robust system starts with a set of guidelines, there will be exceptions to the rules. Don't let the exceptions make the rules, but be advised there will be imperfections. Make room for exceptions, but chose your battles carefully. Not all brand identities carry the same weight. Be prepared to make the hard decisions to insure the identities that have real icon value are consistent with the branding strategies. (This is one area where that executive commitment can payoff.)

- ***Understand your competitors' brands today and their future direction when creating the new brand's positioning strategy.*** Building a valuable brand equity that is distinctive and relevant takes time and consistency. Before you craft your brand strategy be sure of your competitors' brand positions and future intentions. It is important that you establish your brand's unique position and be in a position to deliver on the brand's promise better than any of your competitors.
- ***Commitment, not compliance is the key to successful implementation.*** In organizations of all sizes there are many, many occasions to violate the underpinnings of the branding strategy. Inconsistency is the biggest enemy of all branding efforts. Therefore it is so important to gain consensus among key stakeholders of the brand. There are not enough "brand cops" or big enough hammers to force compliance of the branding system. Be sure and include communications and training elements to your branding process.



- ***Brands have values and personalities.***
Brand loyalty is based on an emotional commitment. To develop the emotion around your organization's brand give it a personality and call out its values. Each brand should have a brand character statement that is the basis of its market position. Furthermore the brand character needs to be backed with a brand promise statement that sends a concise message to the organization's culture. Aligning the organization's value system with the values that are at the foundation of the branding strategy is a critical element of the branding challenge.



About the Author

Karl D. Speak is a consultant who delivers powerful insight and practical advice on brand management issues. At the foundation of his experience and knowledge are his activities connected with Brand Tool Box, Ltd., the company he founded in 1984.

Karl has implemented his contemporary approach to brand management with a wide range of corporate clients, such as Allina Health System, United Healthcare, Honeywell, Cargill, Marshall Fields, American Airlines, Federal Express, ING, Qwest, IBM, US Bancorp, Pillsbury Company, AT&T, Motorola, Skandia, The Scotts Company, Stanley Tool Works, *The Wall Street Journal*, Walgreens, 3M, Sony, and Target Stores.

Karl recently co-authored a book titled *Be Your Own Brand*, which has been translated into ten languages. This book introduces personal branding how successful people have learned to consistently act out their personal values to make a difference in relationships throughout their lives. This book provides practical advice and how-to's for individuals to be more successful by being "more of who they are, not less."

As an accomplished presenter, Karl speaks to many different types of audiences around the world. His energetic style and wide reaching knowledge of brand management make him a favorite speaker with executive teams. Karl has trained hundreds of marketing professionals in the discipline of brand management in corporate training seminars, in addition to his teaching at University of Minnesota, University of St. Thomas and University of Westminster.

About Brand Tool Box, Ltd.

Brand Tool Box, Ltd. is a unique professional services organization melding world-class brand expertise and organizational development best practices to help organizations improve their brand-building competency. We know brand inside and out. More importantly, we know how to make it real for any and all types of organizations. We don't design logos or create advertisements – we provide valuable insights; develop powerful strategies; and enhance our clients' corporate brand-building competency skills. Since 1984, our clients have benefited greatly from our singular focus. Everyone at Brand Tool Box is committed to delivering *ingenious solutions* that build loyal relationships.



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