

Branding 101

By: Scott Vaughan

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What is a brand?

In the book, The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding, by Al and Laura Ries, branding is equated as being very similar to branding on the ranch. “A branding program should be designed to differentiate your product from all the other cattle on the range. Even if all the other cattle on the range look pretty much alike.” They write, in the book’s introduction, “The objective is to create in the mind of the prospect the perception that there is no other product on the market quite like your product.”

Churches have missed their unique calling

Branding certainly applies to the Christian church – a collection, assembly or an organization of Christ’s believers, who together have a collective focus on God. And, because each of those believers is unique among other believers, and unique to God for His unique purpose, it only stands to reason that each church is a unique organization owned by the Holy Spirit to serve a unique community in a unique way.

Branding helps identify the unique church as it pursues God’s plan for it – even if it’s a community with other churches that ‘look’ pretty much like it.

Sadly, over time, we have allowed our churches to become generic. In many communities, the only arguable difference between some churches is the name on the sign – and that is becoming less and less important to the community. The community is more interested in the unique ministry to individuals and families.

Branding helps churches grasp their unique calling and then communicate that unique calling to a unique community.

Branding and the pastor

Should the church brand change with each new pastor?

No.

Most churches and their communities existed prior to the pastor’s arrival and will exist after the pastor has departed. Corporations do not change their brand when the CEO changes – even if the CEO brings a new vision to the company. Church denominations and other national or international non-profits do not change brands every 5-7 years. Likewise, the church should not change its brand with each new leader.

Many pastors work to clarify their ministry – with a church – around God’s leading in their own lives. I recommend that churches do not change the larger brand as a part of this process, but create a secondary brand around a specific ministry emphasis. There’s more on this subject, below, as titled “What about ministry brands?”

If a church and its pastor decide to completely alter the church’s direction, moving completely away from the distinctive nature of the current brand, the church can be repositioned in the community under a new brand. Before taking this step, however, I recommend answering this question:

Will this new ministry direction extend beyond the current pastor?

If the answer to this question is ‘no’ or ‘maybe,’ my recommendation is to keep the current brand, and reposition the new ministry direction under a lesser, secondary brand that doesn’t replace the corporate brand of the church.

How do we discover our brand?

It’s important for a church to discover its unique nature among all other churches. I typically ask churches to make a list of characteristics unique to any other church in the community. These must be real characteristics – not felt characteristics. A real characteristic might be unique ministries, unique facilities, unique services, and unique events. A felt characteristic might include ‘fellowship’ or ‘a sweet spirit’ or ‘a caring family of faith.’ Felt characteristics often are neither unique nor can they be substantiated by the church as a whole.

The unique characteristics of the church begin the process of developing the brand. In addition to the unique characteristics, churches must explore their unique ministry strengths - what ministry strengths ‘separate’ us from other distractions to the community? What ministry strengths are we known for? Unique characteristics and ministry strengths need to be recognized behind the brand; or, when people see the church’s brand they immediately think of the church’s unique nature and ministry strengths. Now, it’s time to write a simple paragraph explaining each of the characteristics and strengths. Perhaps, this can even be a time to brainstorm about new ministries that help distinguish the church.

Once the list is complete, a marketing strategist (yes, like me) can help the church build a brand from the unique characteristics of the church.

What elements compose the brand?

In corporate America, a lot of elements compose the brand. These elements exist within the church brand, but on a much simpler level. With unique characteristics in hand, here are my recommended brand elements:

- (1) Logo. The logo is the simple graphic presentation of the church’s unique characteristics and strengths. It’s the artwork that distinguishes the church from all other churches, non-profit organizations, and community business clutter. It’s the cornerstone of creating the church’s graphic identity to cause a community image to be developed. Used in connection with a multi-year, strategic marketing campaign, the church’s ministry strengths are communicated through the simple nature of the church logo. For this reason, in most cases, the logo is not a generic piece of artwork: a cross, a dove, a fish, a lighthouse, a net, and silhouettes of a family, a tree, a hand, or even a steeple. All of these could, in most cases, apply to every Christian church and therefore don’t distinguish the unique ministry of the church at hand.
- (2) Color. Depending on the logo and the unique characteristics, a corporate color is identified. This color or mix of colors carries the graphic presentation of the logo.
- (3) Message. The brand also includes a message – a simple statement that supports both the logo and the unique characteristics of the church. The message can be a paragraph, which can be abbreviated to just one sentence for multiple uses. The message is crafted from the unique characteristics. Again, many churches opt out for generic statements that can apply to any church. These, in my opinion, are not faithful to God’s unique calling for His unique church.
- (4) Typeface. The brand text includes a unique typeface or presentation. A graphic designer can help the church select a typeface that complements the logo, correctly identifies the church by name, and well-presents the brand message.
- (5) Contact Information. Many strategists might not include contact information as a part of the formal brand, but I do. I think it’s important to think through all the different ways the church can be contacted, and then give thought to how those are presented in graphic relationship to the logo.

Brand Presentation

Once the brand is developed, it must be presented appropriately and consistently. Any miscue in presentation affects the performance of the brand for the good of the church. Here is a list of tips regarding brand presentation:

- (1) Put the logo everywhere. The logo can be presented by itself. It should always be presented in the exact color palette but black, white on a corporate color background, and metallic colors are appropriate, too.
- (2) The message and contact information should always be used in relationship to the logo. These elements should not be presented without the church logo.
- (3) As a first move, all corporate stationery, guest information, and the church website must be brought into brand compliance.
- (4) Quality control regarding the presentation of the brand must extend from the church office to every ministry and to every ministry volunteer.

What about ministry brands?

It is very appropriate for ministries of the church to have their own unique brands. A youth ministry, for example, might have its own brand. However, because the ministry is an outgrowth of the church, the corporate brand should and must be included – perhaps even in a subtle and smaller format – with the ministry brand.

Take a look at can of Diet Coke or Sprite or even Tab. Each of these products has its own brand identification. However, at the bottom of the can is the statement “a product of The Coca-Cola Company.” And, The Coca-Cola Company brand is there in much smaller form.

This presentation positions Diet Coke, for example, as a brand of The Coca-Cola Company, but successfully markets The Coca-Cola Company brand as the parent.

A ministry should not be allowed to pull itself away and apart from the corporate church that sponsors it.

Brand Development. Scott Vaughan Communications, LLC provides brand development assistance for churches. This process includes assisting a church – even by long-distance – in determining ministry strengths and then creating brand elements for marketing the church. For more information, please visit the ‘Graphic Design’ page of the www.svministry.com website. In addition, Scott Vaughan is available to teach branding skillshops for churches, church leaders, and faith organizations.

Scott Vaughan is a former newspaper publisher and editor, working for 20 years in Georgia and South Carolina. From 1994-2003, he served as director of marketing for the South Carolina Baptist Convention. He is a journalism graduate of the University of Georgia with sociology as his minor field of study. He holds a Strategic Marketing Certificate from Emory University’s Executive Education Program in Atlanta. <^><