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Branding Strategies in Non-profit Organizations

By

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Abstract

Branding through children is a marketing tactic that many organizations and businesses utilize today; but what marketing strategy best carries out a message to the children and their guardians themselves? This thesis examines the different strategies used by for-profit and not-for-profit companies in order to better understand branding through children. It dives into an experiment testing the effectiveness of various marketing approaches and their success of gaining further children at events. The strategies are then dissected into which worked best in order to answer the question, "What branding strategies are most effective for non-profits which focus on children?"

Literature Review

Introduction

When looking at branding as a whole, it is clear to see the importance of creating a distinguished relationship between a brand and consumers in order to be successful. Developing a target audience is the key focal point of any business, and branding lies at the heart of it. According to the Harvard Business Review (2023), understanding a brand's product, story, customer, and culture, are the four key elements to developing a brand. Focusing on a brand approach can be difficult; however, following these pillars can guide a company through change and lead them into a positive direction.

For example, in 2015 the designer brand, Gucci, had a 'brand revival' that allowed a notably new creative vision, store refurbishments, and improved digital offerings. As a result, there was an annual revenue increase of 7.8%, an annual operating income increase of 21.7%, and an 86% increase in first quarter online sales compared to the same periods in 2015 (Andjelic, 2021). Gucci understood that a primary factor to overall brand achievement was having a signature brand aesthetic. An overall brand attractiveness, translates directly into a brand's core products, which is ultimately, the purest distillation of what a brand truly is (Andjelic, 2021). In order to understand a brand, one must create an audience that's willing to care and learn about the brand itself.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of branding entirely, urging the audience to see branding in other companies, to branding in non-profit organizations, down to branding in non-profits with a target market towards children. The ultimate focus lies in the question, "What branding strategies are most effective for non-profits which focus on children?"

Like many other objectives in life, the research question came into light after many trial and error attempts. Many non-profit organizations tend to shy away from different branding strategies in the marketing field; however, they also wear many hats along the way. Seeing how the majority of not-for-profit companies make a variety of different flyers, social media posts, public relations campaigns, etc. derived the ultimate question of the study.

Non-profit Branding

Branding throughout the non-profit sector is heavily reliant upon brand image, as it plays an important role in the framework for charitable donations and the ways in which consumers view an organization (Michaelidou, 2015). A brand's image is much more than a logo, mission statement, or t-shirt given out to employees. It is the overall mix of associations consumers make based on every interaction they have with a business (Thimothy, 2016, 1).

For non-profit organizations, marketing is a method to identify potential supporters, ensure potential supporters understand the excellent work they are doing, and create opportunities for supporters to be involved (SalesForce, 2023, 2). Non-profit branding refers to the process that builds a visual identity to help people recognize the organization and its mission and to influence how people perceive the overarching message (Crowdspring, 2023, 4). In addition to this, non-profits are beginning to develop online platforms to increase fundraising strategies and give a more user-friendly approach that connects with potential donors (SalesForce, 2023, 3). Non-profits anticipate a large portion of their annual support to come from giving consumers a genuine, personalized experience. Many individuals may ask, "What kind of 'experience' can a not-for-profit organization give its supporters?" An excellent example of this is the Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC); a not for profit organization that serves as a

temporary home-away-from-home for families whose children are receiving treatment for serious illnesses (McDonald's, 2022, 1).

The Ronald McDonald House utilizes its brand in order to gain funding to support the families of children in need. As part of their platform, they offer different methods to help fund the non-profit organization and show communities their impact through the different houses (McDonald's, 2022, 4). Like virtually every non-profit, RMHC engages in community and volunteer partnerships in order to function on a daily basis. For instance, in 2021, nearly 29,000 McDonald's employees – including Owner/Operators, Developmental Licensees, employees and crew – actively volunteered with RMHC Chapters (McDonald's, 2022, 5). Others even volunteered as RMHC Board members, helping shape the direction and approach in line with the needs of families in their local area. Volunteers are vital to RMHC, helping offset costs and allowing the Charity to direct more donations to services supporting children and their families (McDonald's, 2022, 6).

Many non-profit organizations such as: Ronald McDonald House Charities, St. Jude's and Feeding America, utilize their target market and/or a sector of their foundation, in order to successfully market their platform. For many of these 502(c)(3) companies, their market and branding is through children. By doing so, it opens the door for an increase in things like donations, volunteers, partnerships, and the hearts of individuals in the communities.

Branding is the ultimate tool to any marketing campaign or technique. In relation to branding through children, it is critical to 'market your cause' in order to achieve the ultimate outcome that an organization is wanting. According to the National Institutes of Health, cause-related marketing campaigns have a direct relationship with cognitive and affective attitudes, in addition to one's overall purchase intention (Terblanche, 2023, 1). By understanding

the ‘cause’ of any organization, it allows for its target audience to have a clear vision of the common goal and whether or not that common goal is something that they want to pursue and/or value themselves.

Branding Through Children

When analyzing non-profit organizations that brand through children, Big Brothers Big Sisters is an excellent example. On the organization’s website itself, Big Brothers Big Sisters markets children by plastering various images of a child with an older adult on every page. In each photo, there are smiles and strong interactions between the two individuals. Big Brothers Big Sisters promotes their belief that every child has ‘incredible potential’ (Big Brothers, 2023, 1). Big Brothers Big Sisters utilizes children throughout their marketing campaigns in order to raise awareness of the organization, gain further volunteers/interaction, and solicit donations.

When looking at the donate tab on their website, the largest statement reads, “It’s not just a donation. It’s an investment in a child’s future” (Big Brothers, 2023, 2). This phrase indicates the importance of branding through children by creating a phrase that markets something further than a monetary donation (see Appendix A). It develops a call to action, saying that an individual’s donation could ultimately change the lives of a child’s future in the long run.

Research Question

By researching the overall structure of marketing and branding, it allows for businesses to better understand and analyze their target market, while gaining a stronger perspective on how to achieve a common goal. Marketing provides insight into the day-to-day functions within an organization (for-profit or not-for-profit), and allows for individuals to refine strategies to help

other departments along the way. Brands like Guicci have had ‘brand revivals’ to gain the outcomes that they desire. Others like the Ronald McDonald House Charities, have displayed the importance of donations towards their non-profit and expressed how children benefit on a daily basis through donors' daily gifts.

Many non-profit organizations have specifically emphasized their branding focus towards children. To investigate branding with a focus on children, the following research question is posed, “What branding strategies are most effective for non-profits which focus on children?”

Methodology

Feeding Southwest Virginia

To investigate how non-profits who have a focus on children can effectively brand and market the organization, Feeding Southwest Virginia was chosen for this study. The food bank located in far Southwest Virginia was chosen due to their emphasis on children and focus on branding entirely, throughout the company’s strategic plan. By looking at non-profits as a whole, it is easy to understand that each organization must have a foundation in order to cultivate donors, push their message, and expand for growth. Feeding Southwest Virginia’s mission statement is to nourish neighbors, engage community partners, and develop solutions to address food insecurity (Feeding Southwest Virginia, 2023, 1). In short, Feeding Southwest Virginia is a food bank and distribution center that is a direct partner in the Feeding America network. The organization functions through countless community partnerships in order to feed and change the lives of individuals in Southwest Virginia, in any way that they can (Feeding Southwest Virginia, 2023, 6).

To coincide with Feeding Southwest Virginia's target audience, the food bank has had to get creative with their marketing strategies. Understanding the people Feeding Southwest Virginia is trying to reach, is a key necessity when it comes to food insecurity. While this may seem like a simple approach, each program that is offered at the food bank, is marketed differently. Some of the food bank's programs target elderly individuals, while others are more focused on middle-aged groups who can run a food pantry (Feeding Southwest Virginia, 2023, 3).

But, to understand the overall analysis of the research done, further investigation was done into the ways Feeding Southwest Virginia reaches out to children through their children's programs. Feeding Southwest Virginia utilizes social media, public relations, and flyers to correctly and efficiently brand their company by using children. An excellent example of this is on the Feeding Southwest Virginia website. After hitting a header that says, 'our programs,' it takes you to a page that shows a young child eating. This is one major instance of how Feeding Southwest Virginia practices branding through children and social media specifically (see Appendix B).

In addition to social media, Feeding Southwest Virginia has created a plethora of different flyers, newsletters, thank-you cards, etc. that feature children. In order to market the overall brand to communities around us, the food bank tends to 'pull the heartstrings' and gain support from donors and civic leaders across the region.

In this newsletter, the young girl below is featured above the section showing potential donors on the different ways to give to the non-profit organization. By doing so, it markets a child in need, undergoing food insecurity, to the general public.

It is critical to note the first line stating, “Your kind donation today helps feed hungry children, seniors, and families in Southwest Virginia.” There is no coincidence or surprise that the word ‘children’ was included first in this list. People want to help people. However, people want to help children specifically, as they cannot help themselves at their current age (see Appendix C). No matter the given situation or homelife that they are in, it is ultimately up to good citizens and community leaders to take care of and fight for these young individuals. Feeding Southwest Virginia recognizes this and uses it as a key reason to brand the organization through children.

Data Collected

Over the period of time from September 2021 to December 2022, data was collected utilizing three different marketing outlets: social media, public relations, and flyers. These tactics were all used to test and see which method reached the largest number of children. While each tool was to be used differently, they all were to not only reach the largest number of children, but to get the greatest turnout of children at a food distribution / event.

Social media is one of the greatest ways to reach individuals in the society today. There are multiple different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, Snapchat, Twitter, VSCO, etc. that all aid in the process of spreading a message. Feeding Southwest Virginia used social media in this study to better reach children and the families of children who were facing food insecurity.

In September of 2021, Feeding Southwest Virginia held a Kids Farmers Market (KFM) in Coeburn, Virginia, where children can come to a common site and receive free produce from the truck. Here, each child is provided with ten fake dollars, to go through the produce stands and

purchase their fruits and vegetables to take home. Not only is this similar to a real farmers market experience, but it's getting healthy foods into the bellies of children in the area (Feeding Southwest Virginia, 2023, 8).

At this event, there were a large amount of social media postings, one being a week in advance and an additional post being two days before. There were approximately 72 children who came to the Kids Farmers Market in Coeburn, Virginia. This form of marketing continued for three months in order to gain further evidence.

In January of 2022, Feeding Southwest Virginia utilized a stronger approach of marketing through public relations in order to feature the Kids Farmers Markets. There was a news broadcast two days before the event and public relations personnel promoting it with the school system the day of the KFM. This was also in Coeburn, Virginia and there were 65 children that attended. The strong public relations approach also continued for three months.

In April of 2022, Feeding Southwest Virginia held another Kids Farmers Market event at the same location. This time, flyers were distributed to the school system and printed throughout local businesses and the Feeding Southwest Virginia Distribution Center (see Appendix D). This event was also held at the same location for three months in Coeburn, Virginia, with a total of 30 children that visited the KFM. To see the overall turnout of children at a Kids Farmer's Market event, see Appendix E.

Recommendations, Managerial Implications, Future Research

After completing the study to better understand which marketing tactics allows Feeding Southwest Virginia to expand their reach of children, there are some recommendations to take into consideration.

First, it is important for Feeding Southwest Virginia to understand its target market of the event. In this case, it's not only children, but the families of children. After all, most children below the age of 18 are unable to drive themselves and rely on an adult for transportation. After looking at Feeding Southwest Virginia 's target market, it's necessary to think of the fastest, up-to-date source of information regarding the Kids Farmers Market events. This source will allow for children and parents / guardians to have accurate information in the event that a KFM is canceled, rescheduled, or if there's any other pertinent information.

As mentioned earlier, the Ronald McDonald House Charities prides themselves in offering a genuine, unique experience for everyone that may come into one of their facilities. This is ideal verbiage, indicating that anyone, no matter what they are going through, can be safe in knowing that they are well-taken care. Feeding Southwest Virginia could tailor this towards their approach and use it as a marketing tool to gain more children at the Kids Farmers Markets.

For instance, having a social media post explaining the fun experience that a child will have would likely entice more children to come. Or something as simple as a picture of a laughing child on the flyer, may gain some attention. Feeding Southwest Virginia could also offer an activity to be included with each KFM, allowing the kids a space to get some fruits and veggies, followed by a fun activity - this could be advertised to additional children.

From the study itself, social media seems to be the most effective marketing method to gaining more children at a Kids Farmers Market event during a three month period. By saying

this, Feeding Southwest Virginia should consider performing further research within their marketing department, in social media specifically. This study could analyze and compare multiple social media platforms posts, based on their engagement and effectiveness to raise awareness about the events and Feeding Southwest Virginia entirely. By doing so, it would allow the company to better understand and achieve more accurate, specific goals in the future.

Lastly, another topic of future research may ask, “How can Feeding Southwest Virginia increase the number of children at Kids Farmers Markets through social media and public relations?” With both categories being close contestants for KFM turnouts, it would be interesting to see how the constant promotion of both would interact with the monthly KFM attendance.

Understanding the importance of marketing can be challenging for many companies. Learning the different tactics and methods in which to approach ones target market is not always easy, making it uncomfortable for many organizations in our society today. Learning to effectively market a specific audience, product, and/or group is a critical skill to the success of every business.

When it comes to marketing children, there are many benefits that allow for further expansion across markets. For non-profit organizations specifically, marketing children allows for more fundraising opportunities, a separate target for expansion, an increase of volunteerism and many more. Ultimately, being able to effectively create a marketing strategy that aids in spreading a common message, is the greater goal of any marketing tactic.

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Appendix (A)

Be A Part of Something Big



Appendix (B)

Young Child Eating





Appendix (C)

People Want to Help Children

Every Meal Has a Story...


Beginning as a disaster relief organization under TAP in May of 1981, Feeding Southwest Virginia evolved to become a prolific resource for thousands of people across the region. Although we have faced a great number of challenges in our 40-year history, including a fire that destroyed the original food bank, major tragedies such as the Virginia Tech shooting, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic, our mission to end hunger in Southwest Virginia has remained steadfast.


WAYS TO GIVE

Visit feedingswva.org


Your kind donation today helps feed hungry children, seniors, and families in Southwest Virginia. FSWVA welcomes all types of gifts and we are happy to work with you and your financial adviser to maximize the tax benefits and value of your gift to the Food Bank. Every dollar counts.




Gifts of Cash




Gifts of Marketable Securities



Legacy Gift Bequests Through a Will or Trust



Supper Heroes Become a Monthly Donor



Gifts from Donor-Advised Funds

Appendix (D)

Kids Farmers Market Flyer



FEEDING SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA'S

FREE KIDS FARMERS MARKET

Please join us for this **FREE** event for children 18 years of age and under who are accompanied by an adult. Children choose free produce using "Food Bank Bucks" (provided).



Wednesday, June 29, 2022
Feeding Southwest Virginia CSC
2328 Melrose Ave NW, Roanoke 24017
3:30pm - 5:00pm



This institution is an equal opportunity provider

Appendix (E)**Turnout of Children at a Kids Farmers Market**