

## Branding and the Public Sector

By Martin E. Thoma

Public sector agencies—state governments, federal agencies, quasi-governmental entities—are frequently charged with influencing opinions or changing behaviors.

Anti-smoking and pro-seat-belt campaigns come to mind. But there are hundreds more every year: earthquake and emergency preparedness, prenatal care, cancer screening, driving safety, anti-littering and many more specialized efforts. Funding for these programs comes from federal grants, state legislative earmarks, special interest associations and private money. The programs and their objectives are as varied as the organizations and interests financing them.

The public sector is wired up very differently from the private sector. For starters, there's rarely a profit motive—which would seem to break down the fundamental conceit of branding. (After all, branding is really about making money, right? Doesn't have to be!) In addition, public-sector stakeholders are vastly more diverse, decision-making is much more consensual, risk tolerance is exponentially lower.

So what can the discipline of branding offer the public sector? Well, the track record is clear: creating distinctive, memorable and compelling brands in the public sector can produce results just as effectively as in the private sector.

The Click it or Ticket seat belt use campaign sponsored by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration has essentially created a nationwide advocacy brand.

The brand makes clear its promise: buckle up or we'll cite you! But it also displays many marks of the effective brand: a clear, memorable identity; consistency across all communications platforms: advertising, news media relations, vehicle and road signs and more; and adaptability to local market needs.

NHTSA did not set out to create a national public sector brand—it more or less evolved because it worked. NHTSA funds individual state programs and lets each state's highway safety office work with a firm to develop their local campaigns. When the Click It or Ticket slogan bubbled up out of the early work in North Carolina it gained traction quickly.

NHTSA at first began encouraging states to utilize the slogan, and only later began requiring it as a condition of the grant. Each state still retained tremendous latitude in how it designed and implemented its own program. In a decade, Click It or Ticket had developed a national imprint—and been credited with significant increases in the seat belt use rate, especially in the poorest performing states.

As part of state-level Homeland Security efforts, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) turned to international communications firm Fleishman-Hillard to help ensure that Missourians of all ages and ethnic backgrounds, from all corners of the state, had the necessary information to be prepared before, during, and after a public health emergency, including a terrorism event. Fleishman developed and executed a program called "Ready in 3, Three Steps to Prepare for an Emergency." The campaign reached millions; a poll in August 2004 showed that 80 percent of Missourians said they were at least somewhat prepared for weather-related emergencies, and 54

percent said they felt prepared for uncommon emergencies such as a large fire or explosion. Importantly, 87 percent of households had acted in some way to prepare for emergencies. The “Ready in 3” brand identity reinforced the core idea and paid off a simple, easily remembered concept.

In 2000, the Arkansas Highway Commission recognized that its massive Interstate Rehabilitation Program—which would reconstruct some 60% of the state’s interstates in five years—was a recipe for motorist frustration and accidents. It recognized that a comprehensive statewide information and safety campaign was imperative. And for the first time, the department chose to hire an outside media consultant to help it conceive and execute the program.

We might have simply run ads saying, “Be careful. There’s a whole lotta paving going on.” But we did more; we deployed an arsenal of brand tools—creating a unifying brand identity, developing a consistent look and tone of voice, launching imaginary “spokescharacter” Highway Guy. Every message and activity was kept consistent with internal logic of the safety “brand.”

The program captured nine national and international industry awards for creativity and effectiveness, but more importantly it helped hold interstate fatalities to zero increase during a period of ten times normal construction.

Tourism and economic development agencies have certainly understood the power of brands. Las Vegas, for instance, is not just a city. It’s an idea. Its tourism promotion board has cleverly capitalized on the idea of a “sin city” with the playful advertising campaign tagged, “What happens in Las Vegas stays in Las Vegas.”

While social marketing programs are naturals for brand marketing, Greg Brooks, an expert providing communications solutions for governments, argues that every public sector agency essentially has a brand with certain characteristics that private-sector CEOs would kill for: market dominance, ubiquity, household name recognition. Think about your state’s highway department or your City Hall.

The problem for public agency brands in general is that they exist by default, not by design. Brooks argues that smart public agency leaders who apply the brand leadership discipline to their organizations and communications can earn trust and influence with constituents, legislators, elected superiors and peers. Those are precious assets to any public sector entity; they are assets to be earned and stewarded, not bestowed by default.

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