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THINKING OUT LOUD No. 6

## Branding in the public sector: An overview

### The Takeaway

Public-sector agencies have many of the branding characteristics that private-sector marketers would love to attribute to their products, from marketplace dominance to name recognition.

Too often, however, these resources aren't properly leveraged by public agencies, which often take a "new logo, new tagline" approach to evolving their brand.

When it comes to public-sector communications, too many managers equate a new logo, a zippy tagline or other cosmetic fix with the cure for public apathy or ill will.

The bad news: They're wrong. The good news? There are proven approaches that really do work..

Marketing builds the brand in the mind of the customer. There's a symbiotic relationship at work here — if the brand doesn't reflect the realities of your organization, then all the advertising, and public relations in the world won't help achieve your objective. Conversely, a strong brand can, naturally boost any marketing effort, which in turn strengthens the brand even further.



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First, a definition:

**Branding** is based on singularity; it creates the perception that there is no product on the market quite like your product. Nouning and verbing are both good branding tests, i.e., Instead of imported beer, you can ask for Corona and instead of looking something up, you Google it.

The lesson? A brand is a singular concept you own in the mind of the prospect/customer. In this sense, many public agencies already own what Fortune 500 marketing executives dream of: They are completely associated with the service they provide.

But being joined at the hip with your product or service isn't enough. A great brand won't appeal to everyone because singularity ensures that no brand can have a universal appeal.

And how does this relate to the public sector? Any branding effort for an existing, high-profile public agency or jurisdiction has to start with a simple truth: There's already a brand in play, albeit one that likely exists by default rather than design.

Every public institution already has a brand, defined as follows:

$$\textit{Expectation of value} + \textit{sum total of customer experiences and perceptions} + \textit{recognized sensory imprint} = \textit{brand}$$

Branding gets thrown about as a synonym for “new logo,” but if that were the case, then branding would be the domain of graphic designers alone. A brand consists of:

- **Expectation of value:** When I see, hear or read about the entity behind the brand, what do I expect from them?
- **The sum total of customer experiences and perceptions:** In a well-managed brand, this will be close to or identical to the expectation of value; in a less well-managed brand, these experiences and perceptions may vary wildly from the expectation of value. Experiences always overshadow the expectation of value in determining how the public reacts to a brand.
- **Recognized sensory imprint:** For most companies, this means a logo. But it can also include taste, scent, sound or other factors depending on the brand. Whatever it is, it serves the same purpose: A quick touchstone to elicit the expectation of value.

But touchstones aren't always what you think they are — an example: While working with a utility that wanted to “re-invent itself,” the room was stunned into silence at a simple, powerful revelation. Pulling out a copy of their monthly bill, the utility's branding consultant said: “This is your brand. Everyone knows it by sight, everyone knows exactly what it means to get one and it is the one time each month when your customers consistently think about you. In the corporate world, marketers would kill for that sort of recognition and attention — so what are you doing to leverage it?”

## Challenges and Opportunities

Several characteristics shared by many public agencies can be both challenges and opportunities as part of a rebranding effort:

**Characteristic: Dominance** — Often, a public agency owns something highly visible with no competition. (Think: roads and state departments of transportation.)

**Challenge:** Competition is a natural brand strengthener — if the object of branding is to get to “when I think of x, I think of company a,” in the mind of the customer, then the unspoken conclusion of that thought is “... in comparison to companies b, c and d.” An agency that utterly dominates some aspect of public life (again, the roads/DOTs example is apt), it is, ironically, subject to less appreciation because there are no other alternatives.

**Opportunity:** In a situation like this, the agency doesn’t need to consume branding resources getting to the position of category dominance that’s required of any strong branding effort — the agency is already there. That means management can focus on dominating categories of perception, rather than product, i.e., if the agency is already known for transportation (or providing social services, etc.) and there is no strong competitor on the horizon for the public’s attention in that area, then the focus should be on dominating in perceptible categories, such as efficiency, good stewardship of state resources, environmental leadership and project delivery.

**Characteristic: Ubiquity** — Certain public-sector agencies have the blessing and curse of truly pervasive presence. The department of transportation is a perfect example of this, but so are police and fire services. For these lucky (and, as you’ll read below, unlucky) agencies, name recognition likely surpasses that of the elected officials who govern them.

**Challenge:** An agency that is virtually everywhere can be, in the mind of a public quite capable of screening out excess information, nowhere.

**Opportunity:** Physical ubiquity parallels dominance as an area where resources often don’t need to be expended in building the brand. But before you think you’re off the hook, ask yourself: Does all that physical ubiquity translate into the same level of mission understanding that other agencies enjoy with the public, legislators and the press? Branding opportunities lie in leveraging physical presence with positive brand-reinforcement messages

## Bringing up the V-word

Another action with high potential upside is to align the agency at every reasonable level — from its mission and goals to its communications practices and even, in some instances, its operational practices — to the core quality-of-life values shared by most of its constituents.

Although a broad, rigorous public process is the only truly safe way to identify what the various publics believe their cornerstone values to be, experience with public agencies around the country reveals a few (reasonably) safe bets:

**Safety:** In groups of varying demographics all around the country, safety consistently comes up as a primary quality-of-life value — often the overriding one. The concept of safety means different things to nearly everyone, but for public agencies, the message is clear: visibly putting safety first and making a commitment to safety-centric policies and goals is going to play well in Peoria.

**Stewardship:** For most agencies, but particularly those that control extensive public infrastructure, the current status quo is the end result of decades of local, regional and state effort. Often, even the largest individual project catching current media attention is but a rounding error compared to the the intrinsic value of of the overall system (think: roads, airports, water/sewer systems and schools). Communicating the fact that an agency takes stewardship seriously often falls by the wayside or gets drowned out in more-political discussions of urban vs. rural equity, geographic squabbles, etc. That's a shame, since it's an understandable topic that nearly all audiences can relate to. Hint: Get people to understand what your system is worth (whatever that system may be), and they'll be a lot more on board with individual projects.

**Economic vitality:** There is perhaps no greater physical asset to local and state economies than their infrastructure, but when is the last time you saw a public agency (other than maybe the economic development department), push its value as an economic engine of change? Whether you're talking roads, sewers, water utilities or power/gas, our infrastructure affects the ability to move goods, the willingness of people to relocate here and the decisions of business to establish. While other forces are certainly in play (taxes, etc.), public agencies could strike a resonant chord in these unstable economic times by positioning themselves as agencies dedicated to improving local/regional/state competitiveness by improving the infrastructure that business relies upon.

### **Marketing: Communicating the Brand for a Desired Result**

Go to Google and type in marketing, you'll come up with millions of Web pages. With that many people claiming to be experts in marketing, opinions on what the word even means are apt to vary greatly.

## **Opinions, attitudes and values**

In public involvement, WTG strives for efforts that get past opinions to more closely reflect the attitudes and values of stakeholders.

Each of those words mean very different things. Research by pollsters reveals that three levels of thought guide people in virtually all the decisions they make:

At the top level are **opinions**, the myriad thoughts and considerations people have about any subject. Opinions are choppy surface foam in the ocean of thought — constantly changing and subject to review or revision as new information comes along. Pro and con positions over bike paths, additional road funding and air-quality regulation are examples of opinions.

At the next level of thought are **attitudes**. More strongly held than opinions, the attitude level is where debate about many "big-picture" issues stalls in policymaking and the press. Attitudes are less subject to change than opinions, but can be changed over time by providing credible arguments that appeal to deeper values (see below). A key attitude that may come up in long-range planning scenarios is the concept of sustainability.

Forming the bedrock of opinions and attitudes are **values** — the sum total of our hopes, needs, fears and dreams. Values are instilled in us at an early age and remain unchanged except through the most major of events, personal upheavals or societal change. Because they are so basic to our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, values are shared across broad socioeconomic ranges. For example, a core value often in play during long-range planning is the near-universal concept of a better future — something most people value across the political spectrum.

Pollsters have known for years that whoever frames the argument often wins it — and that the surest way to frame an argument is to communicate in terms that appeal to individuals' values.

**When most people think of marketing, they think of marketing tactics.** Why? Because tactics are fun and visible. But tactics, while the most salient aspects of marketing, are steps you take to get down the road; figuring out where the road starts and where it leads are the first steps.

Marketing is far more than tactics; marketing is analysis, and a sound strategy based on this analysis. But what sort of analysis? The following (admittedly broad) framework can apply to the public sector:

**Customer analysis:** Most agencies serve several types of customers, ranging from the legislative officials who set its budget to the public, property owners, local officials and vendors. Having a solid understanding of customers means having a grasp about how customers behave, their motivations, their perceptions and preferences. Although they may not be buying a product from the agency in the traditional sense, the attitudes they form based on interactions with the agency are just as potentially damning as bad sales experiences — if someone has nowhere else to go, they may continue to come to you for help, but it's a certainty they won't want to help you if you ever need it. Without having this customer knowledge, the tactics of marketing are just blowing in the wind. You'll hope that the tactics work, but be blissfully unaware about whether anyone would want to pay attention or listen.

**Competitive analysis:** Marketing is also about understanding competition. And while most agencies don't have direct competition in the service they provide, there are scores or even hundreds of public agencies that compete for the public's attention, legislators' favor and state or federal dollars every day. In a very real sense, they are the competition, and an understanding of how your messages compare with (and compete with) theirs is crucial.

**Capabilities analysis:** To think about marketing, a public agency has to consider what it can actually deliver on the expectation of value. As with any large, public agency, it's nearly impossible to make all people happy all the time. However, a culture focused on process over problem solving (as an example) is less apt to deliver compelling value over the long haul.

Growing out of these analyses and others, an agency can then position itself, combining this data into an overall understanding of what segments exist in public perception, deciding on targeting some or all segments, positioning messages, and then doing what's necessary to deliver on that positioning.

How does a public agency deliver on its positioning? By branding correctly, advertising correctly and communicating correctly through channels and messages that are consistent with the analysis that marketing is really responsible for.

### **Potential Marketing Strategies**

Although one-size-fits-all approaches seldom work in an optimized manner, some sample strategies are useful to highlight how a public agency might turn its branding and marketing efforts into action. As samples, take these with a grain of salt — you should never embrace a strategy or tactic without some serious consideration as to whether it fits into your overall branding and marketing effort.

**Strategy 1: Don't start with the brand; start with what people value.** Your agency doesn't have enough money — nor is it likely that it ever will — to engage in a sustained, service-area-wide media blitz. The good news is, there's no reason for that blitz. If your agency has tremendous name recognition (if not equally tremendous support), then what's required is not greater linkage of the name with the service provided, but rather greater understanding of what the agency does and how it relates to what people value.

The public is not used to being engaged by the agencies that serve it — an unfortunate fact, but one that can be used to your agency's advantage. Leading off with grassroots-based initiatives to determine what people's core quality-of-life values are and how they can be linked into the agency (a process that's a whole other topic in itself), has two major benefits:

- It provides authentic, nuanced input that will be more valuable to the agency than merely doing a phone survey or similar quantitative process. The difference lies in the "hamburger analogy" — if you get a call from a pollster who asks if you like hamburgers, you may answer "yes." However, if you're in a discussion with your neighbors or co-workers about hamburgers, you may get into grilled vs. fried, the merits of whole-wheat buns, who makes the best mayonnaise, etc. People give more authentic and more nuanced answers — and feel very gratified for being asked — when you duplicate the environment where most opinions and attitudes are formed: Discussion with peers.
- It is a highly visible process. Although it may seem easier to merely put up billboards and tally up the number of daily impressions they make, the relatively small number of people impacted through a values-gathering process are magnified by the publicity and word of mouth that such programs generate.

This values-gathering process may be done through many forms. But it should be done, as an organizational development activity that will validate the agency's mission and goals against what its constituents value; as a re-branding exercise that will take the first steps to educating the public while positioning the agency as responsive; and as a marketing exercise that will generate publicity.

**Strategy 2: Resist the urge to say; embrace the urge to do.** Government agencies are infamously inefficient — that's why it's news when one actually does something instead of just talking about another plan or program. Use that in your agency's favor; become the agency that consistently talks about results and people. Spend less time talking about long-range planning and more time hitting what's been accomplished. Give less time to fulminating over long-range budget issues (at least in public) and more time to an annual "state of the asphalt (or sewer, or schools, etc.)" address where you can point out every fix, new project and economic benefit the agency has provided. Remember: The priority is to talk about results. If you can't talk about results, then you can talk about people. If you can't talk about people, then — and only then — do you talk about process.

**Strategy 3: Get others to say it for you.** Any claim the average public agency attempts to make about itself is going to be more credible coming from a third party, even if that party is an average citizen. If advertising plays a significant role in the final rebranding and marketing effort, then make sure you have faces of real people (i.e., not someone from the agency) talking about results. The same holds true all the way up and down the communications ladder, from public-involvement practices to communications with legislators at hearings — get other people to sing your praises.

**Strategy 4: Market to the public at natural intersection points.** Most public agencies are like utilities in the sense that no one notices unless something is going wrong. Getting past that is possible, but takes years and may be more than the agency wants to tackle in terms of time, effort and cost. In the meantime, aggressively trying to saturate the public with pro-agency messages leads to a waste of resources (because the public doesn't care) or outright hostility (because they will wonder why the money isn't being spent to fix their personal pothole, flooding storm sewer, etc.).

A more-efficient, more powerful strategy: Talk to the public when they're actually dealing with the agency or its work. Given that these interactions are typically sources of negative experience (construction delays, meetings to find out whether a new alignment will impact property, etc.) they represent a good opportunity for the agency. People who come to the table with an issue are apt to be listening — either for something to make them angrier or for something to answer their specific concern. Use that moment of their focus to answer the concern, but also to deliver the branding message and marketing tactics that are developed.

Construction-related communications, announcements of major new programs and public-involvement efforts are a natural channel for this. However, some of the greatest success will likely come from creating events that people want to engage in, such as regional summits. And that leads us to...

**Strategy 5: Get personal. Get physical. Get out on the stump.** In a sense, this is a summation of several of the other strategies. It is so important, however, that it bears repeating.

People need to see the faces of your agency rather than just its logo. They need to hear its personnel asking questions and they need to be allowed to ask questions of their own, even if the answers aren't what they want to hear. In short, your agency needs to engage the public rather than just serve it at a distance. Remember: Great brands are born of publicity rather than advertising in the message-rich environment that exists today. Personal engagement is a compelling act of publicity (particularly for a large state agency), and every in-person impression you can make has the value of many, many advertising impressions, often at a lower overall cost.

*West Third Group provides marketing, public relations and community outreach services to public- and private-sector clients across the nation. WTG was started in 1996 by Grace Brooks, a designer with more than 15 years of experience, and Greg Brooks, a journalist and PR practitioner with more than 20 years of experience. The firm is based in Plattsburg, MO.*