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Communicating for Social Impact
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Branding Assignment

There are two points of view about the use of branding in the non-profit arena. On one side is Vikki Spruill, Executive Director of Sea Web, who points out that branding “fosters unhealthy competition among nonprofit groups for visibility, promotes the hoarding of proprietary information, and leaves donors confused about how their support is making a difference.” On the other hand Kurt Aschermann, Senior Vice President for Marketing and Communications of the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, takes the more pragmatic view that branding is “designed to help the nonprofit serve its constituents better by establishing its uniqueness in a very cluttered nonprofit world.”

Ms. Spruill is right to a point. Branding and the need to establish uniqueness pits organization against organization, and reduces the effectiveness of all the participants’ efforts. Perhaps the single best example of this is the broad based “progressive” movement. Organizations with similar missions -- including Moveon.org, True Majority and Campaign for America’s Future – have found it incredibly difficult to work with each other on joint online projects because of their competing vision on whose name goes on top and who owns the names and email addresses collected. In the political arena, the Office of Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi and the Office of Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer do practically no coordination of their online efforts, because the leadership of each office is highly skeptical of the other’s political motives. In the end, the need to promote yourself and your organization comes at the expense of the broader whole.

However, Ms. Spruill’s lament completely disregards both reality and human nature. Nonprofit organizations that brand themselves are going to be more successful in the public arena than those who are unidentifiable by the masses. The largest and most publicly identifiable organizations are the ones that stick around the longest to effect social change. Common Cause imploded when its membership dried up when they were unable to reposition themselves after the passage of McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform. On the other hand, NRDC and Amnesty USA are becoming more assertive with their online branding, and doing record “business” because of it. While it may be unfair or unjust, branding makes an organization into a player on the field of social change. It is possible to ignore branding, but said organization will either not be around for long or will not have an impact much beyond its small sphere of operation.

Mr. Aschermann’s argument, though, is disingenuous at best, and should be likened to Wal*Mart singing the pocketbook savings of big box stores. The question we should be asking is not whether branding has been beneficial to a particular organization, but whether it is beneficial to the world as a whole. It is telling that his metrics for success are organization based (\$800 million budget increase and 2000 new clubs) as opposed to client based (number of children helped). No one can possibly argue that the organization is not successful. The question is could other smaller organizations been more successful, and did the Boys and Girls Clubs’ success come at the expense of society as a whole.