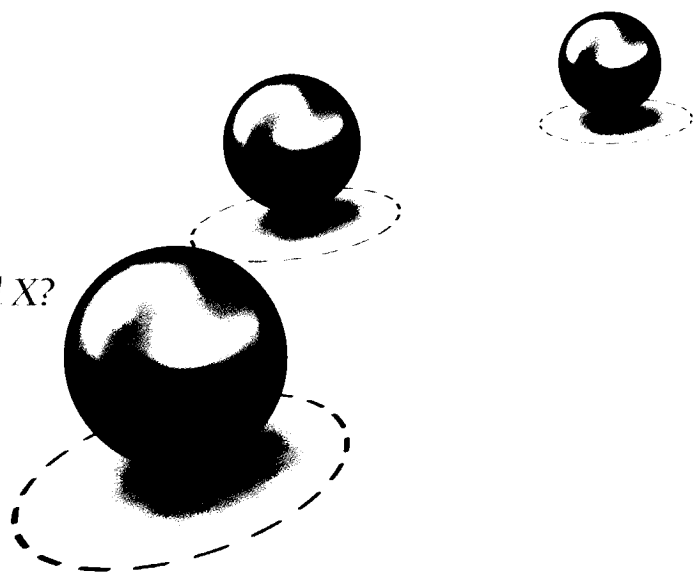
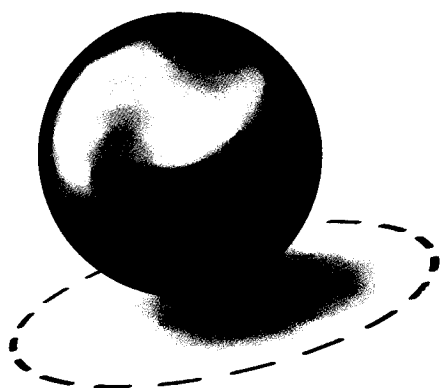


Marketing

Building Your Brand

Are You a Club of Distinction or Merely Brand X?

By Stephen Ready



Private clubs, in many cases, have let their distinctive brand value be defined in an uncertain or haphazard fashion. This is not surprising given the closed and insular nature of many private clubs. But in the 21st century, with challenges such as shifting demographics and the Gen-X misperceptions about club life, taking care and control of your club's brand should be a top priority.

Your brand is a message and a promise. Think Nordstrom, BMW and FedEx. It should be focused on the aspirations of those with

When Defining Your Club's Brand, Ask These Questions:

- What are the club's strong points?
- Are they a match for your target demographic – today as well as in the future?
- To whom are you directing your message?
 - An internal audience? External? Both?
 - What is it you want to say?
- Are you in the dues business? Or are you in the people business?
- Are you selling the facility? Your reputation? The "experience?"
 - Is the experience service-driven or amenity-driven?

whom you communicate. Success in creating and maintaining your brand identity requires a clear understanding of what you're selling, to whom you are directing your message, and through what media it is delivered. Are you careful and consistent in how you define yourself and the value of membership at your facility? Does your club environment and service level match the expectation you've created? And do you relentlessly deliver that message to your target audience?

Corporate America has learned these lessons over many years of effort, trial and error. These are smart companies that understand financially sound businesses and lean toward more, not less, marketing. And, in most cases, they've come to understand that it's generally not about price, except when your brand is just that. If you are selling a package delivery service for situations where shipments "absolutely, positively have to be there overnight," then cost is certainly a secondary consideration.

Likewise in the club industry, if your facility is known for its history and upper-crust legacy, price will not lead your marketing efforts. If you represent a club where family programs are the top priority, then the value of that environment is the primary brand definition. If you've built a challenging course layout with a well-known architect, your branding efforts should reinforce the idea that your course is where the players come to play. Never let your price or a promotion mentality cloud the brand identity that serves you best, regardless of what specific benefits your club offers.

So how does a club determine its branding strategy? The first step is to think carefully about where your club excels. To whom would you direct that message? Does all of your current marketing relay the same message? Is everything a general effort with no overall connection to reinforce the fundamental theme?

Does your marketing need an extreme makeover? Is membership on the rise or on the wane? Has some dramatic event such as a change of ownership or membership structure altered the club's long-term financial health? Or do you merely want to tighten up the perception of the club after too many years with inadequate guidance and protection of your brand value?

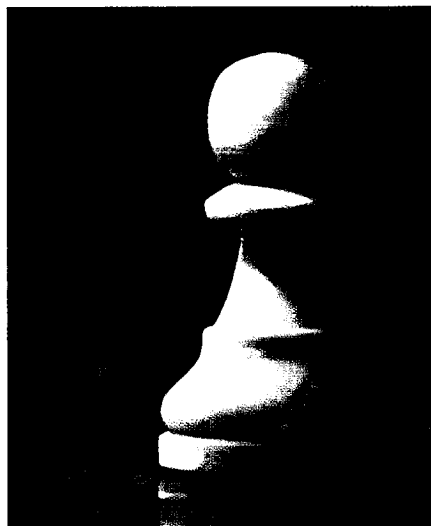
Make no mistake about it, there are real dollars at stake. They flow from how well your club establishes and nurtures its brand. Do that well, and you could see increased fees and dues that you charge because the club is worth it. Let your brand value fall from where it should be, and you're likely to see issues with membership acquisition and retention, and then budget shortfalls that erode the club infrastructure.

Start with small steps, and ask some basic questions. What are the club's strong points? Are they a match for your target demographic – today as well as in the future? To whom are you directing your message? An internal audience? External? Both? What is it you want to say? Are you in the dues business? Or are you in the people business? Are you selling the facility? Your reputation? The "experience?" Is the experience service-driven or amenity-driven? It's also helpful to decide how you want recipients to react when getting your messages. All of these considerations are critical to defining and maintaining your brand.

In the club industry there is one additional aspect that contributes to the value of your brand, and that's community. The relationships that make the essence of the membership experience at your club often will trump any of the physical attributes. After all, being a club member is about belonging to something – it's an emotional purchase and a lifestyle commitment.

How much stronger would your marketing be, not to mention the club's balance sheet, if you were able to get your members to love unconditionally what you provide them? Sound outrageous? Think about what can you do to enhance the club experience for your members. Do you know what they think of you? Honestly? If you don't know, find out immediately through an anonymous survey and then communicate back how you intend to build on the positives and address the negatives.

Establish your brand value with current members based on member satisfaction, and then work to attain an even higher level, called member loyalty. Achieve this, and you create brand evangelists in the community that no amount of money can buy.



It's Your Move The Power of a Personal Brand

By Suzanne Bates

You don't need to have a big budget or a multi-million dollar ad agency to build a personal brand. It's about focusing on how to communicate effectively – using your wits. A creative, thoughtful approach to delivering the message will get people saying positive things about you. If you and your message are interesting, and if you get out and deliver that message often enough, you will develop a powerful personal brand.

What comes to mind when people see you or hear your name? That's your personal brand. It's the sum total of what people know about you – what they think of you after you've had a conversation, given a speech, or they've seen you in the public eye.

On the other hand, your circumstances may dictate a more traditional marketing approach. Be mindful that your list of amenities, location, history and reputation all support the perception of who you are and why you're special. It's not just your logo or a catch phrase, but the total of every impression that is given and received about your club, no matter how subtle.

If your club isn't actively marketing itself, you should at least recognize that others, maybe your competitors, do believe that more efficient, thoughtful marketing

will grow their bottom line. And their growth might be at your expense. ■

So every time you speak, you are branding yourself, and it's important to think strategically about what and how you are delivering that message. Your conversations, presentations, e-mails, phone calls and conversations in the dining room all send signals.

What constitutes a strong personal brand? There are seven aspects of a powerful personal brand. A personal brand:

- Is instantly recognizable
- Stands for something of value
- Builds trust
- Generates positive word of mouth
- Gives a competitive advantage
- Creates career opportunity
- Results in professional and financial success

Wherever you are today in your professional life, you can start sending strong, positive signals that will cut through the clutter of day-to-day business and create buzz about you.

Everyone has the power to create their own positive personal brand. In fact, they must, if they want to succeed in a competitive global economy. It's up to you to create the strategy and messages needed to create a buzz and a powerful brand ■

About the author

Suzanne Bates is president and chief executive officer of Bates Communications, which helps executives and professionals develop a unique and authentic communication style to become stars in their industries. For more information, visit www.bates-communications.com.

About the author

Stephen Ready is president and chief executive officer of VCT. He has extensive experience in club operations, club technology and the club environment, and has spent the past nine years providing Member Relationship Management (MRM) and sales effectiveness strategies to some of the nation's leading clubs. For more information, go to www.vctcorp.com.