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The (Cool) Church:

A Case Study Examination of How Nonprofits Understand and Implement Brand Integrity

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*I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance
during the completion of this work.*

EXAMINING HOW NONPROFITS UNDERSTAND BRAND INTEGRITY

Abstract

The number of nonprofit organizations is growing and the competition for attracting volunteers, employees, and donors is fierce. Effective brand strategy offers the nonprofit a way to advance mission-critical operations, therefore it can be argued that brand strategy too, is a mission-critical operation. Yet, branding in the sector still faces its own set of unique challenges. There are tangible barriers to branding, such as not having the time and resources to do so, but branding also faces a reputation problem in the sector. Kylander and Stone (2011) found the concept is negatively associated with the for-profit sector and that nonprofit leaders tread lightly in their branding strategy limiting the organization's opportunity to reap the rewards that effective branding can provide. To help nonprofits move past this, Kylander and Stone (2011) responded with their Brand IDEA framework identifying four principles to help nonprofits rethink the way they view branding. This study builds on this framework, investigating how nonprofits understand and implement brands that align with their mission and values, a concept Kylander and Stone defined as "brand integrity." This study isolates and investigates the concept in two nonprofit, nondenominational churches in Richmond, Virginia. The church was chosen as an attractive case study to better understand the branding of nonprofit missions as the American Christian church is already having to define itself in a competitive "spiritual marketplace" in order to attract younger audiences. This qualitative study, through content analysis of two organizations' key social media channels and in-person, semi-structured interviews, finds that the nonprofit organization with operations centered around its missions, is well positioned to implement brand integrity, even if the concept is still not well understood by communication professionals in the sector. The findings also identify "pillars" of brand integrity that nonprofit leaders need to consider if they are to implement a brand that closely aligns with the

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organization's mission and values. These pillars better position nonprofits to feel confident in their ability to brand their organizations with integrity.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Branding. It is a term that for most, triggers perceptions that are likely best associated with the private sector. To the non-practitioner, there may be little distinction between branding, marketing, and advertising. Maybe the term brings to mind big name businesses like Coca Cola and its polar bears or Kellogg's with its big "K" in red script — the one found on every child's favorite cereal box. Maybe the term prompts a cerebral replay of scenes from a memorable Super Bowl advertisement, or a video that makes someone pause while scrolling through their Instagram feed. Whatever the response may be to the term "branding," it is likely to be an idea or a memory of a time when a for-profit business was trying to sell itself as a good choice to the consumer. In a world where that consumer is constantly bombarded with competing brands, branding always seems to be begging, "pick me."

In today's fast-paced digital and global economy an organization cannot afford to exist without a brand. Competition is too fierce. Where a brand's primary focus used to be to relay quality, advances in technology now standardize quality (Kotler 1997). Brands now have to work to trigger an emotional response that somehow connects deeply with the consumer's moods, personalities, and the messages they wish to convey to others (de Chernatony et. al, 1998). Without an identifiable identity and a strategy to raise awareness of that identity, the organization loses share of voice in the market and falls behind to its competitors. This is not a problem isolated to the for-profit sector. The number of nonprofit organizations is growing and the competition for attracting volunteers, employees, and donors is fierce.

Branding is not a new concept to the nonprofit sector. Many large, international nonprofit organizations, like Habitat for Humanity and the World Wild Life Fund, have very well established and recognizable branding strategies. Yet branding is often viewed in the sector as a

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tool borrowed from the for-profit industry, and it is because of this association with the for profit sector that nonprofit leaders admit to being hesitant when it comes to dedicating time and resources to carry out thoroughly-developed branding strategies. Kylander and Stone (2011) explored this hesitation and found that leaders of nonprofits expressed that the reasoning for this perspective was out of fear or hesitation towards inconsistencies between branding strategy and the mission and values of the organization. In their study, nonprofit leaders expressed a strong affinity for their mission and expressed a lack of faith towards the sector's ability to implement branding efforts without jeopardizing the mission and values of their organization. In their Nonprofit Brand IDEA framework, Kylander and Stone (2011) define this congruency between an organization's mission and values and its brand identity as 'brand integrity.'

Brand integrity is defined in the literature by Kylander and Stone (2011), but little research has been done to further explore this concept in the nonprofit sector. Yet this concept seems to serve as a barrier to branding being widely accepted and effectively carried out as an integral operation for maximizing nonprofits' organizational impact. Without this acceptance, the nonprofit sector limits itself to the many benefits of effective branding. For example, branding has been found help to raise awareness amongst target audiences and facilitate donor choice (Hankinson 2000) and build loyalty within donor and supporter groups (Ritchie, Swami et al. 1998). Adding to the literature on brand integrity can position nonprofit leaders to more widely accept branding efforts in the sector by understanding how peers are successful at implementing brand integrity or, by understanding the challenges that limit a nonprofit's ability to establish brand integrity.

One area of the nonprofit sector that is currently implementing branding strategies, intentionally or unintentionally, are new-age, nondenominational churches. As a mechanism to

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combat aging member bases, and as denominations lose their brand value, these nonprofit organizations are building new brand identities to reach new audiences and to carve their place in a competitive market (Nones on the Rise, 2012). Their techniques for building their brand identities vary, from more recognizable techniques such as brand videos and modern signage and logos, to techniques less associated with branding, such as moving their place of operation to warehouses rather than the traditional building with pews and steeples. This branding-centric landscape provides an opportunity to further explore and understand Kylander and Stone's (2011) concept of brand integrity in nonprofits.

Brand integrity is identified as an important element for branding strategies in the sector, yet this particular concept has not been researched in practice. If brand integrity is important to implement an effective brand in the sector, it would benefit the sector to understand how nonprofits currently understand the concept and if and how it is effectively implemented. This study capitalizes on the branding-centric religious landscape to isolate an investigation of brand integrity in nonprofits in order to better understand the concept in practice. By understanding how brand integrity is understood and implemented in two sample organizations, future organizations can learn and be influenced on how to implement their own brands with integrity.

This qualitative study explores brand integrity within the current branding-centric environment for which today's nonprofit, nondenominational churches are operating within. The study isolates two nondenominational, nonprofit churches in Richmond, Virginia, collecting data from a content analysis procedure and in-person, semi-structured interviews. Qualitative analysis of this data provides insight into how these nonprofit organizations currently understand brand integrity and provides insight into their experiences and processes in establishing brand integrity.

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Context

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, approximately 1.56 million nonprofits were registered with the United States Internal Revenue Service, a ten percent increase over the course of a decade. And with 12.3 million paid workers, the nonprofit sector in the United States is the third largest workforce, according to the 2019 Nonprofit Employment report (Salamon & Newhouse, 2019). Yet when surveyed in a 2016 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report compiled by the Nonprofit Marketing Guide, 72 percent of nonprofit communication professionals expected their full-time staffing needs to remain the same. Only 20 percent expected their staffing to grow; 57 percent expected their budget to remain the same; and only 28 percent expected their budget to grow. Even more telling, only 36 percent of executive directors determined brand awareness to be an important goal for their organization.

This lack of reverence for branding strategy within the sector cannot be explained by a lack of anecdotes of nonprofit organizations with evident branding strategies. Branding, or the psychological construct held in the minds of all those aware of a product, person, organization, service, or movement (Kylander & Stone, 2011), is often associated with the for-profit sector. Yet it has been incorporated into nonprofit operations for decades. In their attempt to broaden the scope of marketing in 1969, Kotler and Levy noted that managing the brands of the Ford Foundation, the World Bank, the Catholic Church, and the University of California proved to be as difficult and as imperative to the organization's operations as managing the brands of Proctor and Gamble, General Motors, and General Electric. However, it seems to be within only the last two decades that branding and its implications within the nonprofit sector has been examined in detail, and the literature more often than not explores some of the same large international organizations — the World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, American Red Cross, etc.

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But as the body of literature on nonprofit branding grows, there also seems to be a growing consensus that all nonprofits, not just large international organizations, need an effective brand identity (Sargeant, 1999). According to Tan (2003), conscientious brand management in nonprofit organizations -- just like fiscal prudence, good governance, transparency and accountability -- is a principle relevant to all organizations that care about the impact, importance, and sustainability of their endeavors. This argument can be made because of the positive benefits that come with branding in the nonprofit sector. Ritchie et. al (1998) lists several of these benefits. Conscientious brands help nonprofits consistently appeal to their many audiences, from donors and board members to staff and the public served. Strong brands help nonprofits relay the quality of their work and verify their trust with the public and without this trust, the mission is unlikely to be realized.

Additionally, because of their tax-exempt status and reputation for serving the common good, nonprofits are under a lot of scrutiny in how they conduct their work and utilize their resources. Strong brands can help develop goodwill and provide the organization with a bit of a buffer from volatile public opinions. When current events outside of the organization's control impacts those opinions in a way that may have a negative effect on the organization, a strong brand can serve as a reminder of the positive impact the nonprofit has on their communities. And with the increase in competition within the sector, strong brands can help an organization increase awareness and stand out in the crowd, attracting donors, volunteers, resources, and the best employees. In an online article they wrote on their 2011 study findings for Stanford Social Innovation Review, Kylander and Stone (2012) note that the brand is "integral at every step in an organization's strategy and at each juncture of its theory of change, and that a strong brand is

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increasingly seen as critical in helping to build operational capacity, galvanize support, and maintain focus on the social mission” (Role of Brands section, para. 2).

Problem

Despite the extensive list of benefits strong branding strategies can bring to a nonprofit’s operations, the use of branding in the sector is still lackluster (Bennett & Gabriel, 2000).

There are tangible limitations that may prevent nonprofits from establishing and maintaining a strong brand. Branding strategies are time consuming – constituencies have to be polled to take the appropriate positioning, that positioning has to be translated into communication strategies, and the brand has to be maintained in order to stay relevant. There are real costs and time requirements, which tend to raise the question of whether the pros outweigh the cons and whether it is even appropriate for nonprofits to dedicate limited financial and human resources to brand development (Ritchie, et. al, 1998).

Less tangible limitations to branding in the sector are those of perspective, and here in lies the focus of this study. When interviewing nonprofit leaders about branding, Kylander and Stone (2011) identified a skepticism in nonprofit leaders that was driven by a strong sense of pride for their organization and for the sector. The team found the concept of branding to still be widely associated with the for-profit sector and an operation that was presumed to be driven by monetary factors. This association led to hesitations around the idea of branding their nonprofit, citing concerns about the potential for mission misalignment in branding strategies, or worse the exploitation of the mission for monetary gain. Branding campaigns like “Save the slave” were referenced to relay this concern (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

After hearing the concerns of nonprofit leaders, Kylander and Stone (2011) developed the Nonprofit Brand IDEA conceptual framework. They identified four principles that can help

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nonprofit leaders think differently about brands and the way they are managed. Along with *brand democracy*, *ethics*, and *affinity*, the team coined the term *brand integrity*. When brand integrity exists, the organization's external image relayed through its brand is closely aligned with its mission and its internal identity. Kylander and Stone (2011) note that internally, an organization with high brand integrity connects the mission to the identity of the organization, giving members, staff, volunteers, and trustees a common sense of why the organization does what it does and why it matters in the world; and externally, it captures the mission in its public image and deploys that image in service of its mission at every step of a clearly articulated strategy.

Kylander and Stone's (2011) Brand IDEA framework provides a starting point to help nonprofit leaders better understand the principles of branding specific to their sector rather than implementing a branding strategy that feels translated from the for-profit sector. The framework provides a path for nonprofit leaders to move beyond their hesitations and skepticism, and implement an effective branding strategy that positively affects organizational impact.

However, little research has been done to further explore nonprofit leaders' understanding of these newly defined nonprofit branding principles. Specifically, if nonprofit leaders express hesitations towards developing branding strategies for their organizations because they feel the efforts will put the mission at risk, it would benefit the sector to explore the concept of brand integrity further. Unless we better understand how nonprofits currently understand brand integrity and determine if and how it shows up in current branding efforts, we cannot build nonprofits' confidence in their branding efforts and guide them toward better branding practices that can benefit their organizational impact.

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In order to contribute to the literature on brand integrity in nonprofits, this study explores the concept within an area of the sector that is currently flush with branding activity — religious institutions. According to Roof (1999) churches have learned to brand themselves in response to the “spiritual marketplace.” Roof (1999) defined the spiritual marketplace as a phenomenon that occurred due to social changes such as when work replaced church as a place for social connection; when Baby Boomers began to reject the faith of their families; and when technology like TV and internet allowed individuals to learn about spiritual alternatives. As denominations lose their brand value, these nonprofit organizations are already navigating their new brand identities in order to reach new audiences and to carve their place in a competitive market. In Richmond, Virginia alone a quick GuideStar search for churches resulted in more than 2,000 results. This competitive and brand-centric environment provides an opportunity to explore the concept of brand integrity and how it is perceived and implemented by nonprofits. By conducting two case studies with nonprofit, nondenominational churches in Richmond, Virginia, this research aims to explore the following research questions:

R1: How familiar are nonprofits with the concept of brand integrity?

R2: How is brand integrity implemented by nonprofit organizations?

The chapters ahead layout a roadmap for how these two research questions are explored and analyzed. Chapter Two presents a synthesis of the body of literature on branding in nonprofits; the current context of the religious landscape; and the conceptual framework this study builds upon — Kylander & Stone’s (2011) ‘Brand IDEA.’ Chapter Three presents the primary investigator’s methods for data collection as well as the findings of the study. Two case studies were constructed for two organizations by collecting data through a) content analysis of key social media sites and b) semi-structured interviews with communications staff at each

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organization. Chapter Three concludes with identifying key themes that provide insight into how brand integrity is understood and implemented in each organization. Chapter Four discusses the implications of the findings for practitioners, educators, and communities.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

An Introduction: The Concept of Branding —Yesterday and Today

It wasn't until the 20th century that the concept of branding began to appear as a mechanism for organizational marketing. In their analysis of the evolution of branding, Bastos and Levy (2012) identify early research in the 1920s where the term is used interchangeably with the ideas of trademarks and labels. In its earliest years, branding was highly focused on the visual components of a product. The brand was merely an image chosen by the organization to place on labels as a way to ensure consumers could visually identify and differentiate one product from another. It was World War II that led to the "Consumer Revolution," a phenomenon, caused by a surge in the production of goods, where consumers suddenly had to make choices among brands, because they could no longer determine the variances in the numerous product offerings. It was this transition to the consumer's choice of brand, rather than the product, that introduced the highly social and psychological nature of branding that is now associated with modern branding today (Bastos & Levy, 2012).

Continued competition in the marketplace, paired with dramatic changes to the marketing landscape due to rapidly evolving technology in the 21st century has forced organizations to invest heavily in the success of their brands and evolve complex and multifaceted strategies to reach consumers on an emotional and psychological level. A brand is no longer just a label, but an interactive suite of marketing communication tactics, most of which are now highly

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dependent on the internet (Keller, 2009). From websites and microsites; YouTube videos and Instagram photography and captions; to Google search engine optimization and e-newsletters, in order to relay a brand effectively today it requires an intimate understanding of the individual consumer the organization is trying to reach and a tactful approach to reaching them where they are at. Although the tactics have grown in complexity, the definition of modern branding is still quite simple. This study leans on the definition that describes a brand as a psychological construct held in the minds of all those aware of the product, person, organization, or movement (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

An Adoption: Branding in the Nonprofit Sector

Organizational branding efforts are more commonly explored through the lens of for-profit business activity. It wasn't until 1969 that branding was first formally evaluated in the nonprofit sector. Kotler and Levy (1969) recognized the societal role that government and nonprofit organizations play and wrote that the organizations in these sectors, in addition to their social mission, also had business functions that had to be met in order to achieve their purpose. Like the for-profit sector, nonprofit organizations had to raise money, attract and hire qualified personnel as well as volunteers, and build connection and understanding with the community and communicate with that community, the organization's identity and purpose. In order to succeed in these functions, Kotler and Levy (1969) determined that nonprofit organizations, whether they recognized it or not, were engaging in branding activities. This research expanded the concept that branding could be applied to more than just a physical product. An organization could brand its services, its people, the organization itself, and even brand the ideas it advocates for (Kotler & Levy, 1969).

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Benefits. Where Kotler and Levy (1969) highlighted similarities in operational needs as a justification that branding occurs in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, Richie et. al (1999) sought to identify and highlight the benefits of branding that are unique to the needs of nonprofit organizations.

First, nonprofit organizations have to communicate with a variety of audiences that provide multiple functions to the organization. An organization's communication strategy with the population it serves likely looks and sounds different than its communications to potential donors. A consistent brand can ensure that when messaging varies to reach audiences, those messages are tied organizational priorities and key message points remain consistent in some manner across those audiences and communicative channels.

Secondly, the services that nonprofits provide, such as the services provided by a nonprofit hospital or blood donation services, require the organization to communicate that their services are completed at a standard of high quality. A strong brand can help relay a nonprofit's status and level of trustworthiness that can provide its served populations and donors alike peace of mind.

Thirdly, because nonprofits are expected to serve the public and do good, when mishaps occur they are likely to receive more scrutiny from the general public than their for-profit counterparts. A strong brand can develop goodwill and help protect a nonprofit against variances in public opinion. To the concern of 'mishaps,' nonprofits specifically suffer from "image spillover," where a nonprofit organization not only has to manage its own reputation, but must also be concerned with the reputation of similar organizations (Richie et. al, 1999). In short, a bad reputation is more contagious in the nonprofit sector. A strong brand can help an organization protect itself from the mishaps of similar organizations in the sector.

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Finally, 1.56 million nonprofits were registered with the United States Internal Revenue Service in 2015, a ten percent increase over the course of a decade (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2018). Although the level in which competition should exist in the sector is argued, this increase in the number of organizations, has created a situation where nonprofits must indeed compete with one another for financial and human resources. A strong brand helps an organization position itself in order to attract its needed donors, volunteers, and resources (Richie et. al, 1999).

Defining Brand Success in the Sector and Fostering it. If branding has a place in the nonprofit sector, it is important to understand what defines the success of a nonprofit's brand. The literature provides this insight. Wymer et. al (2016) compiled the existing research on what makes a strong brand in the sector. One component of success is defined as brand familiarity. The more well known a nonprofit's brand is by its target audience, the stronger it is. In addition to being well known, the brand must also be favorably perceived. If a brand is well known, but for the wrong reasons, it cannot be a strong brand. Furthermore, for a brand to be strong it should be exceptional, meaning that in a competitive market where similar nonprofit organizations exist, a strong brand should trump other brands. Wymer et. al (2016) define these three traits of success as familiarity, attitude, and remarkability.

The literature addresses the use and need for branding in the sector and it defines what a good brand entails, but one area that seems to be missing in the literature is the link between the two. It's important to gather a better understanding of how nonprofits make decisions regarding their branding strategies and processes. Once a nonprofit organization determines that the benefits of branding are enticing to the organization, what does the decision-making process of implementing a strong brand look like? What factors are considered? Khan & Ede (2009) seem

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to come the closest in exploring these questions by looking at how nonprofits implement their brands. Their findings determined that employees were important ‘deliverers’ of the brand, acting as ambassadors when they interacted both internally and externally. These findings provide insight into how a brand is delivered, but the literature still lacks in exploring the process before the brand is delivered. More research is required to explore the decision-making process and the factors that influence it when a nonprofit’s branding strategy is being developed and implemented.

A Delayed Reaction: The Sector’s Hesitation to Branding

One explanation for this gap in the literature on the nonprofit sector’s decision-making process when it comes to branding strategy, may be explained by the literature that explores the sector’s lack of investment in communication strategy as a whole. The 2016 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report found by surveying nonprofit communication professionals that only 36 percent of executive directors determined brand awareness to be an important goal for their organization. Operational limitations may prevent nonprofits from investing in brand awareness. Ritchie, et. al (1998) notes that branding strategies can be strenuous on nonprofits with limited staff and resources. This may explain why most references in the literature on the topic recall large international organizations’ branding strategies. There are upfront costs in resources in order to implement an effective brand. Brand positioning research has to be conducted in order to understand who the organization’s branding strategy aims to target. Once the brand position is determined, it has to be converted into communication strategies. Once those strategies are in place, they require maintenance in order to remain impactful. All of these efforts cost time and money. For-profits and large, well-established nonprofits dedicate large teams and millions of dollars to this process. Yet for more frugal and conservative organizations,

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deciding how much to invest in the organization's branding strategy may become a discussion of overhead. Nonprofits must justify their costs to their boards and to their constituencies, which may leave their leadership questioning whether the resources that would be spent on branding, may be better spent directly towards the organization's mission (Ritchie, et. al, 1998).

In addition to a cost-benefit analysis, nonprofit leaders' skepticism towards branding has also been explored. In one of the most extensive qualitative studies found on the topic, Kylander & Stone (2011) interviewed 73 nonprofit executives, communication directors, consultants, and donors in more than 41 organizations. The pair identified four themes of skepticism regarding branding in the sector. First and foremost was the fact that branding at the time of the study was still thought of by nonprofit professionals through the lens of the for-profit sector. Nonprofit leaders are hesitant to brand their organizations because they fear that their mission may feel too commercialized, and that selling the brand will be prioritized over the mission. Secondly, the team determined branding skepticism to be caused by the idea that branding is viewed as a top-down process. Leaders often felt that brand positioning is often rooted in the vanity of the organization's leadership rather than its theory of change. A third area of concern was expressed through anecdotal references to brand messaging that seemed to relay the opposite of what the organization's actual values were just to grab attention. A final concern was one regarding competition and how it should be viewed and managed in the nonprofit sector. Unlike the for-profit sector, nonprofits are encouraged to work with one another to achieve greater social impact. Nonprofit leaders feared that organizations with strong brands may overpower their peers rather than promote support and collaboration (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

A Possible Solution: Better Understanding Brand Integrity

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After conducting their interviews with nonprofit leaders, Kylander and Stone (2011) developed what is now known as the Nonprofit Brand IDEA conceptual framework. The framework identifies four principles that assists nonprofit leaders in thinking differently about managing their organizations' brands. Along with brand democracy, ethics, and affinity, the team coined the term brand integrity. When brand integrity exists, the organization's external image and messaging relayed through its branding strategy is accurately aligned with its mission and its internal identity. Specifically, the messaging to internal and external audiences closely align. Strong brand integrity means that an organization communicates with its internal stakeholders in a way that allows those stakeholders to cohesively understand and invest in the mission and the identity of the organization. Communication with external stakeholders does not stray or contradict with internal communications (Kylander & Stone, 2011).

By identifying brand integrity and the other three principles that make up the Brand IDEA framework, Kylander and Stone (2011) provide a pathway for nonprofit leaders to move beyond their hesitations and skepticism. Specifically, understanding brand integrity provides can help ensure an organization's branding strategies are authentic and align with the organization's mission and values. However limited research outside of Kylander and Stone's framework has been conducted to explore how nonprofit leaders currently implement and make decisions, knowingly or unknowingly, about around these principles. Brand integrity needs to be further explored in an area within the sector that is actively implementing branding strategies to develop a deeper understanding of the concept in the sector. One subsector that is currently flush with branding activity are religious institutions. Relatively young, nondenominational, nonprofit churches have learned to brand themselves in response to the evolving "spiritual marketplace" and offer an opportunity to further explore brand integrity in nonprofits.

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The Religious Landscape and Modern Marketing

Over the last several decades religious institutions have been operating within a morphing social environment. In the 1960s, Baby Boomers began to rebel against simply accepting the faith of their families, and the workplace began to replace the church as the leading source for social connection. As mass acceptance of religion was less likely to be the norm, religious institutions found themselves in a phenomenon coined “the spiritual marketplace” (Roof, 1999). Roof (1999) found that this Baby Boomer generation, born between the late 40s and early 60s, approached religion with a more open and questioning demeanor, and with an increasing belief that no one religious institution had a more dominating take on religious truth than any other institution. Further, Roof (1999) found that loyalty to one particular denomination was fading. The church’s value was more likely to be based on the services provided and how well those services met members’ needs. With the Baby Boomer, the emphasis of religion turned more inward, being less about an individual’s identity with a specific religious organization, and more so about the intrapersonal nature of authentic spirituality within.

This trend has continued into today’s generation of millennials. In 2015, the Pew Research Center reported that between 2007 and 2014, Christianity declined by 8%, and the number of those who identify as unaffiliated to any faith increased by almost 7%. Americans who affiliate with not affiliating is so common now that this demographic has been named. Known as the “Nones,” this group continues to grow at a rapid pace, with the Pew Research Center noting that one-fifth of the U.S. public are ‘Nones’ and one-third of adults under the age of 30 are a part of this group (Nones on the Rise, 2012). As American Christianity struggles to engage young people, this generation proves to be looking to different communities in search of the same social services that churches have historically provided (Thurston & Ter Kuile, 2015).

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Thurston & Ter Kuile (2015) found that the reasons millennials sought out and engaged with nonreligious communities, such as the popular exercise organizations SoulCycle and CrossFit, were similar reasons once given for seeking out the church, such as a sense of community, personal transformation, purpose, creativity, and accountability. This indicates that today's 'spiritual marketplace' is a competitive one, with churches not only battling drop-off in institutional and denomination loyalty, but competition from religious and nonreligious organizations alike.

It is this competitive spiritual marketplace that is requiring religious institutions to engage in new and creative efforts to promote themselves as a viable choice for prospective audiences. One of Religious News Service's top articles in 1996 was titled, "The Changing Nature of Faith: Mainline Churches Seek Marketing Help to Fill Empty Pews" (Religious News Service, 1996). The piece reports on churches like the United Methodist Church – one of the largest of the Protestant denominations, who on average lost more than 1,500 members a week for 30 years, turned to marketing consultants in order to borrow the marketing strategy of prospering nondenominational megachurches.

Branding — as earlier defined as the intentional efforts to form a psychological construct held in the minds of all those aware of the branded product, person, organization, or movement — happens in this competitive, religious subsector of nonprofits. No longer defined by their denomination, religious institutions must position their organizations and their services in a way that resonates with today's consumer-conscious religious shopper. Religious institutions must also tread lightly in their branding endeavors, as the literature addresses the discussion of appropriateness when it comes to integrating a branding strategy that closely interacts with a such an intimate aspect of individuals' lives – their faith and spirituality (Einstein, 2008).

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Leadership in religious institutions are having to navigate decisions in order to establish their brand identities in a competitive landscape. Unlike their for-profit counterpart, they must not only do so effectively, but also in a way that feels authentic to the mission and doesn't risk commercializing it. This delicate branding landscape that religious institutions are currently operating within make it a viable case to further explore the concept of brand integrity in the nonprofit sector.

In today's competitive marketplace, all organizations' must rely on a brand identity to establish their share of voice in that marketplace. Although branding has long been researched and associated with the for-profit sector, effective branding strategies have also been determined to have benefits for the nonprofit organization. Yet, branding in the sector faces barriers. Those barriers are tangible, such as financial and human resource barriers, but there are also more intangible barriers such as perception. Kylander and Stone's (2011) study shows us that branding itself has a perception problem in the sector. And although team provides a potential pathway forward with their Brand IDEA framework, little research has been done to study that framework's principles in practice. Understanding that nonprofit nondenominational churches are currently operating in a branding centric-environment, this study aims to further explore one of the concepts defined by Kylander and Stone (2011) — brand integrity. Specifically the study investigates how nonprofits understand and implement the concept, through a case study design that explores how two nonprofit, nondenominational churches in Richmond, Virginia, understand and implement brand integrity. The methods and findings of this study are laid out in the next chapter.

Chapter III: Research Methods and Finding

Methods

With limited research currently available on the topic of brand integrity, this study aims to further explore Kylander and Stone's (2011) concept of brand integrity, or the phenomenon where an organization's external image is aligned with the organization's mission and values, and how it manifests in the nonprofit sector. Qualitative case studies were designed in order to better understand brand integrity by addressing the following research questions:

R1: How familiar are nonprofits with brand integrity?

R2: How is brand integrity implemented by nonprofit organizations?

Sample. The study's sample population consists of two nondenominational, nonprofit churches located in Richmond, Virginia. Although case studies could be conducted on any type of nonprofit organization to investigate brand integrity, religious organizations were chosen as an area of interest because the subsector currently faces a need for branding in order to reach younger audiences, and branding spirituality, unlike a product, is likely a delicate process. Local, religious nondenominational, nonprofit institutions in Richmond, Virginia were surveyed for potential participation in the study. The primary investigator assessed the digital assets of a group of organizations and after reviewing social media feeds, websites, and visual assets, eight organizations were determined to be optimal for the study design because evidence of modern branding tactics existed. These eight organizations were contacted through e-mail (See Appendix A) by the primary investigator in order to garner participation in the study. Two of the eight organizations confirmed participation. The two organizations' marketing strategies were ideal for conducting this study. Both implemented mature, digital content strategies that target youthful audiences. These strategies included sharing the organization's identity on a dynamic webpage;

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through the use of videos; through modern visual identities such as graphics and logos; and through various popular social media platforms. Each had a designated communications staff person, who were identified as an ideal interview subject due to their intimate knowledge of their organization's branding strategy.

Organization A was founded in 2014, and at the time of the study had thirteen employees on staff. On average the organization sees approximately 1,000 individuals at its weekly programming. This programming takes place both in a warehouse in the city as well as online via Facebook Live, Vimeo, and YouTube. The organization also hosts its own podcast. Its key communication channels for external audiences are a website, Facebook, and Instagram. The organization has two staff members dedicated to its communications strategy; a creative director and a social media director. The organization highlights values that focus on growth and learning, fun, generosity, and inclusivity. The mission of the organization is to be a safe place for individuals to explore their faith.

Organization B was founded in 2008, and at the time of the study has seven staff members. On average the organization has approximately 1,400 people engaging with the organization's programming. Programming takes place in an existing historical place of business in the city as well as online via livestream. The organization also runs a coffee shop, which serves as a community gathering place and income source. This coffee shop is on the same block as the place of operation, as well as an additional gathering space on the block. The organization's values and mission focus on community, and because the organization does not have access to its Sunday location, these additional spaces were identified as important to the organization's mission. The organization's key communication channels are Facebook and

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Instagram, and it also has its own podcast. Organization B has one staff member dedicated to its communications strategy, a director of communications and operations.

Instruments. Upon confirmation of participation, an interview script and consent form were shared with the two participants. The interview script (See Appendix B) was developed prior to data collection. 15 interview questions were included in order to guide the primary investigator's conversation with participants in a way that would reveal information about each organization's mission and values; its communication strategy for relaying its mission and values to audiences; an understanding or lack of understanding around branding and the concept of brand integrity; and the challenges faced while attempting to implement the organization's brand. Open-ended questions were used in order to encourage participants to provide thorough answers and examples. Participants were required to read and sign the consent form prior to the interview and were reminded of the study's voluntary nature. Each interview participant signed the consent form and answered all questions without concerns.

Procedure and Data Analysis. One in-person, semi-structured interview was carried out with the communications staff member of each organization. Each staff member was chosen as the preferred interview subject because they identified as the person responsible, either entirely or partially, for the organization's communication strategy. Both interviews were conducted the week of March 9, 2020. One interview took place at a local coffee shop, while the other was performed at the organization's place of operation. These locations were chosen by the participant to ensure that the meeting place was one that was comfortable and convenient to the participant. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to complete. Both interviews were recorded by the primary investigator's iPhone using the 'Voice Memo' application and notes were taken. Following each interview the primary investigator transcribed the recording into a

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Microsoft Word document. Each transcript was assigned an identification letter – A or B - and all identifiers were removed from the transcript in order to protect participant confidentiality. The original recordings were then deleted. Transcripts were analyzed and coded first, for descriptions of the organization's mission and values. These descriptions were then used as a framework to carry out the second phase of data collection, which was an analysis of each organization's key social media channels.

A content analysis of the organization's key social media channels, which for both organizations were Instagram and Facebook, was conducted. One month's worth of content (February 20, 2020 through March 20, 2020) was analyzed in order to identify congruencies or contradictions between the organization's communications strategy and the stated mission and values on the website by participants in the interview. Content such as words, phrases, tone, and visuals, that aligned with the concepts identified in the organizations' mission and values were noted as congruencies and as an indication that brand integrity exists. Words, phrases, tone, and visuals that contradicted concepts identified in the organizations' mission and values were noted as an indication of a lack of brand integrity.

Once a sense of each organization's ability to implement brand integrity was gathered through the process of content analysis, transcripts were analyzed and coded a second time for themes that provided insight into a) the interview participants' awareness of their ability to implement brand integrity, and b) possible explanations for how brand integrity was implemented, such as processes, trains of thought, team dynamics, etc.

Study Limitations. The project's time constraints limited the investigator's ability to confirm a thorough dataset. The initial intentions of the study was to confirm four different organizations, but the primary investigator was unable to do so. A lack of participation interest

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may also be explained by the onset of an international pandemic during the time the study was conducted. U.S. citizens were encouraged to practice ‘social distancing’ and limit contact with other individuals. This limited options for in-person interviews. The study was then adjusted slightly to include the analysis of digital content created by the two organizations being interviewed. The pandemic impacted this process as well as much of the social content created during the time of analysis was considered abnormal because it was dedicated to informing audiences on how the organization was responding to the pandemic. Additionally, with the study’s format change, adjustments to the questions asked would have benefited the primary investigator’s ability to entice insightful interview data, but time restraints limited the ability to return newly proposed questions to the IRB for approval. This also limited the investigator from being able to ask additional questions during the interview when a participant mentioned something that sparked the primary investigator’s interest.

Findings

The study aimed to explore both the current understanding of brand integrity as a concept, and to explore how nonprofits implement, either intentionally or unintentionally, brand integrity. To revisit, brand integrity is defined as an entity’s ability to align its branding tactics with its mission and values (Kylander & Stone, 2011). Interviews with two organization’s communications staff were conducted and a sample of each organization’s digital content was analyzed for examples of brand integrity. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather insight on communication staff’s perspective and understanding of their organization’s mission and values; their tactics in relaying this information with perspective audiences; and their current understanding of brand integrity as a concept.

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The following sections outline thematic findings from the study. The findings first address observations about interviewees expressing a lack of understanding of brand integrity. Findings from the content analysis procedure are then explored to discuss if brand integrity existed in the organizations. Four themes identified in a secondary transcript analysis conclude the findings. The themes identified are supplemental explanations to the initial findings, which indicate that brand integrity may exist even when an understanding of the concept does not.

A Lack of Conceptual Understanding. Both individuals interviewed in this study, a communications director and a social media director, were responsible for coordinating communications for their respective organizations. Both were educationally trained in communications, obtaining bachelor's degrees in a subset of communication studies. When directly asked, neither were confident in their understanding of the concept 'brand integrity.' Participant A described brand integrity as a way for a brand to remain consistent over time:

"Yeah, so I think brand integrity would be kind of sticking with what your values and mission are even if you evolve and change over time."

Participant B, provided a more accurate definition, but admits openly that they had to research the concept ahead of the interview. Even in sharing an accurately researched description, they still showed hesitancy on the subject:

"So I have to admit that I did look it up, because I can't just not be sure of something, but after some light Googling I feel like I have a vague understanding of it... like the brand that you present is consistent with the reality of the organization... You have a clarity of voice that exists and is consistent across multiple platforms, no matter where you go you end up with the same product."

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These answers show evidence that the concept of brand integrity is one that is still not widely known, even among persons trained in the field of communications.

Evidence of Brand Integrity. A lack of conceptual knowledge doesn't indicate that brand integrity cannot exist. Both organizations evaluated for this study to some extent defined their mission and values on their website and both individuals interviewed were able to recall their organization's mission and values. The mission and values statements became the basis for analyzing a sample of each organization's social media content. The organization's ability to implement brand integrity was determined by identifying words, tone, phrases, and visual content on the organization's social media channels that aligned with the mission and value of the organization. When this content aligned with the concepts of organization's mission and values, then brand integrity was indicated. Contradictions and inconsistencies indicated a lack of brand integrity. After analyzing one month of social content for each organization, both showed an indication of brand integrity.

Organization A's mission and values were centered around the concept of the organization being a "safe place to explore one's faith." The organization's values supported this mission, by highlighting an organizational culture that focused on generosity and inclusivity, spiritual growth and curiosity, as well as the importance of incorporating fun. Organization A's values were given a dedicated webpage on its website and Participant A was also able to thoroughly describe each value in detail and also shared why each was important to the organization. When its social media content was analyzed to identify instances of words, phrases, and visual content that relayed these points (Figure 1), Organization A showed a high level of brand integrity as almost every social post relayed, either through text, tone, or visual content, a mission- or value-driven message. Its communication tactics were also closely aligned with

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values-based messaging. For example, in order to reach new audiences and spread organizational awareness, Organization A implemented a weekly ‘check-in,’ where individuals attending the organization’s services ‘check-in’ on Facebook. For each check-in, the organization donates to a chosen local nonprofit. This tactic, not only spreads the organization’s brand to each social network of those checking in, but it also clearly aligns with the organization’s defined value of ‘generosity.’

Table 1. Social Content Analysis Sample of Organization A.

	Search Baseline	Messaging Samples on Social
Mission	Safe/security	<i>‘it’s so sweet to be together’</i>
	Explore/Question	<i>‘come learn’</i>
Values	Generosity	<i>‘check in’ donations to nonprofits</i>
	Growth/learning	<i>‘train and prepare,’</i>
	Fun	<i>‘virtual confetti cannons’</i> <i>‘online-party’</i> <i>(Visual content) Tik-Tok video of silly dancing</i>
	Curiosity	<i>‘stay curious’</i>
	Caring/Inclusive	<i>‘love thy neighbor,’ ‘we want you there,’ ‘compassion’</i>

The definition of Organization B’s mission and values were more place-based, focusing on “transforming lives in the city, for the city.” The organization’s values were more difficult to identify online than Organization A, however during the interview Participant B confirmed that the organization did have a list of values that were important to the organization. Each value was shared in the interview by reading a list of values to the primary investigator from the values statement. Although identified as important to the organization, it seemed as though there was not as much of an intimate understanding of the values as expressed by Organization A. A key

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theme of Organization B's mission and values revolved around building and serving the community. Social media content did show instances of alignment with this messaging. Several posts indicated the importance of having a "heart for service" and identified partnerships with other organizations within the community.

Table 2. Social Content Analysis Sample of Organization B.

	Search Baseline	Messaging Samples on Social
Mission	Community	<i>'connected with others in our community'</i> <i>'making adults and kids feel welcome'</i> <i>'partnering with local churches'</i> <i>(visual content) highlighting community members</i>
	Transformation	<i>'focus on spiritual and physical health'</i> <i>'beginning with knowledge'</i>
Values	Service	<i>'a heart for service,'</i> <i>'call for volunteers'</i> <i>'mobilize those who live around us'</i>

Common Themes of Brand Integrity Implementation. Within these two organizations, brand integrity exists even when the individuals implementing the branding strategy have little knowledge of and experience with the concept. Both interview transcripts were analyzed and coded a second time for common themes to provide further insight into this phenomenon. The following describes four themes that emerged indicating possible mechanisms for implementing brand integrity.

Staff Connection and Background. Both participants in their interviews exuberated an intimate connection with the organization and its mission. Both were initially interns, paid very little, and then continued to stay with the organization after their internships were complete. Participant B left the organization and returned as soon as an opportunity presented itself, indicating a connection with the organization and its mission. Additionally, both participants

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demonstrated knowledge and experience in branding and communication strategy. Both participants were educationally trained in a field of communications. During the interview they expressed the knowledge of key communicative concepts such as “target demographics,” and “tone of voice.” Both individuals also expressed a contemporary understanding of branding. When prompted on the subject they didn’t focus on only visual elements. Branding was equivalent to organizational reputation.

“It’s who you are and how you present yourself and the spaces that you create and how you talk to people and how you respond to people in the comments on social. All of that just kind of lets people know what they can expect when they show up, because you don’t want that to be out of line.”

Team Dynamics. In both interviews themes emerged regarding the role that the team processes and dynamics play in the organization’s branding and communication strategy. Both organizations expressed a team-oriented structure, where collaboration and diversity of thought were highlighted as positive elements to the team dynamic. Yet there is a balance between the team and individual communicator’s role. Although team collaboration and discussion was valued, individuals were also still given the space to own their work and try new ways of reaching audiences.

“We are given a lot of license to make decisions and we are trusted to do the best we can with what we are given.”

Trust as motivation. Both participants strongly responded to the importance of successfully communicating the organization’s mission and values to all prospective audiences. When describing why communicating the mission and values was important, both organizations noted the theme of trust. Communicating the mission and values was a form of building trust

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with its audiences, and having trust among prospective audiences was of the utmost importance to both organizations.

“We try to build trust with people and we hope that means something to them.”

Mission-Aligned Tactics. Several tactics emerged as a means for ensuring that messaging was aligned with the mission and values of the organization. Both organizations had quick and catchy taglines, which were shared when describing the mission of the organization:

Organization A: *“A safe place to explore your faith”*

Organization B: *“Transforming lives in the city for the city”*

These taglines seemed to help the staff organize and collect thoughts more easily when describing the ultimate purpose of the organization. In the case of Organization A, sub-taglines like *“stay curious”* and *“stay fresh”* were also used to help quickly recall the values of the organization both verbally and through social media content.

Both participants also indicated using the mission and values as a filter for both communications content and operations. The mission and values were used as a tool to prioritize projects and determine appropriate messaging. Organization A, understanding its value for open curiosity and growth developed content around difficult social and political topics to encourage thoughtful inquiry. When determining whether to allow the creation of street art on its property, Organization B ultimately approved the installation because the art itself represented transformation, a key theme to the organization’s mission.

Websites were also identified as a key tool for ensuring successful communication of mission and values. Participants A and B aimed to share information across platforms, but confirmed that the website served as the clear and straightforward beacon for mission- and value-aligned messaging. The organization’s website serves as a directional guiding post for the brand.

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Table 3. Common Themes of Brand Integrity Implementation

Theme	Sub-theme	Script Examples
Staff knowledge/ Connection to the organization	Education	<i>I studied media communications and a second degree in graphic design</i> <i>“I was a public relations major and a creative intern for [org name]”</i>
	Terminology as an indication of understanding	<i>target demographic</i> <i>guerilla marketing</i> <i>tone of voice</i>
	On branding	<i>that’s our brand, it’s our reputation</i> <i>Other people may believe that branding is just graphics or just your logo but it is so much bigger and wider than that. It’s who you are and how you present yourself and the spaces that you create and how you talk to people and how you respond to people in the comments on social. All of that just kind of lets people know what they can expect when they show up, because you don’t want that to be out of line.</i>
	Connection to the mission	<i>Extensive use of ‘we’</i>
Team Dynamics	Collaborative decision-making	<i>a lot of our staff decisions are made as a team with everyone in the room</i> <i>we try to put people over policy</i> <i>we have creative meetings every Monday</i> <i>everybody is really supportive</i>
	Diverse thought	<i>a lot of it comes from different people on staff</i> <i>One of our strengths in our staff is that everyone is so different that everyone is always thinking about a different group of people so if I write something someone else can look at it and say hey this might hurt someone.</i>

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	<p>Mission as a tagline</p> <p>Website as a connector</p>	<p><i>if it doesn't do one of those things, we just can't waste our time on it</i></p> <p><i>we had to really define really clearly in the planning of that event, why are we spending our time on this, how does it fit into our goals...</i></p> <p><i>They [posts] all point back to the mission and values.</i></p> <p><i>The mission would be it's a safe place to explore your faith, that's kind of our tagline and it's been one that has been consistently brought back to year after year"</i></p> <p><i>If you look at the website hopefully you'd be able to figure out why certain decisions are made the way that they are.</i></p> <p><i>We have everything laid out on website to read through</i></p>
Challenges	<p>Selective Attention</p> <p>Growth and Ownership</p>	<p><i>one that we struggle with all the time is people taking information that they want to hear and can very quickly tune out...</i></p> <p><i>I think people felt a lot of ownership but as we grew and we brought more people in as we want to do that presents some challenges for some of the people who have been there from the beginning...</i></p> <p><i>People just don't like change.</i></p>

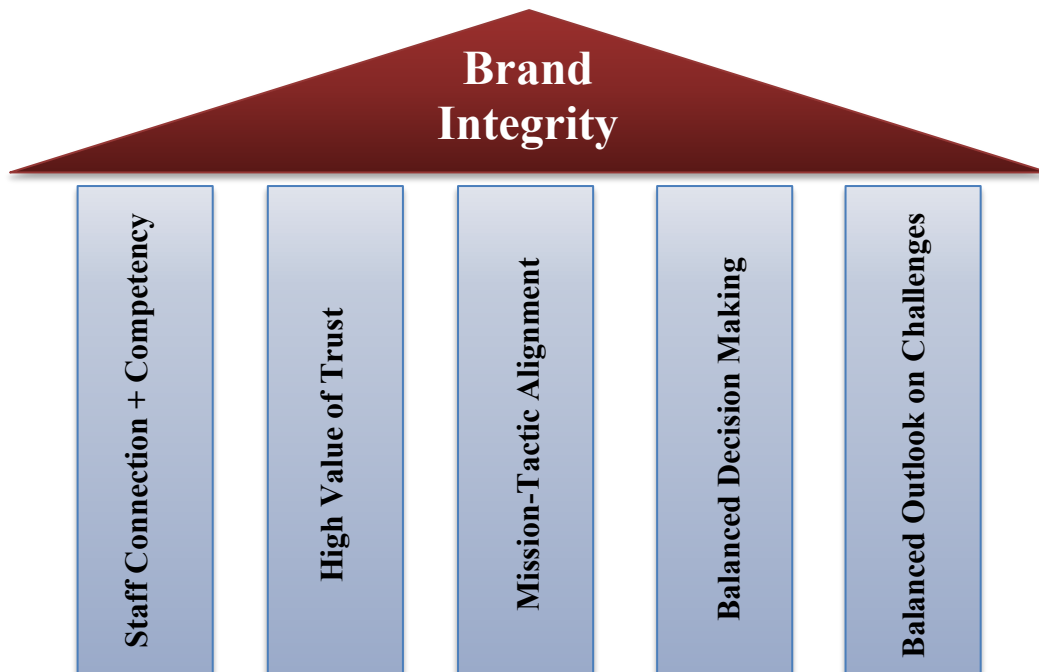
Challenges to Consider. Questions also prompted interview participants to recall the challenges they experienced when communicating mission-aligned messaging. Three subthemes were highlighted. First both organizations noted that sometimes engagement with their mission-aligned messaging lacks because it doesn't align with what the audience wants to hear. An additional challenge was one that occurred with growth and evolution of the organization over

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time. As the audience grows and diversifies, it becomes more difficult to engage every one in every message. Interestingly, these challenges were described as an inevitable frustration rather than a challenge that indicated failure or needed to be changed. Both indicated that they would continue this type of messaging because it was important to the organization's identity.

The findings of this study indicate that even though the concept of brand integrity was not understood or familiar to the individuals implementing branding strategies, examples of brand integrity were still evident. Four themes from interview transcript analysis with these individuals provide possible insight into the variables that may contribute to the successful implementation of brand integrity. The organization hires staff personally connected to the mission and who have a communications background to carry out the branding strategy; places a high value on trust; has communication tactics that are aligned with the mission; has a balanced decision making process; and challenges are approached with a balanced and long term outlook (Figure 1). The implications of each of these themes is further explored in the following chapter.

Figure 1. Pillars for Nonprofit Brand Integrity Implementation



Chapter IV: Discussion

The Problem

Thorough branding strategies are often viewed within the nonprofit sector through the lens of the for-profit industry. Although branding has existed in the nonprofit sector for decades, leaders in the sector often still view branding and marketing strategies as something that originates in the for-profit sector, and is then borrowed by some nonprofits to help elevate the identity and mission of their organizations. Research indicates that a strong, conscientious brand benefits nonprofit organizations by increasing efficiency in operations that are imperative to the organization's mission. Conscientious brands help nonprofits consistently appeal to their many audiences, from donors and board members, to staff and the public served and strong brands help nonprofits relay the quality of their work and verify their trust with the public (Richie et. al, 1998). Strong, conscientious branding strategies, therefore, should also be realized as an imperative operation to nonprofit organizations.

Yet branding in the sector has its skeptics. When interviewing nonprofit leaders about branding, Kylander and Stone (2011) found the concept to still be widely associated with the for-profit sector. This association led to hesitations towards branding, citing concerns about mission misalignment in branding strategies, or that the efforts to brand would take time and resources away from operations directly associated with the mission. In the study, nonprofit leaders expressed a strong affinity for their mission and expressed a lack of faith towards the sector's ability to implement branding efforts without jeopardizing the mission and values of their organization.

In response to their study's findings, Kylander and Stone (2011) developed the Nonprofit Brand IDEA conceptual framework, identifying four principles that can help nonprofit leaders

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think differently about the way they view and manage brands. Along with brand democracy, ethics, and affinity, the team coined the term brand integrity. When brand integrity exists, the organization's external image expressed in the brand is closely aligned with its mission, values, and its internal identity. Kylander and Stone's (2011) Brand IDEA framework provides a starting point to help nonprofit leaders better understand the branding principles that are specific to the sector. However, little research has been done to further explore nonprofit leaders' understanding of these newly defined nonprofit branding principles.

Study Recap

This study sought to further explore Kylander and Stone's concept of brand integrity in today's nonprofit sector. Specifically, the primary investigator sought to study how the concept is understood and implemented within an area of the sector that is currently flush with branding activity — religious institutions (Roof, 1999). Nonprofit religious institutions in America today are faced with reaching and appealing to younger audiences and they do so by building brand identities that differentiate from the traditional identity of the church, as well as from their peers who offer similar services. This competitive, brand-centric spiritual landscape provided an opportunity for the primary investigator to conduct case studies to explore if and how brand integrity is understood and implemented within two nonprofit religious organizations in Richmond, Virginia.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with designated communications staff to gather data on how each organization communicates its mission and values; the organization's perceived importance on this task; and the staff's understanding of brand integrity as a concept. The study also included a content analysis procedure to determine if brand integrity existed in these organizations. Key communicative channels for each organization, Instagram and

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Facebook, were reviewed for congruencies and contradictions between the messages shared with external audiences and the stated mission and values of the organization. Congruencies indicated brand integrity and contradictions indicated a lack thereof.

Findings

In-person interviews with a communications staff person from each organization determined that the staff's familiarity with the concept of brand integrity was very low. Both interview subjects were honest about their lack of knowledge regarding the term when directly asked by the primary investigator. However, it was found that a lack of understanding of brand integrity as a concept did not mean that brand integrity did not exist. Social media content over the course of one month was analyzed for both organizations in order to determine how the organization's content on social channels aligned, or did not align, with the message of the organization's mission and values. Findings indicated that both organizations expressed examples of brand integrity because the content they created for an external target audience did not contradict the stated mission and values of the organization. Once brand integrity was determined to exist, the interview transcripts were analyzed and coded for themes. Specifically, the investigator sought out themes that provided a possible explanation for how each organization's staff implemented brand integrity, even without awareness that they were doing so. The following sections describe those themes.

Staff Connection and Competency. Although each participant did not indicate an awareness of brand integrity as a concept, both individuals had been educationally trained on foundational communicative concepts. Each organization hired the individuals based off of their educational training to specifically carry out a communications strategy. Both indicated a foundational understanding in communication concepts that guided their strategies. They also

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indicated an intimate connection with the mission and values of the organization. This connection paired with background in key communicative concepts likely positively positioned the organization to implement more strategic communications that intentionally aligned with its mission and values.

Balanced team dynamics. A theme emerged around how team dynamics played a role in the communication strategy for each organization. Both interviewees, as key communication staff, were trusted to experiment with, and carry out communicative tactics, showing a level of valued independence in the organization. However, this was balanced with an open and collaborative team environment. Both organizations' staff met regularly as a group and it was not uncommon for others in the group to bring branding ideas to the group and those ideas were openly discussed and debated. Even though the communications staff member had the independence to experiment, this group dynamic ensured that decisions weren't made in a silo.

Trust as a motivation. Both interview participants expressed that messaging the mission and values to prospective audiences was important to the organization. In explaining why it was important, one commonality was the idea that it helped to build trust between the organization and the audience it is trying to reach. Because developing trust with this audience was important to the organization, ensuring that target audiences understood who the organization was and what its mission and values were up front was deemed a priority.

Mission-aligned tactics. The communicative tactics described by interview participants were found to be driven by the mission. Three examples of mission-aligned tactics were described. First, brand taglines were directly associated with the organization's mission and values. These taglines seemed to be a way for internal and external audiences alike to establish a quick cerebral recall of mission, values, and ultimately the identity of the organizations. Second,

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the mission and values were used as a filter when messaging the organization. If messaging and messaging tactics didn't align with the core mission and values of the organization in some way, it was questioned by the staff as to whether it was an effective use of staff time, or the right messaging approach for the organization. Third, the website served as the "home" for the communicative strategy. First and foremost the website's messaging had to be right so that it could serve as an example for other communicative channels and serve as a common digital meeting space for all audiences interacting with the organization's communications.

Challenges. When discussing some of the hardships around mission-focused branding, both interview participants discussed the challenge of keeping their audiences engaged. Specifically, there was frustration around messages getting misconstrued. The intent of the message would sometimes be lost on target audiences, particularly those already engaged with the organization in some capacity. When describing why this challenge occurred, it was perceived to be an inevitable frustration, because there would always be a percentage of the target audience that will perceive messages in their own way. In addition, there was also the challenge to keep audiences engaged over time. It becomes more difficult to engage an audience that diversifies as it grows in size. Over time, those who buy in at first are sometimes not as easily persuaded to continue doing so later in their tenure with the organization. But it was not the challenges themselves that proved most interesting, but how the participants perceived those challenges. Neither indicated that these challenges were a sign of failure. Messaging the mission would not change. Losses from that decision seemed inevitable rather than worrisome.

These key findings develop a potential thematic model (Figure 1) for nonprofit organizations seeking to understand and implement brand integrity. Using the religious organization as a case study, nonprofit practitioners, educators in the fields of communications

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and nonprofit studies, and the general public, may benefit from themes highlighted in this research by providing further insight into brand integrity. The implications of the findings specific for each group are outlined in the next section.

Implications

Nonprofit Practitioners. The key themes identified in this study will have the greatest implications on nonprofit practitioners. The findings indicate what nonprofit practitioners need to understand if they are concerned about a lack of brand integrity in their organization or what they need to consider in order to implement brand integrity. Nonprofits that are mission driven will be well positioned to implement brand integrity, likely more so than organizations with a profit-first mentality. Because it was found that brand integrity can exist without a basic understanding of the concept, it might be inferred that brand integrity does not exist in a vacuum. Brand integrity is dependent on the organization's structure, culture, and values more than staff's ability to intentionally carry out brand integrity. It is important for organizational leadership to understand this connection. Organizations that are already mission focused in their operations will be well equipped to infuse the mission into a branding strategy as well. Organizations that are not mission-focused, should first pause to define the mission and values of the organization before defining and implementing a branding strategy.

If a nonprofit is already operating in a mission-centered way, nonprofits should lean into branding, not shy away. The mission and values of the organization, as for all other operations of the nonprofit, should serve as the foundation of the brand. In organizations where the mission is not integral in the identity of the organization already, resources must be pumped into a branding strategy in order to research and determine what the brand positioning will be. This step in a

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mission-focused organization is less resource-intensive as the organization is already well positioned to understand what the message of its brand will be.

Once the decision to implement a brand is made, the findings of this study indicate there are specific operational decisions that nonprofit practitioners must consider. First, the staff and hiring process should be reviewed. Brand integrity will be best carried out by individuals who also personally identify with the mission of the organization and are experienced and knowledgeable in key communicative concepts. Practitioners need to consider what processes are in place at their organization to ensure these two needs are met when hiring the staff that will carry out branding strategies. In doing so, staff will be more equipped and thoughtful about implementing mission-aligned communicative tactics. Additionally, practitioners striving for brand integrity will need to be willing to honestly evaluate their operations as well as the values that drive how those operations are performed. The findings in this study indicate that brand integrity exists not only when there is a baseline organizational understanding and emphasis on the mission and values, but when trust and fair decision-making is valued as well. For example, if a nonprofit is implementing a brand but does not value the trust of the people it is branding to, it creates an opportunity for the brand to stray from the mission because without valuing their trust, it does not matter to the organization if the brand expresses integrity to its mission and values to this audience. Therefore the values that guide an organization's operations are just as important as a defined and valued mission.

Long term, practitioners must consider the challenges they will face in their branding strategies along the way and how they will approach them when they arise. Take one of the common challenges identified by the two organizations in this study for example. Both identified the challenge of keeping audiences engaged in the brand over time. As a brand evolves, an

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organization may be faced with losing a percentage of its audience over time. In these moments the organization must choose if the individual who is at risk of disengaging with the organization is more important than its mission-aligned messaging. In both organizations here, the organization chose the mission over disengagement. This difficult decision could be considered a form of brand integrity as staff made the decision to choose the mission as priority. Ultimately, brand integrity exists when the nonprofit practitioner prioritizes the mission in all of the decisions that may impact the brand.

Education. Even if knowledge of the concept is not a requirement for its existence, organizations cannot be intentional in fostering brand integrity, or be aware if their organization is lacking brand integrity, if those working in the organization do not have a basic understanding of the principle. Although further research would be required to confirm, it is likely that the two communication professionals interviewed in this study are not the only ones who are unfamiliar with the concept of brand integrity. Brand integrity as defined by Kylander and Stone (2011) should be incorporated into both communications and nonprofit curriculum, so that when students become staff, they are aware of how actions and operations can impact an organization's brand integrity. Students of communication and nonprofit studies should understand brand integrity at a level where they can identify examples of success and failure, as well as the variables that impact an organization's ability to implement it effectively. One possible way for brand integrity to be studied in the classroom would be through the analysis of brand case studies. After students are familiar with the term, case studies could be presented that describe an organization, its mission and values, and comments from internal constituents about the organization. The case study would then also provide examples of the organization's brand

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messaging, and given this information, students could seek to identify if brand integrity does or does not exist.

Communities. The implications of this study are not limited to only those operating within a nonprofit organization. Individuals, communities, and organizations exploring the possibility of engaging with a particular nonprofit would benefit by better understanding brand integrity. Based on this study's findings, nonprofit organizations who are consistent and authentic in their messaging, both internally and externally, are likely to be consistent and authentic in their operations as well. These findings show that brand integrity seems to exist when an organization has knowledgeable personnel on staff, when team dynamics are strong, when the organization values the trust of their constituents, and their mission means enough to drive its communication efforts. It can be argued that these are all characteristics of a well-run nonprofit organization. By understanding brand integrity and how to identify it, the general public can be more knowledgeable in identifying which organizations may be more effective than others. By understanding brand integrity, the public can be more confident in the type of organizations they are donating their time and money to. Over time, as this awareness increases in the general public, organizations who lack brand integrity may be forced to evolve as donors, staff, and volunteers gravitate towards organizations where brand integrity exists.

Future Research

The findings from this study begin to provide further insight into the concept of brand integrity, but more research is required in order to fully understand Kylander and Stone's (2011) principle within the sector. It would be remiss to determine the findings exposed by this study resolute. With the sample of this study only consisting of two organizations of a similar nature, the sample size is too narrow to determine if these findings hold true across the sector. More

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studies of a similar design are necessary. Future studies could and should further explore the religious landscape to determine how brand integrity is successfully implemented in this specific subsector, but future studies should also explore the concept in additional types of nonprofit organizations as well to better understand the similarities and differences across the sector as a whole.

Limitations

There were two key limitations to the study. First, research had to be conducted within a set time frame. Time constraints limited the depth of inquiry. The study would have benefited from more interviews and additional questions being asked during those interviews, but doing so was not a realistic expectation for the time allotted. Additionally, research was conducted at the onset of an international pandemic. Organizations across the United States were forced to alter their normal operations. Both of the organizations examined in this study limited their regular programming. This impacted the content analysis procedure and data collected as it introduced messaging anomalies in social media posts because the messaging was dedicated to relaying programmatic shifts due to the pandemic.

Conclusion

The research outlined in this paper proved to be a valuable exercise in investigating the concept of brand integrity in a relatively thorough manner within two small, nonprofit organizations. By studying two organizations in depth in order to gather explanatory qualitative data that could be cross-examined, the investigator was able to further flesh out how the concept of brand integrity manifests in practice rather than only as a theoretical principle.

As the sector continues to grow and expand, all nonprofit organizations must consider how to strategically foster a recognizable identity in order to establish share of voice in the

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market. The religious institution, which once had the support of a denomination to relay its identity, is already a type of nonprofit navigating the need to delicately brand in order to meet the expectations of the youthful, spiritual ‘consumer.’ All nonprofits, if not already, will soon be faced with navigating how to interact with its own youthful consumer as it will be who donates to, volunteers for, and leads nonprofit organizations. The world surrounding these younger generations is one filled by brands. Brands are expected. Therefore, the question is no longer if the nonprofit needs a brand, but how can it implement a brand in a way that honors its mission and values.

In conclusion, this research infers that rather than shying away from a branding strategy because of the fear of jeopardizing the organization’s mission, the nonprofit organization should lean into its mission and values, viewing these organizational tenants as a strength for nonprofits that can guide their branding strategies. Nonprofits who already place a high value on the mission and build operations centered by the organization’s mission are well positioned to implement brands with integrity. It is suggested here that in order to carry out brand integrity, branding operations need to be centered by the mission. When hiring an employee(s) to carry out branding strategies, nonprofits need to first consider the individual’s personal connection to the mission and secondly, their background and education should positively impact their ability to utilize channels to strategically relay messages that, in some way, represent the mission and values of the organization. This can be done through mission-aligned tactics, such as using the mission as a filter when drafting the messages that will be relayed to an external audience. Nonprofits also need to consider the organizational culture that branding decisions are made within and how that culture impacts the ability to implement brand integrity. Leaders need to ask: Is the organization operating in a way that it values the trust of its constituents? Is the

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decision-making process balanced? Finally, nonprofits need to expect challenges to arise during the ongoing branding process. Difficult challenges will arise, such as the decision to continue fostering the engagement of an individual or group or potentially lose that engagement in order to keep messaging true to the mission.

The principles outlined in this study ultimately suggest that in order to implement brand integrity, the mission of the organization must also be the mission of the brand. If the organization is negatively impacted by the brand then it is not the concept of branding that needs to be assessed. The organization's mission itself and the values that drive its operations must be openly and honestly evaluated. This research provides a model (Figure 1) for that evaluation.

Ultimately, the literature must further expand on this research in order to help guide nonprofits into authentic branding practices that are unique to the needs and operations of the nonprofit sector and help leaders accelerate efficient operations while doing so in tandem with the organization's mission. Where Kylander and Stone (2011) defined brand integrity, this research builds on the definition to provide nonprofit practitioners, educators, and the general public insight into how brand integrity is fostered through mission-centered operations. This study serves as a strong starting point to encourage and foster conscientious, mission-driven brands in nonprofits, accelerating the operations required to meet the important needs that our society requires of the sector.

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Appendix A - Recruitment

Subject Line: Participation in University of Richmond Student Research

Good morning [name of contact],

My name is Lindsey Campbell and I am an employee and a part-time student in the [School of Professional and Continuing Studies](#) at the University of Richmond. After two years of taking courses during the evenings, after fulfilling my daily duties as a communications professional for the institution, I will be earning my Master's degree in Nonprofit Studies this May. To do this I must complete a final research project this spring.

I am hoping that you will be interested in helping me reach this milestone by agreeing to participate in a 45-minute interview for my research project.

As a communications professional I am interested in learning about how nonprofit organizations and their leaders implement communication strategies that align with their mission and values. Better understanding how leaders successfully implement communications strategies that align with their mission and values can benefit leaders in your field who hope to implement effective communication strategies that are authentic to their organization's identity and reason for existing.

I would be interested in learning more about [organization's name], and your experiences trying to communicate with your current and prospective member bases and learn more about the strategies you have used to reach those audiences.

Would you or someone else you might suggest at [organization's name] be interested in discussing this topic with me in a 45-minute interview next month?

I will be happy to coordinate with your schedule in March and answer any questions you may have before we schedule a time to talk. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with your thoughts.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Lindsey Campbell
lcampbe4@richmond.edu
540-420-9353

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Appendix B – Field Tool (Interview Script and Consent Form)

Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study that aims to explore how leaders of nonprofit organizations implement communication strategies that align with the organization's mission and values. Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. If you have questions, please feel free to ask the researcher for more information.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how nonprofit leaders implement communication strategies in order to garner new interest and engagement with their organization. The study also explores how nonprofit leaders implement communication strategies that closely align with their organization's mission and values, and explore their experiences in attempting to do so.

The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes to complete. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to schedule a time to have a discussion with the researcher and answer questions about your organization, its mission and values, and the communication strategies that your organization implements to share messages about the organization with its current member base as well as prospective ones. Questions will also explore experiences around implementing such strategies.

Contact Information

This research is being conducted by Lindsey Campbell. If you have any questions about the project, Lindsey can be contacted at lcampbe4@richmond.edu or 540-420-9353.

Possible Risks

There is no more than minimal risk involved in participating in this study. That is, the risks for completing this study are no more than the risks experienced in daily life. If you do experience any discomfort during the study, remember you can stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

Possible Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this project, but you may get some satisfaction from contributing to this investigation.

Confidentiality of Records

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Reasonable steps will be taken to ensure that your individual results will remain confidential. However, as with any research process, the risk of a breach of confidentiality is always possible. Nevertheless, to the best of the investigators' abilities, your answers in this study will remain anonymous and confidential. Once the study is completed, the data will be completely "deidentified." All identifiers, such as your name and your organization's name from the data collected and only then will the information be used for future research studies.

Use of Information and Data Collected

The researcher will not tell anyone the answers you give them. Your responses will not be associated with you by name and the data you provide will be kept secure. What is found from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

Protections and Rights

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the University of Richmond's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research at (804) 484-1565 or irb@richmond.edu for information or assistance.

Statement of Consent

The study has been described to me and I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may discontinue my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that my responses will be treated confidentially and used only as described in this consent form. I understand that if I have any questions, I can pose them to the researcher. I have read and understand the above information and I consent to participate in this study by signing below. Additionally, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Witnessing Researcher: _____

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Interview Questions

1. Tell me a about your professional background and your history with your organization— What is your role at [organization’s name]?
2. Explain the purpose, or mission, of your organization.
3. Describe the values that are important to your organization.
4. Who does your organization aim to serve? For example, describe who interacts with your organization, your leadership, and who you hope will interact with your organization in the future.
5. How are the organization’s values and the organization’s mission expressed through the operations of the organization and by the people in it?
6. If your organization is trying to reach new audiences, what messages does your organization communicate about itself in order to try to persuade this group to learn more about or engage with your organization?
7. Tell me about your organization’s tactics, or the methods it implements, in order to communicate these messages. (This could be messages in email, messages on social media, messages, or images, on signs or billboards, or during face to face interactions).
8. Tell me how your organization came to the decision to communicate with new audiences in this particular way.
9. How important is it to you that new audiences understand the organization’s mission and values? Why is it important?
10. How is the mission and values of your organization, either explained or implied in your communication efforts to this audience?
11. Describe how intentional your organization’s decisions were in determining how to communicate the mission and values of the organization with this new audience.
12. Describe any challenges you have faced in communicating your mission and values to this particular audience. Provide examples if possible.
13. Have these challenges changed over time? How so?
14. Would you consider these efforts to be considered branding?
15. Are you aware of the term “brand integrity”? If so, what does brand integrity mean to you? If no, what would you might think brand integrity means?