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BRANDED!

*Use Branding to
Cement Image,
Gain Referrals*

by Merrily Orsini, guest editor

In today's media- and information-saturated world, there's no substitute for instant name recognition. Referrals are won and lost in the few seconds it takes a potential client to determine their gut impression of your agency's services.

Which means your agency needs to push beyond traditional print, radio or television advertising into the less tangible, but far more powerful, world of **branding**. You need a strong, positive brand that conveys a sense of quality and standards and makes potential customers trust your services before they've even sampled them.

Unfortunately, despite the feelings of many in home care to the contrary, brands don't build themselves. Even if you have a good reputation in your community, great word-of-mouth exposure and solid relationships with referral sources, that is not the same as a distinctive brand. A brand speaks to potential clients rather than existing ones, extending your message to patients who've never heard of your agency before.

Which is why our top clients spend an average of 30% of their marketing budgets each year on branding activities. And they made back every penny—and then some—with average growth rates of 20% to 25% over the past few years.

So what does branding really mean anyway?

Logos. Company colors. Uniforms. Brochures. Many people mistakenly assume that these individual things are your brand. While these are important in communicating your brand, a brand is more ephemeral—it's what your customers and the public think about your service.

Unlike food or retail businesses, branding for private duty is not just a logo, corporate identity, product or a strategy. Instead you must combine all those factors to affect the first impression and the lasting assumptions that potential clients have about your company.

That means your branding strategy must sport several prongs:

- 1) **Manage potential clients' assumptions and feelings** about your services. You have the opportunity to determine how people regard your business and the mental associations it creates. Do you want to be seen as inexpensive and affordable, or top-of-line and the best quality, but at a higher price?
- 2) **Control your company's image** through carefully orchestrated key messages that distinguish your business from your competitors. For example, Acclaimed Home Care in Southfield, Mich., provides a broad range of services. Their key message is the compassion with which their caregivers treat clients. Owned and operated by a nurse, Acclaimed highlights this compassion in all of its written materials and on its web site.

Another approach: the owner of Carefree Home Care, Scottsdale, Ariz., makes note of her Irish heritage to differentiate Carefree from the competition. Then, she drives home her key message of her agency's responsiveness to client requests.

By identifying your key messages and consistently delivering them through every facet of your marketing and branding strategy you can control how your business presents itself and build a reputation as an industry leader.

3) **Build a graphic representation** of your company (logo, business cards, etc.). This must be carefully crafted to be immediately recognizable. The best brands are identified from a single graphic image, such as the Mercedes circle logo or the Nike swoosh.

With all of these segments of your branding strategy, you're trying to create one feeling that is universal and that carries through all the facets of your marketing and advertising.

Review your identity and influence perceptions

Before you create a new identity for your agency, be sure you know what your existing one is. Public perception of your agency may be drastically different from your own.

► **STEP 1: Take stock of your standing in your market.** Conduct small focus groups, send out surveys, mystery shop, take a poll and analyze the information.

In each of these activities, you want to uncover what the feelings and assumptions are of your company and the messages that your business is communicating to the public.

Some key questions to ask:

- Why did you choose our company?
- What was your perception of our company before you used our services?

- What are your perceptions now that you have used us?
- What do you think that we do best? Worst?
- Would you purchase our services again?
- How do we compare to other home care companies you know of?
- What do you think our top priority is?
- Would you refer others to us?

► **STEP 2: Write out your business goals** and develop a positioning statement. A positioning statement describes your agency's unique position in your market and how you are different from the competition.

Try to narrow this statement down to one or two points of difference. Preferred Senior Care leaders developed an informal positioning statement that focused on three main points, according to Sue Tornabene, director of operations:

- **Going beyond traditional home care.** The company prided itself on giving patients more than the usual aide services. In fact, company leaders specifically noted in the positioning statement that they provided "services for the home, body, mind and spirit," which included such things as light housekeeping, personal care, and companionship as well as taking a client to church or a social activity.

The devil's in the details when it comes to logo design and production, so don't just leave it up to the designer. You can create major problems if you choose a color that doesn't match your company uniforms or an ink that doesn't reproduce well on your agency's stationary.

Here are our top tips for choosing appropriate colors and materials, as well as working with printers to create brand consistency:

- **Stick with a one- or two-color logo** for the most cost-effective printing. It's expensive to do short-run full-color printing.
- **Choose saturated colors.** Make sure both colors are deep enough that if copies are made of the logo or something is faxed with the logo on it, the color won't wash out.
- **Set standard PMS (Pantone Matching System) colors.** But test out a few variations first. Print the colors on a few different paper types, such as coated and uncoated stock. If the results vary too widely, you may have to choose one PMS color to print on coated paper and another to print on uncoated paper, to get the same final effect.
- **Match stationary, other paper stocks carefully.** Many agencies now use colored stationary, brochure stock and other paper products. To keep your brand consistent, you'll want the base paper to be one of your logo colors, which can be hard to find if your printer doesn't already stock it.

Also, consider the weight, or thickness, of the



Logos: Don't Ignore the Details

paper you're using. A beautiful brochure printed on flimsy paper will defeat the look of quality. So will note cards printed on cheap stock. However, above a certain weight, it can be difficult to see or feel a significant difference. Ask to see and feel the paper the printer is planning to use.

- **Check printer capabilities.** Not every printer is equal. Get referrals from colleagues or your marketing firm (if you have one). Ask about the printer's capabilities. Does the company have the equipment to handle your job? If not, will parts of your job be subbed out to another printer? For example, not all printers can print marketing kit folders. Only printers with a large press can do this job due to the fact they need to handle very large pieces of paper.
- **Communicate your print needs clearly.** Write out PMS colors, exact paper specifications and your expectations. Don't leave room for assumptions. It is also helpful to explain to the printer what you hope to achieve and ask for ideas on better ways to achieve your goals.
- **Develop graphic standards** for your company that require use of the same images, including font colors and type faces in every flyer, brochure, letter, etc. Then give both employees, outside contractors and your printer clear directions on when and how to use your logo and messages. For best results, you should organize an in-service for your administrative and marketing staff to go over the information.

- **Making a personal connection** with the client and her family members, and carefully matching the caregiver to the client's personality and specific needs.
- **Providing premier, not discount, care.** Rather than position the company as the least expensive option, Preferred worked to establish itself as a top-flight home care service, offering the best quality of care and the best service.

► **STEP 3: Compare the public's answers to your agency's own internal values.** Do consumers recognize your agency for the reasons you think they should? If not, it's time for a major branding push, getting your message out in as many different media channels and different audiences as possible.

Preferred found that it need to bolster its image as a high-quality, top-of-the-line provider. So the agency decided to create a higher quality graphic representation, redesigning its letterhead, its brochures, adding a product sheet that reinforces its unique selection of services and also developing a Web site and new brochure. All these products carry the same messages and the same graphic images. Now, at a glance a potential customer knows they are working with a home care agency that exudes quality, professionalism and caring.

► **STEP 4: Develop key messages.** You need a total of four to five key messages that summarize the most important things you want potential clients to know about your company. These key messages should stem from your positioning statement and expand upon your values, benefits and service standards.

In home care-related businesses, it is especially important that key messages evoke feeling and make an emotional connection with customers. Home care is a highly personal service, so your key messages should showcase your compassionate caregivers and high-quality services.

However, you want your key messages to be even more specific so that they highlight your unique offerings and how your company differs from competing businesses. Here are the messages Preferred Senior Care puts in all outgoing material—brochures, Web site, admission packets, and more:

- Preferred Senior Care is dedicated to providing a unique, high-quality, caring service for seniors in their private homes in Chicago and its suburbs.
- Preferred Senior Care's personalized services cover a full range of options that encompass the home, the body, the mind and the spirit.
- A loving and compatible caregiver will be matched with your needs for personality, availability and skills.

► **STEP 5: Set yourself apart.** If you're finding this process difficult so far, it's probably because you haven't suffi-

ciently identified what makes your agency different. It's particularly tough in home care, with so many companies offering essentially the same services, to make your own company appear distinctive or memorable.

And you may fear that if your identity is too tied to a niche service or quality, that you'll lose business from the mainstream customer. Not so. This exercise is about getting that initial notice—getting potential customers to remember your company over the others and connect with you in a way that they don't do with your competitors.

The best way to do this is to offer a unique customer benefit—something specific and measurable that your clients

value. Preferred Senior Care highlights several unique customer benefits in its marketing materials, telling potential customers that Preferred Senior Care staff will:

- Meet with you or your loved ones and perform an in-home assessment of specific needs and wants.
- Match you perfectly with the right caregiver in terms of skills, personality, and compatible interests.
- Conduct a free in-home safety check.
- Include an Emergency Response

System for all clients.

- Use the latest technology (specifically, telephony) to assure that a caregiver arrives on time as scheduled.

IMPORTANT: Once you've made these claims, you must consistently deliver these benefits every time. Don't make claims that you're unsure of or that are not consistent. Spend the time up front to train staff to provide these services, monitoring them for quality.

► **STEP 6: Set expectations.** Now you can move on to set specific expectations about how you are going to provide the benefits and make sure you meet the expectations every time.

Create a strategic marketing plan with responsibilities and time lines for how you will provide the things you promise and incorporate the expectations into your corporate identity. From the person who answers the phone, to the in-home caregiver, all must know the expectations and understand their role in exceeding those. That means creating staff protocol and procedures for all aspects of the business.

For example, one way to uphold the expectations you set is to provide top-notch customer service. Providing your customer benefits must start with the first point of contact for potential contacts.

You may have to make some changes, such as hiring more experienced staff members, or moving veteran customer service reps up to answer front line phones. You don't want the least experienced person answering the telephone and fumbling what could be a potential new client or a referral source. You want the person who answers the phone to be courteous, professional, informed and familiar with the bene-



Preferred created a logo with a heart and home image to evoke a feeling of comfort and caring. The green color is meant to be soothing to clients.

fits and specifically how you will provide them.

From the first call, Preferred's staff hands over the inquiry for services to a seasoned customer service professional or area director who answers questions, provides company information and spends a lot of time with the client and family on the front end, beginning with the initial in-home assessment. Often that involves almost functioning as a counseling service, reassuring clients and family members who are usually out of energy and desperate for help. It's in those moments that Preferred has the opportunity to create an atmosphere of trust and show genuine compassion towards the client, as well as showcase the unique customer benefits that they offer.

To keep standards high, Preferred staff make follow-up phone calls to clients and family members, performing verbal surveys to determine satisfaction. When a job ends, they also ask clients or family members to write a letter to let Preferred know how they felt about the service that they received.

► **STEP 7: Create a powerful and consistent identity.**

Once you've created your key messages and position, the unique customer benefits that you provide and the expectations you set for your target customers, you need a way to consistently deliver that message. That means creating a stable of symbols, messages and designs that reinforce those messages and create a link to your brand, building an identity

Set Graphic Standards.

Preferred uses the same logo, colors, fonts and messages in all its outgoing marketing such as its web site.

The screenshot shows the Preferred Senior Care website. At the top left is the logo with the text "Preferred Senior Care" and the tagline "because staying at home is preferred". A navigation menu includes "Home | About Us | Services | Resources | Employment | Contact Us". The main content area is titled "Welcome to Preferred Senior Care" and describes the company's dedication to providing high-quality, caring service for seniors in their private homes in Chicago and its surrounding suburban areas. It lists personalized services covering the home, body, mind, and spirit. A list of services includes: Client Services, Our Caregivers, Telephony System, and Emergency Response System. A bulleted list of benefits includes: meeting with clients for in-home assessments, ensuring care needs are met, conducting safety checks, providing a Health Watch System, using technology for on-time arrivals, and 24/7 monitoring. Contact information is provided at the bottom: "Contact us to meet your home care needs by [email](#) or call us at 847-240-0400." The footer contains copyright information: "© 2005 Preferred Senior Care, Inc. • 941-D North Plum Grove Road, Schaumburg, IL 60173" and contact details: "Tel: 847.240.0400 • 708.448.8380 • Toll Free 888.670.CARE • Fax: 847.240.3201" and "www.preferredsc.com • info@preferredsc.com".



A linear, geometric design might suit if your agency wants to be known as a progressive, cutting-edge provider.

that potential clients will remember.

Your goal is to translate your identity into every aspect of your business from your logo to your staff name tags. You want to create a consistent look and feel for everything related to your company. A consistent identity is key to successful branding and is the cornerstone of your brand.

Logo creation is the single most important part of the design branding process. The logo sets the stage for your colors and for the overall look and feel of your corporate identity and marketing collateral.

When developing a logo, let your key messages guide the design. Develop a stand-out image that plays on the benefits and messages that you want to communicate to your would-be customers. For example, a linear, geometric design might suit if your agency wants to be known as a progressive, cutting-edge provider. Or, your logo could use an open, rounded image reminiscent of embracing arms if you're trying to portray a welcoming, trustworthy image.

Don't let it get too complicated, however. Remember—your logo must be easy to see and interpret on everything from a tiny lapel pin to a giant billboard.

Preferred developed a logo featuring a house overlapping with a heart (see box, p. 30) to visually show the company's dedication to compassionate care. The agency chose an elegant script for the company name to further exemplify its personalized and top-quality service. The soothing green colors used throughout Preferred's marketing are harmonious, gender-neutral and pleasing to the eye.

But don't just grab the first graphic your designer creates. Consider carefully everything from the colors used to the materials the logo will be placed on (see box, p. 28).

For example, few of our clients ever use red because it is the color of blood and is a bold, harsh color. Other colors evoke their own primary emotions—yellow portrays sunshine, but may be too light and soft to be memorable. On the other hand, soft ocean colors—blues and greens—are soothing and may be a natural choice because they evoke feelings of comfort and well-being.

► **STEP 8: Tackle the tagline.** Don't settle for generic phrases that don't mean anything to your customers. Your tagline should: 1) be memorable, 2) reinforce the unique position of your company and 3) elicit an emotional response.

Taglines hammer home what the company is about and have meaning as a stand-alone statement. To develop a tagline, look back to your key messages. The tagline should

be a natural evolution of your key messages and positioning statement.

Preferred's tagline, "because staying at home is preferred," taps into the deepest desires of their clients and their families to be able to stay at home as long as possible. The tagline also is a catchy phrase that includes part of the agency's name, making it even more memorable.

► **STEP 9: Spread the word.** To build a true brand, your logo and tagline must be proffered in every area of public awareness. You know about the usual methods—business cards, marketing brochures and even billboards.

But there are some unusual places where you should put your brand:

- **Booths, kiosks.** Use a booth or a kiosk at a community senior fair, a shopping mall, or a state or county fair to provide information to potential customers and to promote the business.
- **In-person communications.** Train your intake reps and receptionists to state your tagline as a secondary greeting when answering the agency's phone. Also, create an "elevator speech", a thirty-second description of the benefits of your service, and include it with the tagline when customers ask for more information.
- **Supplies left in the patient's home.** Several of our clients leave branded careplan books in the client's home. Information is recorded such as daily schedules, meals prepared, visitors, exercise, and excursions so visiting family members can keep abreast of activities, as well as let replacement caregivers know what to fix for meals and what to do for entertainment.
- **Church, social meetings.** Some of our clients offer seminars at local churches for answers to aging questions. Prepare handouts that are company branded giving local resources for seniors.
- **Sponsor a community senior expo.** By being a sponsor, you are covering part of the expense (a luncheon or a giveaway) in return for having your logo visible on all advertising and giveaways such as a tote bag, etc.
- **Create aging-related small (but useful) giveaways** and imprint your logo on them and distribute them to physicians, trust officers or estate attorneys. A few winners for our clients have been night lights for seniors, "magnifying glasses" in the shape of bookmarks or credit cards, or refrigerator magnets that serve as a photo frame. ■



*About the Author: Merrily Orsini is a former private duty owner and an industry expert, regularly speaking at conferences and meetings in the home care industry. She is now the owner and managing director of **corecubed**, a communications agency that specializes in branding and communications services for the home care industry. Further information can be found at www.corecubed.com.*