STATEMENT OF POLICY

Increasing the Visibility and Perceived Value of Local Health Departments through Building a Strong Brand

Policy
The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recommends that local health departments (LHDs) adopt the business practice of branding to differentiate their services from other health providers, raise their visibility in the community, and increase their perceived value to the public, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders.

As LHDs engage in developing and promoting their brand, they are encouraged to:

- Develop and implement an agency-wide brand strategy; the term “brand” is a concept that focuses on what products and services an LHD has promised its stakeholders;
- Ensure that senior staff have a foundational knowledge base in organizational brand building principles and practices in order to provide strategic leadership in these areas;
- Educate and engage employees at all levels in the development of the organization’s vision, mission, and guiding principles, and empower staff to be effective ambassadors of the LHD “brand” in the community;
- Integrate the brand framework into:
  - All internal systems improvement activities, including the agency-wide strategic plan, voluntary accreditation, organizational development initiatives, staff trainings, and new employee orientations;
  - All internal and external communications (e.g., news releases, newsletters, brochures, annual reports, videos), communication platforms (e.g., websites, social media sites, traditional print and broadcast media), and communications plans;
- Recognize the role of public health communicators (e.g., public information officers, public health educators, media specialists, social marketers, government affairs specialists) in developing, promoting, and ensuring the integrity of the LHD brand;
- Build LHD communications capacity by recruiting professional staff with expertise in communications or ensuring that such experts are available to the LHD; and
- Use the National Identity for Public Health Departments (i.e. the public health logo) as a standalone logo or in conjunction with an organization’s existing logo, and other imagery.

Justification
Brand work is not a policy, program, or isolated process, and LHDs should integrate elements of a brand framework into other systems improvement initiatives, such as the agency-wide strategic plan, staff development activities, the agency-wide communication plan, and other activities. This recommendation is supported by the Public Health Accreditation Board Standard 3.2: Provide
Information on Public Health Issues and Public Health Functions Through Multiple Methods to a Variety of Audiences.

LHDs and their staff provide an essential service to the community — yet their good work often goes unnoticed and under-funded.

Since 2008, LHDs have experienced devastating funding cuts that have led to job losses, elimination of vital programs, and dissolution of agencies in some instances. LHD funding has always been inconsistent, but these events underscore a new degree of vulnerability in an ongoing weak economy. Rather than view these losses as inevitable outcomes of the Great Recession, LHD officials should ask themselves four critical questions:

1. Is my LHD consistently delivering what is important to the community, funders, and other key stakeholders?
2. How can my LHD become a more trusted and influential leader on public health issues affecting the community?
3. How can my LHD position itself as a community leader and agent of change in preventing disease and injury?
4. How can my LHD become more valued by and visible to policymakers, funders, the media, and the general public?

The responses to these questions—which address both the quality of an LHD and how the organization is perceived by external audiences—define an LHD’s brand and reputation. Brand and reputation are two related but distinct concepts.

The LHD brand is more than a logo. The term “brand” is a concept that focuses on what products and services an organization has promised its “customers,” which for LHDs would include the public, funders, and other stakeholders. A strong brand helps communicate that the LHD and its services are relevant and uniquely able to meet community needs.¹ The LHD brand is formed by the organization’s every communication, action, and interaction with the public and other stakeholders.

The term “reputation” is a concept that focuses on the credibility and respect that an organization has among a broad set of constituencies, which for LHDs would include employees, the public, opinion makers (e.g., the media, elected officials), business and community leaders, funders, and other stakeholders².

Why do brand and reputation matter to an LHD? The answer is simple: If an agency is not delivering a high quality product (brand) and not valued by key stakeholders (reputation), the organization will not be funded at appropriate levels and will likely face a multitude of other challenges in trying to improve the health of the community.

A popular expression in the field of marketing is “the brand on the outside is only as strong as the brand on the inside.”³ In other words, a compelling external brand for LHDs must begin with a strong organization that offers a high quality product (e.g., a mix of services, programs, and policy/advocacy activities that together improve community health) and creates a workplace culture in which employees are aligned with the organization’s mission, goals, and values and act as enthusiastic brand ambassadors to the community and other stakeholders.

Through developing and implementing an agency-wide brand framework— in concert with pursuing quality improvement initiatives (like voluntary accreditation) and working within recognized frameworks for local public health service delivery (like the Operational Definition of a Functional Local Health Department and 10 Essential Public Health Services) — LHDs can improve the quality of
their services, have a more engaged workforce, and raise the organization’s perceived value among stakeholders.\textsuperscript{4,5}

A brand framework can be used to guide an LHD to consistently deliver what is most important to its stakeholders. The centerpiece of such a framework would be formative research (e.g., focus groups, surveys) involving LHD staff and key external stakeholders (e.g., the public, elected officials, partner organizations) that would identify attributes of the LHD that are unique, important, and valued. Formative research is also useful for identifying brand weaknesses that diminish the value and credibility of an LHD.

The LHD brand can and should be broadly communicated through written materials and visual imagery that are disseminated through multiple channels (e.g., the agency website; traditional media; Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube; e-newsletters).

Of particular importance is the use of a common visual identity and tagline (e.g., logos) to convey an LHD’s brand through a design, color, font, symbols and theme. An agency’s logo, if used consistently and over time, should increase the visibility of an LHD in the community. The National Identity for Public Health Departments (national identity) offers LHDs a common visual symbol and thematic message. It can be used alone or in conjunction with an agency’s existing visual identity. The use of the national identity by LHDs is voluntary. The goal for LHDs to become universally recognized and understood can be achieved when health departments across the country embrace the national identity.

For LHDs interested in building their brand, it is also important to recognize the significant role that communications and marketing staff play in promoting and ensuring the integrity of the organization’s brand, as well as their contribution to the overall effectiveness of the organization. Without trained public health communication professionals, it is challenging to convey the successes of the organization to the public, and media, policymakers or build and maintain key information channels.

References
2. Ibid.

Additional Reading

Record of Action
\textit{Proposed by NACCHO Public Relations Committee}
\textit{Approved by NACCHO Board of Directors}
\textit{July 2012}