NACCHO
National Association of County & City Health Officials
The National Connection for Local Public Health

Branding Your Local Health Department: *The Process*

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About This Guide

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) developed this resource to guide local health departments (LHDs) as they embark on strategic planning and quality improvement processes and begin to explore how best to position their agency in the "health marketplace".

NACCHO recommends that LHDs adopt the business practice of branding (also known as image management) to differentiate their role and function within the community from other health-related organizations and providers. A strong brand should raise an agency's visibility in the community and increase its perceived value to the public, policymakers, funders, and other key stakeholders. An effective brand has the potential to yield community support and funding.

This guide introduces brand development. It describes the journey toward building a stronger local health department brand and breaks down the process into understandable and manageable steps. The guide is a living document and will be updated to reflect new information as it becomes available.

Branding Defined

The term "branding" is used in the business world to describe efforts to compete for "market share" by advertising, marketing, and using a recognizable logo. While LHDs have not typically sought market share, they want to be effective and they want program success, community recognition, respect, and support. The facilities, services, and programs of an LHD are not the brand, and neither is the logo. Branding happens before all of those.

A brand says that something is different about an organization—something worth more than "just" a health department. People do not want just soda, they want Coca-Cola®. They do not want just tennis shoes, they want Nike®. In public health parlance, brand is equivalent to image, or an agency's personality. Brand is what community members, clients, policymakers, and other stakeholders think of the agency and say about it. It is also a promise an organization makes to the community and should drive the day-to-day efforts of employees to deliver the best possible client experience. Police and fire have strong brands. Emblems and uniforms tell people what they are. The degree to which they are supported, funded, and respected in the community depends on their actions in the community.

Some LHD clients' only brand experience is their annual flu shot. However, if an LHD develops and implements a strong brand vision and strategy, the LHD should be able to position itself not just as a provider of flu shots but as the driving force behind improving health in the community.

For better or worse, every LHD already has a brand. It is the image the agency and its employees project to the community each day. Since brand images change as circumstances change, it is critical to consciously monitor a brand over time. Agencies must pay attention to brand or image and not let it be set by default. When an LHD sets for itself a strong brand, vision, and strategy, the LHD is positioned as the driving force behind improving the health of the community.

Role of Leadership

The health official or director is the most prominent representative of the LHD. If the health official is not visible, then the agency is not visible. The health official must always act with intent and project strong agency values to the staff and the community.

When an LHD values honesty, flexibility, responsiveness, connectedness, competence, appropriate power, and sensitivity to the community, the health official should strongly project these values and inspire staff to act and function in the same way.

The Role of Employees

Leadership must value the brand at every level, and every LHD staff member is responsible for implementing and upholding the LHD brand. Ultimately, the greatest marketing strategies in the world cannot make up for a poor client experience. "Front line" staff are critical to ensuring a positive experience by delivering consistently superior customer service.

Employee engagement with community partners is also critical in supporting the agency brand. LHDs should ensure staff interactions contribute to meaningful partnerships and strategic relationships. Partners can be an LHD's strongest ally for reinforcing the community's perception of an agency.

The LHD Brand: Why It Matters

LHDs provide essential services to the community, yet their good work often goes unnoticed and underfunded. While the public may value prevention and other public health activities, they may not connect this work with LHDs. This confusion is understandable because public health services are not delivered exclusively by LHDs. To genuinely succeed in improving community health outcomes, LHDs must be visible to and valued by the public, government partners, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders.

Moreover, with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, the marketplace for public health services will likely become increasingly crowded and competitive. The path forward should include positioning the LHD as a valued, effective, trusted leader in the community. To do this, LHDs should build and maintain a strong brand.

The Process

1. Define the Current Reality

To determine the future of a brand, the LHD must define the current reality of its brand—or lack thereof. The following steps will help LHDs ascertain the starting point of the branding process.

A. Communications Audit

The LHD has likely published thousands of documents and marketing materials. Gather as many as possible and examine the overall look, design, and content. Include official letterhead, slideshows, brochures, posters, website, press releases, etc. Does the agency have a logo? Is it used consistently on all collateral materials (letterhead, business cards, website, posters, event displays, etc.)? What are some of the defining features of the publications? Is every document instantly recognizable as a product of the organization?

B. Brand Audit—Research

Examine areas that are helping or hindering the brand. Begin with employees and board of health or other governing body. Focus groups, job shadowing, and e-mail surveys are tools to assess employee attitudes and perception of the agency.

Reach out to community leaders such as community partners, business leaders, local government, and news media to discuss what they perceive to be strengths and weaknesses of the agency.

Phone surveys are one tool to reach members of the community to determine how the general public feels about the agency. Are people aware of the programs and services offered?

C. SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis will help identify internal and external factors that can help with the development of the brand. Identify the following:

- **Strengths:** What does the LHD do well?
- **Weaknesses**: In what ways is the LHD lacking?
- **Opportunities:** What avenues can the LHD use to promote and share its brand?
- **Threats:** What external factors hinder the development of a strong brand?

2. Define the Desired Future

Once the LHD has established a starting point by defining the current perspective its brand, the next phase is to define the ideal future for the brand. How does the agency want employees, the general public, and key stakeholders to perceive it?

A. Vision

What is the desired long term strategic position of the LHD? The vision will guide the mission, values, and subsequently the overall brand. It will act as a long-term goal for the mission.

Brainstorm what the LHD will look like in 10 years. What impact will it have on the community?

Create a vision statement that is short and succinct—one sentence will suffice. The mission statement will dictate what goals will help the agency achieve that vision. All employees should know and understand the agency's vision so that daily actions and long-term agendas reflect the vision.

B. Vision Statement

The agency's vision statement should describe what the LHD wants to be in the future. Vision statements should be lofty and grand and should inspire and challenge employees to see themselves in the future of the organization. The vision statement should be brief and memorable.

To help write a vision statement, begin by asking the following questions:

- What do we want to create?
- What gives meaning to our work?
- What are the results/consequences of our work?

C. Mission

The mission statement is more than a goal or objective. It is a primary positioning statement that states exactly why the LHD exists. The mission should be short—no more than one to two sentences.

To help write the mission, begin by asking the following questions:

- What business are we in?
- What is our product/service?
- Who are our "customers"?

D. List and Define Values

A brand can be described as the personality of the organization. If the LHD were a person, what adjectives would describe it? Begin by listing values and then define how the agency applies those values through its operations. The mission and values should drive every facet of the LHD—including how decisions are made, how funds are spent, and how the LHD promotes itself to the public and community partners.

E. Name, Logo, and Look

The agency name, logo, and overall look should accurately reflect the vision, mission, values, and core essence. Careful consideration, time, and effort should be spent in determining all of these. While a brand is much more than a logo, it is the visual reminder of who the agency is and what it stands for. Graphic elements such as a logo, official font, and color scheme should be defined and adhered to in all materials.

Develop a brand standards document or establish a definition in the agency's communications plan that sets guidelines for logo use, fonts, colors, and design scheme for all communication. Protect this investment through standardization. A brand standards document can include guidelines for e-mail signatures, suggested telephone and e-mail "out-of-office" messages, suggested telephone greetings, and PowerPoint templates.

Assign a department or employee to review all communication before publishing to ensure that it adheres to brand standards. From this point forward, all brochures, fliers, posters, websites, slideshows, videos, press releases, letterhead, business cards, etc. should follow brand standards.

Consider using the National Identity for Public Health Departments (National Identity). NACCHO created the National Identity in 2006 to help increase the visibility of governmental public health and to broaden the public's understanding about the role of LHDs and how their work benefits individuals and the community at large. The National Identity can be used as a stand-alone or in conjunction with another logo (co-branding). Use of the National Identity by LHDs is voluntary. LHDs will only become universally recognizable and understood when all LHDs use the National Identity.

3. Strategy for Brand Launch

A. Assimilation

Employees are the face of the brand and carry out the mission daily through interactions with clients and community partners. A brand must be successful internally before it can be successful externally. Everyone must know, understand, and live the brand. It should be the basis for the LHD's culture.

Hold an internal meeting with all employees to educate everyone on the key elements of the brand. Stress the importance of adhering to the brand. Explain why it is important to present a unified front to the public and community partners.

Integrate the brand into all internal and external communications materials, agency-wide strategic plan, staff development activities, workforce development plan, and the agency-wide communication plan.

Make sure everyone has access to the brand standards document.

Select a date to launch the brand externally. This can be done in many ways such as launching a new website or holding a press conference to unveil a new name or logo. Explain how the organization plans to carry out the mission.

B. Public Relations

Once the LHD has defined, created, and launched its brand, the agency must develop a public relations strategy that resonates with the public. Through brand-building, the LHD has defined "who" it is—the personality, style, and look. Now give the LHD a voice. This voice should reflect the LHD's values and personality. For example, if the LHD's personality is refined, informative, educational, and resourceful, then these characteristics should be reflected in all oral, written, and visual communications.

Press releases, earned media, feature stories, health columns, news publications, and community outreach are all tactics to spread the word about what the LHD is and what it does. LHDs should form good relationships with the media because they are the gatekeepers to reaching a larger audience, including policymakers.

If research found that the public is not aware of services offered, try pitching a local reporter to cover a story about that service. Look for "the hook"—why should the public care about this service?

In the digital era, LHDs should not rely on traditional media as they did in the past. LHDs should strongly consider investing staff time and resources to create and maintain their own effective communications channels, such as a website and social media platforms.

C. Advertising

Newspapers, billboards, radio, television, direct mail, social media, event sponsorship, and online advertising are various means of advertising. Advertisements, whether paid or unpaid, should be carefully crafted to promote the agency or a specific service. Printed advertising materials should be visually appealing and adhere to brand standards. Radio and television advertising copy should "sound" like the LHD in tone and content.

Choose key time periods to advertise. For example, advertise immunizations program in the back-to-school months and vaccination programs during flu season.

Final Thoughts

The development and implementation of a brand do not happen overnight. When done correctly, branding is a strategic and thorough process that requires the full commitment of internal stakeholders. This can take up to two years to complete. Set target objectives to help stay on track. It is more important to be methodical and meticulous than to be fast.

Implementing a brand does not necessitate enormous funds. It is possible to implement a strong brand on a low budget. Begin with implementing brand strategies that require no funds at all—such as employee education and engagement. Empower all employees with the vision, mission, and values of the agency. This includes senior management and front line staff. A successful brand is built from the inside out.

A strong brand identity creates value in the mind of community partners and clients. Members of the community will be more strongly inclined to use health department resources when they perceive the organization to be valuable, knowledgeable, and high quality. Increased support from the public has the potential to significantly improve public health over the long term.

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Other Resources

NACCHO's statement of policy, *Increasing the Visibility and Perceived Value of Local Health Departments through Building a Strong Brand,* can be found at: http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/positions/.

More information about strategic planning and developing an organizational mission, vision, and values statement, including the publication *Developing a Local Health Department Strategic Plan: A How-To Guide* can be found at: http://naccho.org/topics/infrastructure/accreditation/strategic-plan.cfm.