

Re-Branding and Organizational Identity: **Implications for Alameda County Social Services Agency**

LULA PARKER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Who are we? What kind of business do we operate? These questions, and others like them, have been raised for years. They speak to issues of organizational identity which can be defined as a dynamic, continuous and distinctive set of shared values, beliefs, mission, vision, and practices that characterize an organization.

The pressing need for human services (e.g., child-care, jobs, affordable housing, responsive customer service), the rising cost of living, the threat of fiscal sanctions, and the issue of racial disproportionality and disparity are some of the recent challenges iden-

tified and acknowledged by San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) and consumers within the county.

The San Mateo County HSA created a five-year strategic plan (for 2008 through 2013) to recognize and respond to challenges that individuals and families face, and to refocus its priorities to address those challenges.

This report looks at San Mateo County HSA's strategic planning process and the organization's re-branding efforts.

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Introduction

Organizational identity describes how an organization defines and characterizes itself. Who are we? What are we known for? What do others know us for? Or, what do we want to be known for?

Stuart Albert and David A. Whetten contributed the first formal theoretical statement concerning organizational identity in 1985, and thereby inaugurated this field of study. Albert and Whetten defined organizational identity as that which is central, distinctive, and temporally continuous. This identity may be reflected in shared values and beliefs within an organization, its mission, the structures and processes of the organization, its organizational climate, and so on. Albert and Whetten further propose that discrepancies between how insiders view the organization versus those on the outside can affect organizational health.¹

Do the following slogans sound familiar? Do they bring to mind a particular product or service? *Like a Good Neighbor, State Farm is There*; *The Pursuit of Perfection* (Lexus); *It's the Real Thing* (Coke); *Just Do It* (Nike): These slogans are powerful communicators that remind consumers of a specific brand. A brand is defined as a trademark, or as a class of goods identified by name as the product of a single firm or manufacturer.²

A few years ago, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency (HSA) sought to answer its own question of identity: who are we to the community? Thus, they embarked on a journey to devise a new strategic plan. That process redefined their agency's mission, vision and values. It created a shift in organizational philosophy, and, subsequently, changed the organization's identity.

Background

San Mateo County HSA's prior strategic plan expired in 2006. With changes in organizational structure, demographics, staffing, leadership, fiscal realities, and community needs, HSA needed to devise a new strategic plan that would conform with the county's strategic plan (Shared Vision 2025). These factors also presented HSA with the opportunity to identify who they were and what they were doing (i.e. an opportunity for re-branding).

In that same year, (around December 2006), HSA started its accreditation process under the Council of Accreditation. The accreditation process was an ideal fit with the strategic plan/re-branding process because it involved looking at all of the agency's practices. HSA's accreditation process promotes an ongoing culture of excellence. It is an ongoing improvement process. The accreditation process is repeated every four years. In 2008, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency became the first county public social services agency in California to achieve agency-wide accreditation for its demon-

¹ Stuart Albert and David A. Whetten (1985). *Organizational Identity*, Academy of Management Review

² Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th Edition (1999)

strated excellence in service delivery and organizational effectiveness.

The Strategic Planning Process

In 2008, the San Mateo County Human Services Agency created a five-year strategic plan (for 2008 through 2013) to address the needs of individuals and families in their communities. The theme of their five-year plan is: “Inspiring Individuals. Empowering Communities.”

The HSA’s strategic planning process involved:

- Listening and responding to the community
- Renewing its mission, vision and values
- Setting new directions
- Maintaining and increasing its organizational capacity

The HSA discovered that many people in the community did not know who they were or what types of services they delivered. To complement and strengthen the strategic planning process, HSA launched an effort to re-brand itself. To inform clients, the community, staff, partners, and stakeholders of how a newly redefined Human Services Agency would better serve them now and in the future, HSA began an extensive external and internal marketing effort. A new logo and slogan were developed that were put on the website and in print materials.

HSA’s strategic plan is based on its vision and mission. HSA’s success, or the realization of its vision and mission, rests on its’ adoption of five C.L.E.A.R. values:

- 1 Collaborations and partnerships that are community-based and client-focused,
- 2 Learning practices throughout the organization, including continuous quality improvement, development and innovation,
- 3 Excellence in providing quality human services that value and support our clients, community partners, and employees for their skills, knowledge, and commitment,
- 4 Accountability that encourages the highest standards of ethical conduct and honesty, and
- 5 Respect and honoring the diversity, rights and dignity of each other and those we serve.

The five values define the beliefs and behaviors of HSA. They are part of the cultural foundation that guides its progress toward meeting its goals and objectives.

Implementation

San Mateo County Human Services Agency adopted five strategic goals and fourteen strategic areas for change. The five strategic goals are based on several factors, including service mandates, community needs, legislation, and human resources. The goal categories are:

- Staffing
- Customers
- Community
- Infrastructure
- Programs

HSA did several things to disperse its message to internal and external partners and stakeholders. HSA staff conducted focus groups, met with managers and staff, held community meetings and forums, distributed surveys, and conducted a media campaign.

Additionally, all of HSA’s employees attended mandatory trainings, and the director and other senior management team members met with staff. A consultant was hired to assist with the re-branding and marketing efforts. A launch party was held. The new logo and slogan were placed on all printed materials and on the website. Furthermore, the mission and values are displayed in all of HSA’s offices with the signatures of the management team included to signify their commitment to the process.

Monitoring

HSA monitors its progress toward its goals through ongoing community engagement and feedback, continuous quality improvement processes, report cards and dashboards, and performance reporting to the County Manager and Board of Supervisors.

Cost

Some of the identified cost estimates for the strategic planning process included: \$19,000 to hire a consultant from a marketing company; \$118,190.47

for contractors; \$1,937.50 to pay rent for facilities; \$1,943.18 for food and beverages; \$3,810 to print their brochure; and \$947 for signage.

HSA re-branded their website at no additional cost when the county changed its management system. HSA's newsletter was also re-branded: they transferred from a print version to an electronic version which reduced the print and production cost from \$4,200 to \$0. They also changed their letterhead and business cards, but found a new vendor whose fees were more reasonable and significantly lower than past fees.

An additional cost incurred as a result of the strategic planning and re-branding process was the expense of staff time spent in related trainings and meetings with various community partners.

Recommendations

The Alameda County Social Services Agency operates according to its guiding principles and core values of initiative, integrity, responsibility, and respect. The recommendations below are being made to reinforce these values and to foster a climate of service excellence.

- In order to promote consistency, direct all written communication through our Public Information Office prior to public release
- Train all employees on SSA's mission and values, as well as on the importance of excellent customer service delivery.
- Directors, managers and supervisors should frequently re-visit our mission and core values at meetings and conferences, as well as in informal conversations.
- Include a review of media policy in new inductee trainings.
- Invite the Media Relations Officer to staff meetings.

Upon approval by the director, all of the recommendations above (with the exception of the second recommendation) can be implemented at no cost to the agency.

The average cost of hosting a training facilitated by a vendor is \$2,400 per day, with SSA's highest vendor cost at approximately \$3,000 per day. Our in-house employee training staff (through the Staff Development Specialist) is paid an hourly rate of \$39.99. Average training days are generally scheduled to begin at 9:00 in the morning, and last until 4:00 or 4:30 in the afternoon. The Alameda County Social Services Agency has approximately 2,200 employees.

With these factors and the current budget climate in mind, a decision to incur additional training expenses may not be prudent at this time. Since there is no additional cost for maintaining and upkeep for SSA's intranet website, SSA should post its mission and core values on the intranet. I am further recommending that SSA add an additional section to its the intranet site that is specifically dedicated to customer service delivery.

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