

## Brand Identity for Orthodox Parishes?

Utilizing crass commercial language to describe Orthodox ecclesial life can easily feel disrespectful. Priests as *salesmen*, parishes that need to *market* themselves to effectively offer their *product* – all these terms and more are occasionally heard. It's certainly not common parlance within church leadership where the tone is reverential.

Still, though distasteful to some, perhaps something useful can be derived from business strategy to assist in the parish fulfilling its mission. For example, is there something beneficial to be garnered from the business practice of developing and maintaining *brand identity* (public perception of a product)? Whether we like it or not the Orthodox Church and each local parish *already* has brand identity, though it may not be the one that we would want. If we fail to work at *shaping* brand identity for Orthodoxy or the local parish, then we are handed the default perception generated by the media the one we unconsciously project out into the local community.

Retail branding identity is a force that in the business world can drive sales far beyond the level achievable through quality and value alone. So businesses invest enormous resources in creating and maintaining brands. Orthodoxy certainly has quality and value but what do people think of us, if anything, when they drive by one of our churches?

The benefits of brand identity are not specific just to consumer business enterprises. Parishes often overlook the value of attending to their brand presence or cringe at the superficiality and slickness of it all. Priests and lay leaders usually think more about the content of their programs and services than about their marketing (outreach) to potential new members.

In general, nonprofits have been less than aggressive in making use of the brands that they have actually established. There are, of course, gigantic exceptions, such as the Red Cross, the United Way, and the Salvation Army, but an argument can be made that while the first two have promoted their brands brilliantly, even the Salvation Army actually has not made full use of the enormous good will of its brand. The universally familiar logo of the Salvation Army typically calls to mind a limited image of Christmas bell ringers, soup kitchens and religious charity, without building fully upon the quiet efficiency of an organization that offers a great variety of services and the lowest overhead cost of any large charity. Year after year they top all other nonprofits in contributions received.

The challenge for the Orthodox church, nationally and locally, is to take control of its identity (often through strategic planning) and represent it, internally and externally, for various vital purposes: fundraising, new member enlistment, present member retention, more volunteer involvement or other measures of engagement such as public relations and morale.

If we could change public perception, what would we want the general public to know about us? What makes Orthodoxy unique? What makes our parish special? Why should someone become an Orthodox Christian? For that matter why should a young person raised as Orthodox and now off to college where a vast menu of choices concerning ultimate beliefs and values are offered, choose to remain Orthodox?

Busily attending to the liturgical life of the church and the inner activities of the parish, Orthodox churches are usually unaware of the substantial asset they have in what the business world calls brand identity.

### Identity vs brand identity

In the nonprofit community the *identity* of a parish is its essential nature, purpose, the sum of its actions, programs, values and goals. The *brand* identity is this “essence” or purpose as it is viewed from outside the parish by the general public. The *brand* is the expression of the parish’s identity in the language of the marketplace. It is a church’s most public face.

In a free society where there is an open competition of ideas, beliefs, spiritual practices, etc., the church must attend to its brand identity or risk erosion in membership.

Not just a function of retailing consumer products, brand identity for a parish can strengthen mission, stabilize operations, increase revenue and attract new members all the while tying together diverse elements of parish life to produce real and lasting results.

There are two levels of brand identity for an Orthodox parish: 1) the general public perception and 2) the perception that visitors, seekers and new members may receive once they enter the community or come into one of our churches.

In terms of the first level, general public perception, simplicity is best. Activities, events, signage, any advertising or promotions should send messages such as “We are a caring church”; “We are an accepting church”; “We are an open and welcoming church”; “We are a church that gives back to the community” or “We are the second largest Christian church in the world”. But consider also messages more pertinent to Orthodoxy: “We are an ancient and venerable church”; “We are a worshiping church”; “We are a church faithful to the apostolic teaching and the councils of the church”; “We are a church of joy in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and His victory over death”; or “We are a church consistent in our beliefs and teachings”.

The second level of messaging needs to be readily available to those who “come to see” – the visitors, the seekers and the newcomers. Do we inadvertently send these messages: “You must first become acclimated or even assimilated into our particular ethos before you can join us.” “You will have to dig and scratch to find out what we are really about because this is

not readily available for you.” “We are an extended clan and though you come and participate you may never feel that you are one of us.” “We have seemingly long and complex services but you’ll have to figure these out on your own.” “Please come to the coffee hour but be prepared that no one may speak with you” or “Yes, our services are in two languages, one of which you may not understand. Get over it. You change for us; we don’t change for you.”

In addition to the public messages broadcast to a visitor, seeker or newcomer, which must be confirmed through parish experience, consider communicating messages that convey interesting and attractive reasons to become Orthodox. Twelve are listed below. No doubt there are many, many more. As stated above, these messages are nearly impossible to communicate to the general public, but they should be made available early on to visitors and seekers.

1. Theosis – deification as both the process and the goal of humans joined to Christ; we become “partakers of divine nature” – fully deified without losing our own unique personhood.
2. Synergia – anthropological maximalism compared to Augustinian anthropological minimalism; every human being has the opportunity and blessing through working with God to participate in their own salvation.
3. Pleroma – the fullness of the Holy Spirit; not a branch on a tree of Christian *denominations* but The Tree itself – roots, trunk, branches, leaves, flowers and fruit.
4. Leitourgia – an unparalleled, rich liturgical life; does more need to be said here?
5. Triduum Sacrum Paschale – sings the joy of Great and Holy Friday, Great and Holy Saturday and the Feast of Feasts like no other church.
6. Ecclesia – one baptism, one faith, one community gathered for one Sunday Holy Eucharist assures that the size of most local parish communities remains on a human scale (though there are exceptions).
7. Mysteria – the sacraments as concrete expression of sacred materialism (according to Alexander Schmemmann, sacraments represent the true purpose of creation); a shocking experience for most Protestants because it’s incarnational theology with a punch.
8. Paradosis – Holy Tradition as the ongoing life of the Holy Spirit through the centuries with the apostles, the councils, the fathers, the saints, the righteous dead in Christ and the living community of believers; same faith, same services, same life found in every Orthodox church in the world
9. Proigoumenos – the antecedent of the Christianity developed in the east is Semitic in origin and then it Christianizes Greek philosophy; the Christianity developed in the west is also Semitic in origin and then it subsumes Roman law.

10. Hesychasm – the experience of God in and through uncreated Energies and uncreated Light; according to St. Symeon the New Theologian, this experience is readily accessible to all believers, not just to a highly select group of ascetics.
11. Exousia – ultimate authority in the Church – not the Bible *over* the church or a certain Bishop *over* the Church but these important elements existing *within* the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; the ultimate source of authority.
12. Eloutheria – the celebration and emphasis upon liberty in Christ as true human freedom; always available, always encouraged, free will as the image of God in a human being.

### A well-articulated identity and brand offer:

- evidence of commitment to mission
- a foundation for parish strategy
- increased revenues (through such means as programs and fundraising)
- cost-efficiencies
- new member growth
- increased retention of present members
- sustainability

The more robustly one defines brand identity to encompass, represent, and communicate vision, mission, values, ministries, and services, the more the idea can be used to unify and advance parish programs and activity in a meaningful and powerful way. The notion of brand identity can help a parish to focus on the most important issues in context, keeping in sight the broad strategic directions that all actions and messages should support.

### Assessing brand identity

Once the value of brand identity in the realm of parishes is accepted, the question arises of how to assess, develop, and maintain it. Over time a parish accumulates layers of isolated, individually sensible decisions that gradually begin to erode the clarity of its brand identity.

Distracting “opportunities” are seized, programs grow piece by piece, and the illogic of happenstance is no longer noticed internally. Publications and programs establish their own brands, without adequate support for the umbrella brand of the parish as a whole. Buildings get renovated and re-renovated until they are a hodge-podge. From time to time any parish must step back and re-evaluate its identity, and refresh and renew its brand.

The fundamental issues involved in developing a parish brand identity are strategic. No successful brand identity program can be developed without a clear understanding of the vision, mission, values, and strategy of the parish —its essential identity and purpose. If the

parish's identity is unclear, there may be much deeper strategic problems to address before branding.

If this seems too obvious, try an experiment. Ask the parish council and staff members to each write down their vision of the parish. Have them then list the values, strengths and weaknesses of the parish, its primary offerings, and how they wish various constituencies and external audiences to understand the parish. Finally, have them list the impediments to success. If there is clarity and consensus, it's now possible to move directly to examining the existing brand identity. If not, it will be necessary to take a step back to build a solid foundation in strategic thinking coupled with staff and parish council development. Only after establishing the parish's identity (i.e. exactly what the parish is trying to communicate with its brand) does it make sense to consider its implementation.

### Establishing brand identity

Brand identity can be understood, and in turn reinforced, by rigorously examining the parish from the point of view of parishioners or non-parishioners who participate in parish programs. What are the full needs of the people who take advantage of parish services? Is there a way to build on existing respect in the community to deliver more of what users need?

Fundamentally, development of a parish brand involves the following:

- Articulating precisely the vision, mission, values and uniqueness of the parish and capturing this self-knowledge in the form of a clear and concise statement of identity; this may well require a parishioner survey to determine current perceptions, and some form of inclusive, participatory strategic planning to connect identity to action;
- Creating a brand identity concept, a compelling set of underlying messages to convey the identity;
- Developing a branding plan, a framework of policies, procedures, guidelines, and standards for systematizing the expression of the parish's identity through programs staff attitudes, communications (spoken, electronic, print and signage) and facilities;
- Vigilance – maintaining focus requires ongoing attention.

In implementation, brand identity is not just a communications, or even a development issue alone, but it can be the lever that guides a parish through the thoughtful, strategic processes required for successful communications and fundraising.

### The threat of complacency

Attention to brand identity should come with a caveat. The purpose of brand identity is to focus and convey the essential message of a parish outward to the public. Internally—among parish council and staff—it is as important to be clear about weaknesses, vulnerabilities and changes in external conditions as about strengths.

If clergy and the parish council are uncritical in receiving their own message, a strong brand identity can, like a pain-killer, get in the way of a clear diagnosis of a problem if and when one arises. If a parish is not maintaining a clear strategic vision, and taking actions accordingly, an established brand identity may show parish membership and contributions at in ever-down trend for years. Leadership or the parish council may not realize that a major overhaul is needed until the lifeline of the brand identity is squandered, too, and revival becomes enormously more difficult.

The biggest enemy of any parish is complacency. It is human nature to achieve morale through comparative categorical hyperbole: We have the best of this, the most individualized of that, the most opportunity for the other. This is not bad, the first time it's said; with repetition, it becomes a catechism more than an assertion of tested fact. It substitutes for critical thinking and thus interferes with leadership, good governance and management.

Brand identity is a powerful tool—but it can only be effective when developed, applied, and maintained with vigilant self-awareness.