

To serve and protect the police brand.

by Robert Ferguson

We all know what a police force stands for – or do we? George Floyd's death this spring galvanized people around the world in protests about police reform. It also galvanized debate about one particular idea that has now become a household phrase: defunding. This isn't about defunding; I do, however, want to discuss what the defunding chatter indicates.



If someone told me a social or cultural organization was under threat of losing its funding, I'd immediately assume the politicians or funding agencies holding the purse strings no longer saw its value – and I'd wonder what was wrong with its brand.

Branding helps us understand an organization's role and purpose. Essentially it serves as a north star, or a strategic signpost: by helping define the core mission – telling us who we are, what

we do, and who we help – it offers direction on how the organization should behave (how it is supposed to act) and creates parameters defining actions (what decisions it should make).

More broadly, a brand is how one wants to be seen and understood: it establishes the broad set of associations people have about the organization. People internalize the promises inferred by the brand which helps engage current employees, and it helps turn away applicants who aren't a good fit.

Above all, a brand is a form of protection; it should mean funders tangle with the brand at their peril. A strong brand means you are perceived to have value; impact; strength. The organization is seen to make a contribution. It isn't a matter of being untouchable, or that your work can't be questioned, but it means people "get you" and will go the extra mile to support your work. It means people out there have your back. So when someone threatens to defund your operation – whatever sector you are in – just know that people perceive you in a much different and more negative way; all those nice sentiments disappear. It means you have a big problem with your brand.

This is a branding problem.

Perhaps we don't think of the police as having a brand, but they do; perhaps individual police departments themselves don't realize they too have a brand. If they do, they've been negligent about it: many of them have been content simply to ride the coat-tails of the famous the LAPD motto "To Protect and to Serve," which was created in 1955 and subsequently adopted around North America.

***Law enforcement's business is safety and our product
is providing protection to the citizens we serve.***

Chief Michael Phibbs "Why your police department needs a brand"
Policeone.com, September 7, 2017



Their laissez-faire approach is undermining the once-seemingly rock-solid narrative of the police brand just as effectively as protests. The prevailing belief among police departments – as with most organizations – is that “people already know who we are and will continue to support us.” This culture of expectation – which has become a fundamental strategic philosophy – is why organizational brands break down. It lulls organizations into thinking they don’t need to innovate to proactively engage the attention of audiences. People on the inside of organizations lose touch with their story over time, which leads to mission drift, and the reality for most organizations is the public and the media become disconnected from an organization’s story.

Police departments aren’t immune from this. They are, quite simply, overloaded and have lost touch with their story and their core responsibilities.

It’s hard to stay on brand when your mission takes you on tangents.

This isn’t just about policing in the United States or in Canada. In England, the closing of youth centres, and laying off thousands of youth workers means hundreds of thousands of vulnerable young people – particularly those at risk of violence, being pressured into criminalized activity, or living in dangerous home environments – have been cut off from trusted adults in whom they can confide. The result is that criminalization is being used as a first resort for the social problems many people face (Adam Elliott-Cooper, “Defund the police’ is not nonsense. Here’s what it really means,” *The Guardian*, July 2, 2020). These aren’t police issues, but off-loading has made them police problems, which has left police officers overworked and overstressed.

As duties and responsibilities get piled-on we all – everyone one of us – lose touch with what they are all about. And that’s where calls for defunding come in: not to eliminate the keepers of the peace, but to reinvest a portion of their funding into social programs and crime prevention techniques that may be out-of-sync with police officers’ skillsets and training. But let’s stay focused on the root problem: we no longer grasp the essence of the policing brand. This lack of a clear brand is throwing the police into disarray. No one seems to be on the same page about what a modern police force is all about, and that is a disconnect that needs fixing.

Because of mission drift, police (almost everywhere, it seems) have not been prepared for this particular public relations debacle. It’s time they got serious about branding because – as we’ve all learned this spring and summer – perceptions matter. Branding is about trust. Trust builds around organizations that explain why they are leaders and why they deserve the public’s support. But the police cannot operate and be effective without the support of the community, and they cannot get that support if they are not trusted.

Nature abhors a vacuum.

This particular issue about the police remains very fluid: it could go in different directions as the debate evolves; either side can seize control of the narrative and move people in either direction. Police departments have discovered there is a cost to being passive about their brand: when organizations don’t say why their work matters, an information vacuum is created and people’s

attention is drawn to others who tell more compelling stories. Either you shape your brand or you allow others – people with louder voices peddling a different message who then command the agenda – to create it for you.

If people see you as irrelevant or even unethical – as less accessible to the general public than your critics – your storytelling needs work. Broad-minded marketers focus endlessly on keeping their organizational identity up-to-date. Don't stop thinking about who you are, what you do, and whom you help. Articulate organizations that keep people engaged and talking about their work are able to prove their organization is worth the cost to anyone responsible for allocating resources, whether politicians or taxpayers.

Keep your brand fresh.

Explain yourself. Establish your identity in peoples' minds before problems strike. The more thoroughly embedded their perceptions, especially with respect to credibility and trustworthiness, the more likely the organization will weather the storm.

How do police forces across the country regain the trust that has been allowed to erode? A clearly expressed identity is a sign of internal strength, and indicates employees are participants in the managing of identity. When employees at all levels know the parameters guiding their behavior, they become active players ensuring the organization makes appropriate decisions.

Having a clear sense of purpose is crucial to achieving this. Can you articulate your organization's purpose to build trust in the power of its mission? Take a deep dive into your organization by starting with these questions:

- Why do we exist?
- How are we perceived?
- What would happen if we did not exist?
- How do we fulfill the promise set out for us?
- What are our core values?
- What makes us different?
- Who do we really work for and whom do we serve?

How do you stay on brand when your mission takes you in directions you are ill-equipped to perform in? The branding problem police have will only begin to get fixed once the culture, training, and behavior changes and they recommit themselves to serve the public. But even this will fail if they neglect to be proactive about managing perceptions through following effective brand management principles and seizing control of the narrative. Fixing the disconnects flagged by recent protests is a priority. Managing your brand, and managing how the public perceives your organization, is your management team's most important job. With the army of PR professionals at your disposal, strategy, communication, and branding should not be a problem.

Retool Lab is a collaborative focused on helping cultural, entertainment and public institutions regroup, reshape, and retool their strategy to recover from the economic impact of the current crisis, and to use these insights as a springboard to thrive far into the future. You can contact us at info@retoollab.com or at www.retoollab.com.