

# **BRANDING IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: DEVELOPMENT AND PRINCIPLES**

**Woodnewton Research Paper 2**

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## Introduction

This paper surveys how branding has been used within the public service from the 1920s to the present day. It argues that the underlying relationships that brands seek to encapsulate and communicate are fundamentally different in the private and public sectors, and that brand theory and practice has largely failed to acknowledge this. It proposes a set of broad principles for the effective use of branding within the public sector.

## What is a brand?

A brand is not simply a name or a badge, or a piece of artwork on a letterhead: they are *symbols* or *logos*. Nor is it a system of using a name or symbol in specified ways: for example, typeface, colour, or size. That is a *corporate identity*. A brand may incorporate all these: but in essence it is the totality of the experiences and perceptions that shape the relationship between an organisation and its audiences. This gives a brand three potential roles:

- A mark of **ownership**: that an object, be it a letter or a building, belongs to a specific individual or organisation. Though the most well-known marks are now used by businesses to distinguish themselves and their products and services from their competitors, some of the earliest uses were by governments on coins or uniforms.
- A **promise**: that the object or the organisation to which it belongs will behave or perform in a particular way. This is helpful to businesses wanting to win and retain customers, but can also be traced back to the implicit or explicit contract between ruler and subject encapsulated in symbols of authority such as flags or regalia.
- An **experience**: the promise of a brand is tested through experience; but the brand itself can tap into deep and complex emotions, such as pride and psychological processes, such as aspiration, and so create a powerful experience in its own right.

Departments, agencies and other public sector organisations can usefully be considered as brands, even if the visual manifestation of that brand is instinctive or unconscious. The Royal Navy, for example, has for centuries been in every sense a brand: high levels of recognition of the name and its associated symbols (ownership); a clear role in the defence of the realm (promise); and a strong set of associations and emotions, including values and traditions (experience). Yet the Royal Navy came relatively late to the conscious management of its brand, and did so under pressure from the market-place: a combination of the desire to compete against commercial organisations in recruiting and retaining staff, and the influence of commercial corporate design on communications such as signage and magazine design and production.



*The Royal Navy: a stronger brand than Virgin?*

## Commercial and Non-commercial brands

The power of brands and the enthusiasm with which businesses have adopted them as part of a wider conscious adoption of marketing techniques during the twentieth century has meant that brands have come to be seen as essentially commercial. When asked to name a brand, people will typically mention commercial ones: Nike, Coca-Cola, Virgin, and so on. Debate on branding, whether designer goods or the role of multi-nationals, is also centred on the commercial sector.

In contrast, the nature and role of 'non-commercial' brands – not only in the public sector, but also charities and campaigning groups – is hardly referred to in the practitioner or academic literature. Practitioners have tended to rely on their experience in commercial branding when working for non-commercial clients. As a result, their work has reflected commercial fashions and idioms, and the distinctiveness of non-commercial branding has been curtailed.

## Public Sector Brands

Brands are promises, and non-commercial brands are likely to work in very different ways to their commercial cousins because the nature of the 'promise' or 'contract' between citizen and government is not the same as between customer and company. Democratic accountability; personal responsibility; the nature of the transaction; the element of compulsion; these and other factors mean that the citizen, even when treated as a 'customer', is never truly that.



A commercial insurer, for example, will contract to provide a specified level of cover. The National Health Service, though in effect an insurer as well as a provider of health care, does not provide a formal contract. The level of provision and the conditions under which it is provided are determined by – and ultimate accountability lies with – the Government. If this line of accountability is blurred, then users of the service may become confused or anxious. When individual NHS Trusts adopted their own corporate identities in the 1990s (often based on commercial imagery and practice) patients and local communities were left unsure of the exact status of their relationship. Would they have to pay for treatment? What would happen to personal information they might hand over? Who could they turn to if something went wrong?

Similarly, when plans were developed to combine the Employment Service, Benefits Agency and local authority housing departments into a single service, the aim was to create a brand that would reflect the best of commercial customer service. However the 'One' identity developed for the pilot programme (Wolff Olins 1999), though contemporary and attractive, did not signal that the service was provided by the state. Users were confused and managers of 'One' centres resorted to displaying posters explaining to clients that this was indeed a government service. The 'One' identity was dropped for the full programme and 'JobCentrePlus' used instead.



*Sleek and sexy... but 'one' what?*



*Hard on the eye... but says what it does*

In short, branding in the public sector may share perceptions and techniques with those in other sectors: but it needs its own distinct approach, reflecting the nature of the underlying contract or promise. However, this has not generally happened in practice.

## The Rise of Public Sector Branding

Governments have always used symbols to communicate and to build loyalty, but in the last century they have also become more conscious of the process and also been influenced by the private sector. This development falls into four broad phases.

### **State-owned Commercial Identities: 1920s – 1950s**

In parallel with the wider adoption of marketing techniques by the public sector, bodies with a commercial outlook such as the Empire Marketing Board (set up in 1923) or British Railways (1948) tended to adopt variants on existing symbols such as the Crown or Royal Crest. Others such as British Overseas Airways Corporation (1939) or London Transport (1933) inherited alternative symbols from their predecessors (in BOAC's case, the 'speedbird' designed by Theyre Leigh-Elliott for Imperial Airways, in LT's case, the roundel used by the private-sector Underground Group from 1908).



*Acknowledging the past...*



*... or embracing the future*

### **Corporate Identity leaders: 1960s**

Public bodies with a significant exposure to customers or those wishing to operate in a more commercial way began to adopt 'modern' corporate identities. This included a number of state-owned corporations, including British Steel, the National Coal Board and the Central Electricity Generating Board. These often drew on commercial approaches and avoided traditional state or government elements, such as the near-abstract logotype for British Rail (The Design Partnership 1965).



British Rail: a very versatile corporate identity

In parallel, and again driven in large part by restructuring, many local authorities ought to adopt more modern and open or engaging identities, to connect them more closely with the residents that they served, such as the newly-merged borough of Camden (Wolff Olins 1965).



*“Wolff Olins created an entirely new kind of symbol for a local authority – not obscure and heraldic, but straightforward and immediate. This would be a conspicuous symbol to define the arbitrary borders of the new authority – saying, in effect, ‘you are in Camden’ – and drawing attention to the work the council did for its people. The symbol was a pattern of eight interlocking hands – voting, working, giving, receiving – expressing the human interrelatedness of modern local government.”*

Wolff Olins 2009

### Corporate Identity followers: 1970s

Driven by commercial pressures and by the desire to imitate, the remaining nationalised industries and public utilities of the time moved to adopt modern corporate identities. As with the private sector, some had significance, authority and style while others added little to the organisation’s presence or reputation. Some departments, agencies and public bodies also adopted corporate designs, though rather tentatively and often in conjunction with the creation of new bodies or restructuring of existing ones (such as the Property Services Agency within the Department of the Environment).



British Steel and Thames Water:  
Two logos that survived privatisation...



The Central Electricity Generating Board  
and the PSA: two that did not

### **Branding Government: 1980s**

The privatisation of public sector industries and services created a demand for new or refreshed corporate identities. As businesses for sale, these usually avoided any public service imagery or associations. In parallel, the application of pro-business ideology to the management of the civil service and the public sector led to the importation of business-style corporate identities. David Young, formerly of Cable and Wireless, began the process at the Manpower Services Commission and then at the Department of Trade and Industry. Again by imitation, by the mid-1990s every major government department had adopted a formal (and often commercially-influenced) corporate identity.



Where their names remained unchanged, such as the Department for Trade and Industry or the Health and Safety Executive, departmental identities had time to build recognition. Where departments themselves were subject to rapid structural change, acronyms baffled the public: one inelegant answer was to write out the departmental name underneath.

### **Brand Proliferation: 1990s**

The application of what was often termed branding, but was often no more subtle or far-reaching than the substitution of a logo for the previous royal seal or crest, accelerated, and also spread to individual units within larger organisations and even new policies or initiatives, including many short-term 'vanity brands'. By the late 1990s, even directorates within central government departments (for example, school standards with the Department for Education and Employment) were developing their own 'identities' in an attempt to generate profile or staff loyalty and to distinguish themselves from the negative associations of their parent departments.



More brands, less impact: few of government's internal or campaign identities have gained much recognition (let alone affection or loyalty), even amongst Whitehall insiders.

### **Brand Management: 2000s**

Proliferation increased concerns that many brands in the public sector were not providing value for money or even had a negative impact. One early example of a change of attitude was the use of a brand strategy in support of the wider 'One NHS' policy to reverse the internal market in the National Health Service. Over 200 individual identities within the NHS were replaced by a single brand, reducing costs and promoting joined-up working (The Team 1998). In 1999 a cross-government approach to signage for major infrastructure projects was introduced: 'Building for the Future' (Johnson Banks 1999). This led on to the adoption of the first brand management framework for Government and the development of a formal HM Government identity (Johnson Banks 2002).



### **2011: A Snapshot**

The current state of branding within the public sector remains fluid. Government has a brand management framework, but it is not as yet mandatory (as for example in France). The Coalition government elected in 2010 has stated its determination to bring more central direction and control in areas such as marketing and branding, but the moratorium on communications spending means that, so far, there have been few 'test cases' to show how effectively it can control the impetus for departments and agencies to 'go it alone'.

In the wider public service, the adoption of a more professional attitude to branding depends on individual organisations being aware of the issue and able to find the resources to invest in it. Universities, acutely conscious of how their brands can attract students at home and overseas, have continued to spend despite the recession. But some core aspects of branding – for example, their role in driving service improvements, and the risks of damaging employee engagement – are still generally neglected by commissioners and by branding and design agencies. And the fundamental failure to understand that the public sector is not the same as the private remains widespread.

## **Distinctiveness**

Brands in the public sector are distinctive, largely because the state is not the same as the private or not-for-profit sectors. The state has the power to levy taxes, prosecute, fine or imprison; provides critical services such as law and order; and is directly connected to powerful forces such as nationhood and patriotism. All this creates a distinct and unavoidable relationship or social contract between the state and the citizen that public sector brands must acknowledge or reflect. It also means that elements of 'power' and 'security' are far more important than in private sector branding.

These considerations not only affect the core relationship between the citizen and the state, but also between individuals and all the hundreds of government ministries and state agencies, public sector initiatives and services with which they come into contact. The relationship also varies between institutions: some regulate, others provide services, still others information or support. This makes public service branding yet more complex, for the brand of each and every service draws upon and influences the others.

The creation and management of an effective brand architecture for the public service is therefore challenging. It must cover an array of organisational units: departments and ministries, agencies and non-departmental public bodies, and other organisations at both central and local level. It must also cover brands and identities applied to initiatives and to specific services, and

also co-branding with other organisations, partners, co-funders and service providers. Whereas even large private sector organisations can manage a large number of brands within a single and relative simple architecture – for example, Unilever’s tradition of individual product-level consumer-facing brands within the corporate portfolio – the public sector has to employ a more ambitious and flexible architecture.

## **Principles**

Public sector brands, therefore, are not like those in the private sector. The nature of the underlying relationship, and the perceptions on both sides, are too distinct to allow principles and practice from one to be imported unchallenged into the other. This, then, forms the basis of the case for developing a set of principles for public sector branding:

### ***Clear***

The brand has to be clear about who it is and what it is offering: ‘this is who we are, this is what we do’. It must convey the underlying social contract as well as the specifics of the particular service on offer, in such a way as to be readily understood by its audiences. Dealing with government brings different perceptions of the citizen’s rights and responsibilities: establishing that the organisation is part of government, or part of the state sector, is therefore crucial. In part, too, brands need to be understood by using familiar symbols, images and language. They should be accessible and inclusive. Here, tensions may arise between the desire to be authoritative and the desire to treat citizens as equals.

### ***Trusted***

The brand must set out to communicate the reality of the organisation and the service: ‘this is what we do, and we do it every time’. It is a promise which the user or potential user can rely on, time after time. Trust is in part a matter of the audiences believing the offer that the brand is trying to communicate, and ensuring that it is congruent with their experience (though see *Inspiring* below). It is also trust in the sense of reliability; that the organisation will have the capacity to deliver. Here too is a sense of uniform provision – that the experience will be the same for all, everywhere, to meet expectations as to fairness and equality.

### ***Engaging***

The brand must not only be informative, it must also engage: ‘this is what we can do for you, or your family, or your business or community, or for the country.’ The emotional element should balance the informative and so encourage take-up (often a key policy objective in service delivery) and also behavioural change (crucial in the branding of social marketing campaigns). It can also create loyalty and advocacy inside or outside an organisation, and so underpin the delivery of public services and the management and enhancement of their external reputation.

### ***Inspiring***

The brand may need to challenge perceptions and provide a vision of the organisation, service or even wider social behaviour that is distinct from current behaviour or performance: ‘this is what we want to do’. Though not all public sector brands need to be inspiring or aspirational, it remains a major component of the power of brands to meet wider objectives. The danger is that the aspirational element becomes so dominant

(the gap between rhetoric and reality so great) that the element of trust is weakened or broken entirely, leading to the brand being damaged.

The Building for the Future identity is an example of these underlying principles being put into effect. The three main elements of the design each contributed to the overall brand: the campaign strap-line (“Building for the Future”) was an expression of the specific purpose of the identity; the image (a sapling casting the shadow of an oak tree) was engaging and aspirational; and the HM Government mark provided clarity and reinforced trust.

There may be occasions where such principles need to be relaxed or put aside. For example, a government ‘voice’ might be counter-productive when appealing to young people to avoid drugs or use a condom. Similarly, health campaigns often channel money into charities with a more acceptable ‘voice’, again to avoid some of the aspects of the Government brand having a negative effect.

## **Conclusions**

The paper seeks to establish that brands in the public sector are distinct from those in the private sector, due to the difference in and greater complexity of the underlying relationship between the citizen and the state; the size and complexity of the public sector; and the wider range of relationships that the brand and its sub-brands might need to create.

From this, some broad principles can be identified for the successful creation and development of public sector brands. But perhaps the most fundamental point is that our understanding of public sector branding is still under-developed. As change in the public sector accelerates, and as assumptions about the state and the public realm themselves come more into question, the role of branding may become yet more important in maintaining trust between the state, service providers and citizens.

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