

# Branding Is Back: Revisiting Who We Are After Three Years as the COVID Care Provider

By Ryan Donohue, NRC Health

**D**uring the pandemic, unity was a necessity. With incredible speed and purpose, healthcare organizations of all kinds banded together to fight COVID-19. This concerted response was necessary to contain the virus and avoid overwhelming emergency rooms. It also created an unanticipated consequence: every healthcare brand sounded the same. In local markets, competing brands started carefully assimilated phrases like “unprecedented times” and “abundance of caution” while evangelizing “six feet apart” in unison. Their Web sites all had eerily similar photos of the masked, links to testing, and locations to be vaccinated. A sea of sameness had emerged.

Three years later, we are drying off and finding that consumers across the country listened to us:<sup>1</sup>

- Four in 10 consumers reported “hearing the same message” from local healthcare organizations.
- Four in 10 consumers were not sure if they had heard different messages or not.
- Two in 10 consumers reported “hearing different messages” from local healthcare organizations.

Our powerful show of unity has left behind a brand blur. After decades of carefully cultivating brands that

promoted strengths and displayed points of differentiation, every brand purposely started sounding the same. The fallout is emerging: many consumers and patients no longer feel connected to the healthcare brands most familiar to them. While general brand awareness has remained high (due largely to consumers tuning into COVID messaging) a steady 32 percent of consumers have “no preference” when asked where they will go next for care. This includes patients who have had a recent experience but still don’t retain a future preference for care.

At the board level, we must ask ourselves: without COVID to define us, who are we? Healthcare branding is clearly at a crossroads between COVID messaging and a new brand message. Strong brands will not hesitate to branch out from baseline pandemic messaging, eagerly shedding their sameness for a bold new positioning. Some have already done so. Intermountain Health recently rebranded and boasts an incredibly unique look. Not something you see in healthcare, and that’s the point.

As we branch out, boards may also ask: should we resume our pre-pandemic brand messaging? Perhaps you were pursuing advanced technology, compassionate care, convenience, or a combination of all three. Much like life these days, it’s not feasible to return to 2019. As our consumers have changed preferences, so have patients and the experiences they receive. Healthcare is different. The pandemic proved telehealth is a real experience. Inflation has put healthcare out-of-pocket costs in an increasingly unfavorable light. Convenience is the newly crowned king, even in healthcare. Many patients have decided not to be patients at all. So far this year, nearly one in three consumers are deferring their care.

## Key Board Takeaways

- Ensure the board is involved in the brand’s creation, socialization, and measurement.
- Take a hard look at your current and past messaging to get a better sense of where to go next. COVID response messaging has created a brand blur, so now is the time to differentiate your brand.
- Discuss your organization’s brand at every board meeting. One of the key reasons patients choose a hospital is their brand, yet we often assume its value or neglect it for other matters.
- Decide what your organization does best and then put real time, energy, and spirit into imparting your brand on employees, physicians (both employed and independent), patients, and consumers across the communities you serve.

Outside of an emergency, what will lure them back?

Strong brands turn disconnected consumers into engaged patients. It’s not easy or fast, but branding is a strategy that must be pursued all the way at the top of healthcare organizations. According to consumers, “reputation” of a healthcare provider is a top three reason to choose them—sharing the stage with insurance acceptance and doctor recommendation. As a board, how much time do we spend discussing and debating insurance networks and physician referral patterns? Now how much time do we give to our reputation? Many boards assume their brand reputation is already addressed or is to be assumed. It is not.

## Revisiting Branding at the Board Level

Members of the board have a unique perspective as they often come from other industries where brand building is a necessity and reputation is everything. Harnessing their inherent knowledge and unique vantage point, the board should discuss and debate the following:

- What is our current brand? Who are we and what value do we provide? Do consumers and patients agree with this assessment? *Note: this isn’t aspirational. This is what we believe we are right now.*



<sup>1</sup> The data in this article is from NRC Health’s Market Insights study of healthcare consumers, national, 2022–2023, n size = 75,364.

- What does our organization clearly do best? What's the one thing (not five or 10) that we do the very best and we can *prove* it? Can consumers and patients get this anywhere else or is it solely ours? *Note: if others also do what we do best it isn't a disqualifier, but it means we have to differentiate that particular value or proposition. It must be different if we want to be the best.*
- How do we measure our brand? Do we only ask our patients what they think of us or do we include the wider community? Do we also ask our employees? *If measurement is lackluster (it often is) then ask: how should we measure our brand?*

A common objection I hear at the board level is, "We don't have enough money to explore our brand." I find this curious for two reasons: First, you already spend money on your brand. You already pay for marketing, advertising, and communications. You hang signs and print paychecks with your logo intact. You also deal with your current reputation and its

ability to attract patients—or not. Your brand costs your organization money every day. Second, the benefits of a stronger brand far outweigh concerns and cost. A strong brand in healthcare means higher awareness and preference and that increases the likelihood of converting consumers into patients.<sup>2</sup> Don't forget about our employees who we desperately seek to retain: LinkedIn's research shows that a strong brand reduces employee turnover by 28 percent and cost per hire by 50 percent.<sup>3</sup> And consistency is key. By presenting your brand in a clear, simple way across physical and digital platforms, companies can increase revenue by up to 23 percent.<sup>4</sup> Who better than to drive consistent value into every corner of the company than a board who is dialed into the brand.

One of the most common fears I hear from board members and executives is the encroachment of Amazon, Walmart, CVS, and other powerful quasi-healthcare brands. They all possess clear, compelling, well-known brands. Would you want to battle these brands without shoring up your own?

So, what could possibly get in the way? The most common enemy of branding success is not your competition. It's not the perceived (and misunderstood) expense. Your biggest challenge is changing perceptions. Minds aren't easily molded. Chances are that your current brand has COVID. Cash is tight and the appeal of hunkering down is quite strong. That means it's a perfect time to refresh your perspective on who you are and what you do best. Asking these questions at the board level may reveal surprising answers and new pathways to explore. Either way, we have entered a time of great uncertainty and that means incredible opportunity to do something different. Think, discuss, and act on something new. It will clear up your brand blur and give you a leg up on the competition.

*The Governance Institute thanks Ryan Donohue, Strategic Advisor, NRC Health, and Governance Institute Advisor, for contributing this article. He can be reached at [rdonohue@nrchealth.com](mailto:rdonohue@nrchealth.com).*

<sup>2</sup> NRC Health Market Insights Survey, 2023.

<sup>3</sup> "Why Employer Branding Matters, Now, More Than Ever?," Rato Communications, January 23, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Ilya Lipovich, "Building Brand Recognition through Your Content and BI Tools," *Forbes*, August 20, 2021.