



Branding Your Agency: Creating the Police Department's Image

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In today's mass-market media-driven society, it is becoming difficult to define ourselves before someone else does it for us. This is true for everything from laundry detergent to automobiles, and it holds for police departments. A community develops and holds an image of its police department. This image defines the standing of the police department and its employees in the community's esteem. It also affects the department's recruitment and retention, its budget, and the support it receives from the community. Unfortunately, too often police departments have allowed others to define their image instead of defining it for themselves.

The Public Image of the Police

In October 2001, the Administration of Justice Program at George Mason University completed a report, *The Public Image of the Police*, for the IACP Police Image and Ethics Committee, that identified historical trends in the public perception of the police.¹ Among the various conclusions that could affect the branding of a department were the following:

- A citizen's confidence in the police depends more on his or her perceptions of a police officer's motives than on whether the outcome of a contact with an officer was favorable to the citizen.
- Racial minorities consistently show lower assessments of police than do whites, and the overall legitimacy of the police depends more on citizens' perceptions of how police treat them than on their perceptions of police success in reducing crime.
- Citizens' perceptions of how police treat them appear to affect their willingness to obey the law and obey the police.
- Citizens' expectations of how the police will perform affect their evaluation of how police actually perform during a specific contact.
- Most citizens regard the mass media as their prime source of information about crime, and crime news is the context for most mass media accounts of police work. The implicit message of much crime news is that police have been unable to catch offenders.
- Although the majority of the public has a substantial degree of confidence in the police as a general institution, it has been declining slowly since 1996 (from 60 to 54 percent). The trend in respect for the police has been declining since the mid- to late-1960s.
- Most citizens express positive attitudes about the fairness of the police, but a significant portion rate them as "only fair or poor."
- Entertainment media present images of police officers (as incompetent rule breakers, for instance) that distort the realities of everyday police work.

This report shows that the perception of the police, the police department's brand identity, has a direct impact on the department's ability to prevent, control, and solve problems. It also affects the relationship officers have with citizens.

Who Defines the Department?

Does the department define itself, or do others do it for the department? Does the chief define him or herself, or do others do it?

Each day, the police executive navigates a series of issues that has the potential to define the agency in a manner inconsistent with the actual mission, vision, and values of the department. How well the chief and the department handle these issues helps determine the department's ability to obtain the public's cooperation and support, to recruit the right people for the department, and to secure the budgetary resources to do the job.

Although it is the chief who must establish the vision for the department, each employee has a role in defining the department. As such, it is important to consider how well employees and prospective employees fit with the image of the department before promoting or hiring them:

- Do they share department's philosophy of service?
- Do they define their role and self-image in a manner consistent with the department's mission?
- Are they perceived in such a way that they instill confidence in the public so the department can do its job?
- Once they are on the team and are successful, will they stay?
- Are they (sworn and unsworn employees and prospective employees) aware of the impact that bias can have on the department's success?
- Do they (officers and officer candidates) recognize the challenges that excessive use of force can have on the community's support?

Another issue to consider is that police action in one area of the country can affect the image of policing in another area. We know that the image of the whole profession, in other words, can be tarnished by the actions of a few officers many miles away. When such issues are found at the top of the organization, or in the ranks of midlevel leadership, a wedge is driven between managers of the department and the officers who are providing the service at the line level. All this may lead to internal stress, a lack of introspection, reduced public confidence in the police, and, ultimately, a colossal failure to provide police services.

Today, police agencies are better trained, better educated, and more diverse than at any other time in history. Technology is such that officers are better equipped and prepared to address the issues they face daily. As a profession, law enforcement has adopted a philosophy of proactive community policing and the leaders are more strategic, compassionate, service oriented, and tougher on crime than any other time in our history.

In spite of this historic success, Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton writes, "Our profession today is in a 'malaise.' We are coming off the most significant 10 years in advancements in policing history. We led it, we did it, we were the thinkers and the implementers and the evaluators—yet it isn't enough. In our 'malaise' we are not leaning forward into the fight, but we are back on our heels in survival."²

A way out of this malaise is through branding the police department.

Brand Positioning Starts with the Agency Head

Brand positioning identifies the true nature of the service, and whom it is for. Branding creates an emotional link between the user and the service or product. In the case of policing, it requires clarity about the policing mission, vision, and values. It requires police executives to be clear that they are serving the public in a fundamentally democratic way. Police executives should ask themselves the following questions:

- What philosophy of service do you as the chief executive adhere to?
- How does that system of beliefs cascade into policy and operations?

A brand position must be unique, relevant, timely, and clear. The chief's vision, and its implementation, is unique to the chief executive officer of the agency. Consequently, how the department is branded in the eyes and minds of its community starts with chief executive officer.

Corporations have been branding their products in many cases for centuries. For the past 50 years, the Walt Disney Company, for instance, hasn't sold the public its amusement parks and movies; instead, it has sold the public their childhoods. Disney sells memories, happy times, and youth. It sells innocence, love, fantasies, and romance. As a result, the public buys Disney movies and makes the pilgrimage to the Disney amusement parks. Volvo isn't selling a car; it's selling the safety of families. L.L.Bean isn't selling shirts, shoes, and camping equipment; it's selling us a piece of the outdoors and a relationship with the environment.

In a like manner, law enforcement agencies aren't selling crime statistics and solvability rates; they are providing security, peace of mind, and a sense of safety for their communities.

Thirteen Points in Branding

Ken Millman, chief executive officer of Spike Advertising in Burlington, Vermont, has developed a 13-point branding manifesto that the authors have adapted to meet the needs of police agencies.³

1. Branding is about getting your community to see you as the only solution to their problem.

Being the only game in town doesn't necessarily mean the department is the preferred choice. According to the George Mason University research study, public confidence and support for the local department depends more on the citizens' perceptions of police officers' motives than whether the outcome was personally favorable to the citizen. Perceptions can be manipulated. To their detriment, some police departments have neglected to put energy into a public relations effort and have allowed others to define them. Community members need to see their department not as the only solution to their concerns but as the best solution for their problems, as a trustworthy source of protection, and as being worth every penny they are paying in taxes, and more.

2. Don't lose sight of the fact that advertising grabs minds, but branding gets hearts, and that's what will help build public loyalty for the chief, the employees, and the department.

Advertising is not branding. Don't get lulled into thinking that simply putting the department's logo, badge, or decal on the side of the department's cruisers is adequate branding. What do the public documents look like? The Web site? The informational brochures? The building and work areas? Is there consistency between the image and the service? Advertising (such as the department's logo and the accreditation decal on police cars) raises the awareness of the brand and helps build image and trust, but it doesn't brand the department in the citizens' minds.

3. The department's logo isn't the department's brand.

The department's badge, logo, and uniform are symbols; they do not constitute the department's brand. As Nancy Koehn of the Harvard Business School observes,

Watching the Information Revolution unfold in the 1990s, I was struck by the sheer number and variety of new goods and services being brought to market: technology-based cellular phones and Internet access, specialty coffee shops and cappuccinos, and so on. Most consumers in the 1980s had not even heard of e-mail or caffe lattes. Yet in less than a decade, millions of people not only became familiar with these and other novel products, they also made them part of their daily lives.⁴

She goes on to explain how individual entrepreneurs and companies translated a few buyers' curiosity about new product into widespread customer loyalty by communicating the virtues of its products to potential buyers in effective ways. In similar fashion, the police department cannot assume the community has an understanding of the department's values and philosophy. As the George Mason University study showed, the overall legitimacy of the police depends more on citizens' perceptions of how police treat them than on their perceptions of police success in

reducing crime. The police department is branded by contacts the officers, dispatchers, and other employees have with the department's customers.

4. The stronger and more credible the department's brand identity, the less susceptible the department is to being defined and undermined by outside influences.

What feelings, images, and thoughts do police officers and citizens' experience when they see a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer in a red dress uniform? Does the RCMP always get its man? The RCMP has created a strong brand identity. Canadians view their federal police force as a group to be respected, revered, and honored. They're seen as competent, effective, and extremely service oriented.

Several years ago, the London Metropolitan Police ran an advertising and branding campaign to recruit constables. One of the posters showed a cluster of colorful balloons tied to the railing of a Brownstown in a nice neighborhood. Walking away from the balloons, and slightly out of focus, was a couple holding hands. The message said that the London Metropolitan Police were looking for you to serve their community. Moreover, it wasn't the language of the advertisement that captivated; it was the emotional draw of the images. Few citizens have personal contact with police officers, yet police must reach all citizens to establish the department's brand. They who vote for our budgets, they call us when they witness crime, and they obey our laws as upstanding members of society.

5. Build the brand from the department's strengths.

Be what you are, not what you want to be. Each police department has its own strengths and challenges, its own pros and cons. Not every police department can be the epitome of every aspect of police service; as such, the department's brand must enforce what the department does well. Some agencies push aggressive motor vehicle enforcement, while others strive to develop strong relations with their schools. Ideally, each will, at a minimum, be competent in all aspects of policing but not necessarily excel at all aspects. The chief should ask, What do we want to be known for?

6. The success of a brand depends on consistency and frequency.

How many times has a customer been led to believe one thing with a product or service only to experience something different? It's devastating to the customer's faith and confidence in the product or service. If an agency works to establish community service or tough motor vehicle law enforcement as its brand identity but a survey of the community indicates perceptions quite the opposite (if, for instance, dispatchers, as first points of contact, are rude, or if speeding on the main roads goes unchecked) then this lack of consistency and frequency undermines the branding efforts. Actors portraying Disney characters at theme parks never step out of character. Why? Because Disney employees adhere to the principle of consistency and frequency. If the police agency's message to the community is inconsistent and infrequent, there is a fundamental flaw in the branding process. This is true internally as well: managers and employees alike must reinforce the brand even in their interactions with one another.

7. If you can't articulate your brand, neither can anyone else.

Many times the authors have asked a chief, a patrol officer, a dispatcher, or an administrative staff member what the core of their agency's mission is and received a trout look in response—eyes glazed over, mouth hanging open in an oval shape, and an audible sucking sound. If the chief can't articulate what the department is about, its core mission, and its brand, then no one else can either.

8. Just because you've heard about it doesn't mean it's well branded.

Branding and awareness are not the same. Even when branding is strong and well defined, awareness isn't necessarily a given. A strong brand can withstand temporary setbacks. If an unfortunate incident involving an employee of the department occurs, the community will see the aberrant action or behavior and consider it just that—an aberration. The community will accept that problems will develop from time to time, and community members will not leap to

generalizations as quickly. What matters to citizens is the knowledge that these are isolated incidents that will be appropriately handled.

9. The more you niche brand the better.

It is important that the agency regularly tell the community how good it is in a specific area (niche) and must tell the success stories often and consistently. For example, regularly police departments explore solutions through networking and on-site visits to see firsthand how a solution works. In branding the department, these meetings can provide new stories to illustrate peer acceptance of the department's niche.

10. The smaller your budget is, the stronger your brand must be.

Police departments do not have advertising budgets like corporations. What departments do have, however, is community and news media interest. Corporations pine for this natural attention, and capacity to shape their message before someone else does it for them. As studies show, most citizens obtain information about the police through the news media. At every opportunity the department needs to show its brand and talk up the successes. Even the most difficult situation can involve positive action, again reinforcing the values and vision of the department, its proactive, involved leadership; its caring response. Corporations couldn't buy the daily exposure offered to police departments; but departments must use that exposure to reinforce its brand in the community.

11. If the branding is wrong, so is everything else.

No amount of advertising and spinning stories will save a brand if the reality is different from its values and visions. A citizen's experience with an individual officer influences their impression of the police department. Branding is established one citizen contact at a time. If the department advocates one set of values but the reality of what citizens see is the opposite, it will be a short time before that discrepancy diminishes the agency's ability to achieve its core mission. The reality of experiences must be consistent with the brand.

12. The department's brand is a promise.

Once the department promises to deliver on a brand, the promise must be kept. Remember: the overall legitimacy of the police depends more on citizens' perceptions of how they are treated by the police than in actual results and crime statistics. If citizens feel officers treated them professionally, fairly, and with compassion, then even a result unfavorable to the citizens will do little to undermine their confidence in the officers and the department. If police do not recover a complainant's stolen property, for instance, but the responding officers were attentive, courteous, and competent, failure to recover the property will not necessarily diminish the complainant's opinion of the police department. But if the officers appear uncaring, unprofessional, or biased during the contact with the complainant, those shortcomings will shape the complainant's views of the police more than the eventual recovery of the stolen items.

13. Be honest, be real, and be the brand.

Whatever the message, the mission, and the core values of the agency, the brand identity makes a promise that must be validated every day by messages and by people. It has to be enduring, authentic, honest, and believable. When successful, it defines an emotional link between the department and those served.

Resources

When a chief is ready to take the department's brand development to the next level, he or she can turn to several resources. A university police agency should work with the institution's marketing department. A city, county, or state agency could turn to the local chamber of commerce, convention and visitors bureau, or tourism agency. For instance, there has already been a lot accomplished to brand Vermont and Maine from the recruitment perspective, to find new employees. The local department does not need to reinvent the wheel. If

these government agencies don't have ideas the department can borrow, they can certainly help the department to develop some. Whatever the local demographic, it's in the business community's best interest to promote a strong public safety entity, as it makes people feel good about residing in, visiting, or conducting business there. This is a fundamental principle in economic development; it's not simply Build it and they will come, but Build it and make the emotional connection strong.

Yet even before any of this can be done, the chief and the department must be clear about who they are, what they are good at, and why they do it. Define yourself before some one else does it for you. You'll be glad you did.

¹*International Association of Chiefs of Police, The Public Image of the Police, a report prepared by Catherine Gallagher, Edward R. Maguire, Stephen D. Mastrofski, and Michael D. Reisig of the George Mason University Administration of Justice Program (October 2001); available at www.theiacp.org/profassist/ethics/public_image.htm*

²*William Bratton, Turnaround: How America's Top Cop Reversed the Epidemic (New York: Random House, 1998).*

³*Visit Spike Advertising at www.spikeadvertising.com*

⁴*Nancy F. Koehn, Brand New: How Entrepreneurs Earned Consumers' Trust from Wedgwood to Dell (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001): 1.*

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