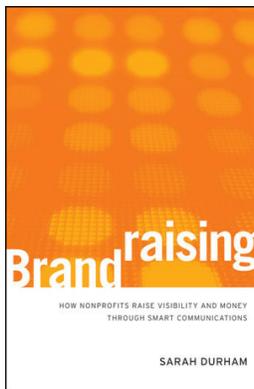


Review: Brandraising
By Sarah Durham
February 2014

Reviewed by Jonathan Poisner, www.poisner.com

I recently had the pleasure of reading *Brandraising: How Nonprofits Raise Visibility and Money through Smart Communications*, by Sarah Durham.



My three words of advice for anyone who needs to think hard about the connections between fundraising, communications, and planning for a nonprofit is: Read this book.

Durham, who has forged her opinions through nearly 20 years of nonprofit consulting, has done a marvelous job of writing a book that presents theory in a straightforward way, while also offering numerous practical tips on how to implement the theory into practice.

What is “brandraising” and why should nonprofit leaders care about it?

Durham doesn’t offer one precise definition of the term brandraising. Rather, she describes brandraising as “the process of building a strong framework for communicating.” The process as she outlines it involves three different levels of decision-making.

The “Organizational Level” encompasses an organization’s vision, mission, values, objectives, audience, positioning, and personality. Some of these elements are traditionally developed through strategic planning processes.

The “Identity Level” encompasses an organization’s visual identity (such as its logo, name, and tagline) and messaging platform (such as an elevator statement).

Lastly, the “Experiential Level” encompasses the major avenues by which the organization’s audience experiences communications from the organization: online, in print, on air, in person, and mobile.

Among the strengths of Durham’s approach are:

- She makes very clear why it is folly for an organization to make major decisions at the Identity or Experiential Level until the group has consensus at the Organizational Level.
- She focuses on the nonprofit audience first and foremost. Throughout the book, she repeatedly demonstrates how and why nonprofit staff tend to vastly overestimate how much their donors

and supporters know about the organization, along with the negative impact of this disconnect. She also concretely demonstrates the practical implications of how a nonprofit audience can vary significantly depending on whether the organization is thinking about its program work, advocacy, or fundraising.

- She begins from the premise that brandraising is how to “do more with less.” This book isn’t a plea for groups to spend more on communications, although organizations following the book’s tips may wind up doing so. Rather, the book makes clear why it’s so important to *focus* your communications so as to generate the best bang for the buck. Better to spend \$X really well on communications than twice X haphazardly.
- She has very practical advice for how an organization can address questions about its name, logo, tagline, and other Identity Elements, with particular attention to how those elements should flow from first determining the organization’s mission, vision, etc. I particularly appreciated her writing about the overreliance of nonprofits on acronyms.
- She spends considerable ink discussing “in person” communications as one of the areas of emphasis in the Experiential Level. Too often, I’ve seen writers about nonprofit communications avoid what, in reality, is often the number one way small and medium sized nonprofits communicate. *Brandraising* does an admirable job of recognizing in-person communications as important, while providing advice for how to make in-person communications more effective.

Leaving the substance aside, I very much appreciated Duham’s writing style. It was matter-of-fact. It told me why I as her audience can benefit. It didn’t just say “Do X.” It then provided an example of what X looks like for an organization. And it included practical advice for how an organization should develop X.

No book is without weaknesses. For me, the two most salient are:

- She underestimates the difficulty a nonprofit leader will likely have to get consensus within the organization around moving forward with the brandraising approach. I’d like to hear more thoughts about how to do this, beyond just handing out her book to everyone involved.
- The book is already somewhat dated. It came out in 2010 and some of the advice about online/mobile communications seems quaint just 4 years later. Durham would be advised to produce a new edition in the next year or two, updating this section.

With those weaknesses aside, I heartily recommend *Brandraising* to Executive Directors, development staff, communications staff, and board leaders who want to better understand how strategy, communications, and development can be put together into a single, ongoing process that should yield results.

For my part, I wish it had been written a decade earlier, so that I could have applied its approach when I was an Executive Director. As is, I'm sure I will be incorporating ideas from *Brandraising* into my own work with clients on strategy, development, and communications.

Jonathan Poisner is an independent management consultant who helps nonprofit organizations thrive. He helps organizations with strategic planning, coalition building, fundraising, communications, executive coaching, and other organizational development challenges. He can be reached at jonathan@poisner.com.