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**The Foregrounding of Re-Branding  
in the Struggle for Survival:  
How One TSO has Responded to  
Austerity Measures in the UK**

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## An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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**The Foregrounding of Re-Branding in the Struggle for  
Survival: How One TSO has Responded to Austerity Measures  
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**Abstract**

A change of government in the United Kingdom from Labour to a coalition in 2010 coupled with a whole raft of austerity measures ushered in by the coalition government in response to the global economic crisis has meant that in a very short space of time, Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) have found themselves operating in a significantly different political and economic environment. This radical shift in government policy in its dealings with TSOs has necessitated new thinking on the part of small to medium size organisations in particular. Operating within this new landscape meant that the status quo was no longer viable. One noticeable change, as this paper will seek to explore, is a small and medium sector organisation engagement with re-branding techniques as a strategy for riding out these measures.

**Key words:** Re-branding, Re-positioning, third sector organisations  
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## **Introduction**

Branding techniques are widely used as strategic tools by commercial organisations to create a competitive advantage (Segal-Horn, 2003; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Knox and Brickerton, 2001). Many large Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) have well established brands and have routinely employed branding techniques to gain a competitive edge (Saxon, 2008; Crosby, 2009; Ritchie et al, 1998; Hankinson, 2004; 2000; 2001). This however, has not been the case for small to medium size TSOs who have tended to eschew branding techniques, in part due to financial cost (Sun, 2011; Tan, 2003; Laidler-Kylander and Simonin, 2009). This topic remains crucial because as Natalie (2004) observes branding is not only essential for large but also for small to medium size TSOs.

The paper will assess the practical challenges faced by a TSO's management committee internally as it sought to first seek out re-branding strategies, but then implement the demands of re-branding strategies with a workforce which was unfamiliar practically and culturally with this new trajectory.

## **Definitions**

It is important to begin by attempting to clarify terms such as TSOs, re/branding and re/positioning. As Adcock and Kendall (2010) note the term TSOs is a contentious issue. Generally, the term is used interchangeably and sometimes differently to classify small community and voluntary groups, registered charities, foundations, trusts and a growing number of social enterprises and cooperatives charities, not-for-profit, faith-based, arts, community, civil society, campaigning organisations and trade unions (Hudson, 1999; Sergeant, 2005; Anheier and List, 2005). The term is amorphous (Saxon-Harrold, 1990) but is useful because it highlights the difficulties of classifying the sector.

de Chernatony and Segal-Horn (2001:1095) define brand as "a cluster of functional and emotional values which promise a particular experience". However, like TSOs the term brand is a contentious issue. In this paper words such as re/branding and re/positioning are used here interchangeably to mean the positioning of a product, service, person or place in the mind of the prospect (Trout and Ries, 2001).

## **Background to the Study**

As a means of keeping the organisation and the interviewees confidential (Tapp, 1996) the organisation will be referred to here as ABC and the interviewees as case study participants. ABC is a small to medium size TSO based in West Yorkshire, in the north of England and this paper seeks to examine the specific circumstances which have compelled this organisation to turn to re-branding techniques.

In highlighting the difficulties facing TSOs in Yorkshire and the Humber a study conducted by Involve Yorkshire and Humber (2011), claimed that 4 out of the 5 most deprived local authorities in Yorkshire and Humber will be significantly affected as a result of spending cuts. That means on average that 36% of TSOs in the region that receive local authority funding will be affected by the cuts. The percentage of cut can be as high as 50% (Kane and Mohan, 2010; The Yorkshire Post, 19 December, 2010). The conclusion to be drawn from these studies is the view that many TSOs in the region are in a highly vulnerable position. As a consequence, finding strategies to enable TSOs to continue to maintain and deliver a high level of services as demands for these services increases with fewer resources remain essential.

### **Methodology**

As this is an exploratory piece of research it employs a cases study approach which is used for gathering data within a specific context. This approach seeks to test theories, understand and explain what is happening within a specific context (Collis and Hussey 2003; Yin, 2004; Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2005).

The research commenced with three in-depth interviews with key stakeholders within the organisation who were involved in strategising around the rebranding. These included a committee board member, a manager and a third person who works for the PR Company that oversaw the branding exercise for ABC.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and the data analysis was supported by the academic literature and what Boyton (2005:2) calls “grey literature”, that is to say, documents produced in the form of papers, reports, pamphlets and internet sources. These documents proved insightful in supplementing the face-to-face interviews. Hatch and Schultz (2001) strategic stars was used as a guide for constructing the interviews questions. The 6 themes identified from the research was for the most part influenced not only by Hatch and Schultz framework but also by themes that emerged from the interviews.

### **Conception of Branding**

A primary focus of the study was to explore how the case study participants defined brand and how that compared with the academic literature. It was expected that case study participant’s definitions would be different when compared with the academic literature. Case study participants defined brand as the ability of “users to easily identify what you do as an organisation” and where “people can associate our name with what we do”. Branding is a “clear and consistent message” which implies that “people are able to build recognition of us and understand what we do...”. Branding is “the outward image of a company or individual – everything from visual, written and spoken communication and imagery”. Although the case study participants were not



familiar with the academic literature on branding their account of the term seems markedly similar with the academic literature (Sergeant, 2005; Killer, 2008; de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003).

### **The rationale Behind Rebranding of ABC**

There are several reasons why organisations rebrand (Riezebos, 2003). A useful way to begin this exploration is asking why ABC sought to reposition itself. It appears that prior to the introduction of austerity measures in 2010 by the coalition government some of ABC's stakeholders had concerns about its brand. Case study participants pointed out that from research conducted with key stakeholders it was found that the identity of the organisation was unclear. Comments such as "anyone who was not a member would not have the foggiest idea what it was from its name". Some stakeholders according to case study participants commented that they "don't know that they [ABC] had a brand". From this comment it seems evident that stakeholders do not think of the organisation in terms of brand a view which is given voice by Tan (2003).

Case study participants observe that it was "external pressures, changes in the voluntary sector, the changes in government and the economy all those had a big effect on us ...the whole structure of our world as it were". The quotation below seems to highlight these points further.

There are grants that are pretty much not available now where they used to be and lots of specific programmes have been cut. And there has been restructuring not only of the voluntary sector but at a spatial level - economic and social levels. The words and concept of regional has pretty much gone out the window with the cutting of the regional development organisations such as Yorkshire Forward.

One point in the above quote which is worth emphasising is the cutting of the regional organisations. This is particularly important as this provides the context for understanding to some extent why it was necessary for ABC repositioning. ABC interacted with a number of organisations in Yorkshire and the Humber but two key regional organisations which served as the hub for ABC's core functions were Yorkshire Forward and the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber. Yorkshire Forward was the regional development agency for Yorkshire and the Humber focusing on economic development and regeneration in the region. This organisation also drilled down European funding for organisations in the region such as ABC. The other important organisation was the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber which provided some funding for organisations in the region but more specifically served as a bridge between ABC and Central Government on various government policies and programmes. Following the coalition government public spending review in 2010 it was signalled that these organisations would be abolished a plan which was implemented in 2012. With these two central organisations abolished ABC had to set a new direction by re-orienting itself.

The impact these changes had on ABC is reflected in the quote below:

We were originally set up...to mirror those regional organisations that were set up by the Labour government earlier on, so with these structures removed, we were suddenly left exposed without them to relate to in the same way. So it was clear that we had to adapt... We are pretty clear there is still an important role there.

Given, as Hankinson and Lomax (2006) note that many TSOs brands are not as clear as it might be and considering the current changing economic climate in which these organisations operate rebranding seems a valuable asset. As case study participants pointed out ABC had to “adapt” and repositioning itself provided the means for doing so.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the study was to explore how one UK TSO used rebranding as a strategy for responding to the austerity measures. As the interviews questions were based around Hatch and Schultz (2001) strategic stars, 6 closely interrelated themes were identified. These are: a consistent message, values, relationship, partnership, vision and stakeholders each of these principles are further developed below.

### **Ensuring a Consistent Message**

As Richie et al (1998:34) state “an organisation’s image is reflected in the impression of that organisation held by members of a given audience”. An essential aspect of communicating brand image is projecting a consistent message to stakeholders. ABC sought to maintain a consistent message through the use of its name, logo, colours and strap line. For example, an examination of the grey literature shows that the company logo and strap line are located on all of the organisation’s publications. Prior to the rebranding, case study participants comment that “we all felt we were not giving out a proper message”. Therefore it was necessary that the organisation ensure a consistent message is given to all stakeholders. According to case study participants “this might be a simple matter as setting standards for answering the telephone”. The website can be another example where a consistent message is presented. As Ha and Perks (2005) observe websites are becoming an essential instrument in brand communication and ABC is using this media as a means of communicating a strong brand which is based on its values.

### **Conceptualising values**

According to Sergeant (2005), values represent what the organisation stands for as well as how it approaches key issues relating to the cause it stands for. For TSOs values are a powerful force for behavioural influencing and a key driver (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Tapp, 1996; Hankinson, 2000). The values of ABC are “listening and sharing diverse opinions and ideas both internally and externally” as well as “speak up confidently” on important issues affecting the sector. The question then is how does ABC live out its values? It seeks to do so through the services it provide which include organising

conferences and consultation management which serves as a point of contact for the voluntary and community organisations in the region and through publications, briefings and other information guides. Even though values are fundamental to TSOs, Stride and Lee (2007) note that this is an area which is generally understudied in the literature. The whole notion of values is closely connected with the issue of relationship.

### **Forging Stronger Relationship**

One of the key aims of ABC is deepening the relationship between itself and a diverse range of stakeholders. As Ryans (2009) notes in situations where customer segments are complex and diverse building relationships tends to be crucial. The changing environment in which ABC operates makes this even more important. The appreciation of the different values of different stakeholders provides the basis for establishing strong relationships (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). As de Chernatony and McDonald (2003:141) highlighted “the nature of the relationship between two people can be inferred by observing their individual attitudes and behaviour”. ABC seeks to build a positive relationship with its stakeholders by making relationship building a key principle. In order to ensure that this effective relationship is built up between different stakeholders, the organisation organises away days where staff and other stakeholders can interact and learn about each other. Holding away days is regarded as one of the essential means of forging better relationships. Hopkins (2010) discusses the idea of TSOs forging relationship with the private sector which case study participants regarded as a way to “build recognition” of the brand and help people to “understand what the organisation does and through those relationships are developed”. Establishing such relationship calls for collaborative work ethic.

### **Building Effective Partnership**

Partnership can be perceived as a strategic alliance “where two or more organisations share resources and activities to pursue a strategy” (Johnson et al 2011:338) by working together in order to achieve a common goal. This approach is becoming increasingly more important in the sector (The Future Role of the Third Sector in Social and Economic Regeneration: Final Report 2007; Adcock, 2010). Hudson (2010) cites Kim van Niekerk the co-founder of Quanta Corporate Citizenship as saying that there is a trend in which companies are moving away from how much money they donate to how they can work with TSOs. ABC is attempting “...to build links with the private sector where they come into contact with the community and voluntary sector”.

Despite the benefits of partnership Haugh (2005) warns of the dangers of such relationship. ABC, however, is concern about damage to its reputation and loss of independence and so forging this kind of relationship cautiously. For case study participants “trying to get the right partnership” is crucial. Their view is that if ABC is going to collaborate in partnership with other

organisations it needs to take into account its own strengths and values and whether these are in alignment with those it engages with collaboratively. This calls for exploring different options for collaborative work.

### **Focusing on the Vision**

An essential characteristic of branding is developing a clearly articulated vision of the organisation. Saxton (2008:6) defines vision as the “synthesis of a set of organisation beliefs, woven into a statement of how the world should be”. This is concerned with the extent to which the organisation hopes to transform the world through its activities. In the case of TSOs, such undertakings attempt to address deeply entrenched social problems which are not easily measured. Vision can be perceived as the desired future state of what an organisation wants to achieve (Johnson et al, 2011). Saxton’s idea of vision can be related to what Hatch and Schultz (2003:1047) refer to as a strategic vision which they regard as “the central idea behind the company that embodies and expresses top management’s aspiration for what the company will achieve in the future”. Saxton (2008) argues that since beliefs are central to TSOs, then those beliefs should be the essential criteria in their branding. Even though Saxton (2008) thinks that TSO branding is similar to commercial branding, it is at the point of belief that he distances himself from the latter approach.

Drawing on the work of Collins and Pornas (1994), Hatch and Schultz (2003:1048) put forward the view that “successful companies build their visions from redefinition and redefinitions of core values rather than revolutionary shifts from one value set to another”. In the case of ABC, the rebranding was not a complete revolution. The organisation changed its strap line but the graphics of the logo remained the same. The idea behind that was keeping the graphics so that the organisation was not seen as changing its image so radically that its members would not recognise it. This was because the organisation has a very rich heritage and therefore it was important to maintain that. Coming back to the theme of vision Hatch and Schultz (2003:1048) state that “although vision can stretch the company towards new goals and levels of achievement, it must also connect authentically with the heritage of the company” it was for this reason that ABC did not change the graphics in its logo. In the next section we address the issue of stakeholders before finally turning to the principle of differentiation.

### **Stakeholders**

Do the stakeholders of ABC really concern about the organisation brand? The research found that although stakeholders (members) perceive the organisation as professional, knowledgeable, intellectually able, helpful and having a strong grasp of how the region works. They do not think of the organisation in terms of brand but identity. As mentioned previously during the research for the re-branding stakeholders were more concerned about the

identity of the organisation rather than its brand. Comments such as: “I do worry that it does not seem to have a clear identity” and “anyone who was not a member would not have the foggiest idea what the organisation is from its name”. Other remarks as “I don’t know that they have a brand” or “there is some concern that the name no longer has a strong link with the sector it works for”. These points of views led case study participants to conclude that it is important for the organisation to have “a consistent message” but beyond that there is also a “need to develop different messages for different stakeholders”. ABC is working on a plan to “reach more business communities and that would need a different message of services and products for them” which is different from “what we would need for local support and development organisations”.

As case study participants explain over the years the organisation has gone through a series of changes and as a result “there were some confusing messages”. With the closure of Yorkshire Forward and the Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber ABC had to reposition in order to re-orient itself in order to respond to the changing environment in which it operates. As Area (2006:141) points out an “organisation should seek actively and continuously to develop its brand position in order to clearly and effectively reach its target audience” raises the question as to how ABC differentiates itself.

### **Differentiation**

Markets are constantly changing and as a result this generates an ongoing series of opportunities and threats to an organisation (Doyle, 2008). Therefore, responding to the changing environment is essential and can mean an organisation differentiating itself from its competitors. Differentiation is the selection of one or more choice criteria by buyers in an industry in which a firm is positioned to meet such criteria which is superior to the competition (Jobber, 2010; Kay, 2006; Baines, et al, 2008). For Jobber (2010) the crucial point is that differentiation serves to provide buyers with the reason to prefer one set of offerings over another. Hyojin (2002:50) quotes Kotler and Andreasen (1996) as stating that since donors are not familiar with and cannot differentiate one TSO from another it is essential that the organisation be firmly positioned in the mind of the donor if it stands any chance of securing funding.

As a consequence “creating differentiation in terms of greater value than is provided by competitors, and making this distinction apparent to donors is essential to the success” of TSOs (Hyojin, 2002:50). The issue of differentiation is particularly crucial in the literature on rebranding but at a more practical level ABC focuses on collaborative work and therefore seems not to regard differentiation as essential because it invokes the spirit of competition. ABC, however, is concerned to add value through collaboration. However, one does not need to understand differentiation necessarily as competitive. There is a sense in which an organisation needs to differentiate in order to be more effective at collaborative work. This view resonates with

aspects of the literature on differentiation, as for example, Jobber (2010); Kay (2006) and Baines, et al (2008) regard differentiation as an essential strategy for adding customer value and attracting customers.

## **Conclusion**

The 6 principles identified in this study can be seen as factors driving the rebranding of ABC which clearly is an ongoing process. Commenting on the significance of TSOs branding Saxton (2008) states many of these organisations have visions which are not clearly articulated and where they are, they are frequently unconvincing. As a consequence, rebranding seems a useful tool for recasting and better communicating the vision of many TSOs and ultimately enhancing their level of profitability.

This study found rebranding is not just a strategy of clarifying vision in the case of ABC it was a strategy for flourishing and survival. In terms of rebranding and the emphasis case participants placed on partnership or collaborative work it is plausible to conclude that for ABC branding is less about creating a competitive advantage and more about creating visibility and building a reputation as a trusted organisation. The key message then is that ABC can be seen as an organisation which can be trusted, respected and one which gets the job done.

Rebranding, however, can be inadequate in cases where it does not make a meaningful difference or add significant value to an organisation offering (Kay, 2006). In such cases, rebranding is unlikely to be appropriate (Ritchie, Swami and Weinberg, 1999). Therefore each case has to be considered on its own merit.

## **Limitations**

The data collected for this specific case study provided useful insights into the rebranding strategy of ABC but the study has limitations. The study was unable to analyse the pitfalls of repositioning (Kaikati et al, 2003) and how the current repositioning added value to its stakeholders. These are areas for further exploration. As this was a single case study it was not possible to make broad generalisation about how the sector as a whole was using repositioning to cope with austerity measures and a multi-case study approach would be far more useful for generating further comparative insights.

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