


# How to Build Your Brand

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## Skillfully employed, the right branding can help your facility earn a spot in the psyche of local consumers

by Nicole Van Winkle

**W**hat makes a brand? We are inundated with branding everywhere we turn in our personal and professional lives. It is designed to pull at our heart strings and connect with us emotionally. Though we like to believe logic, price comparison and product quality are key to our purchasing decisions, in reality, we subconsciously are swayed by our relationships with brands.

A brand can be very complex, but is typically made up of two components: physical and emotional. The physical brand is the tangible product customers receive or experience. In the aquatics industry, a physical brand includes your facility, whether it be a small municipal aquatics center with a play structure, lap pool and three slides, or a large waterpark with a continuous river, surf machine, and numerous thrill rides.

The emotional part is what customers feel when they see, interact with, or hear about the physical product. Words such as safe, fun, memorable, exhilarating or informative may describe this component.

There is a reason that marketing and advertising fuel a \$100 billion industry. If your signage just listed the park's attractions and prices, how effective would it be for your bottom line or customer experience? Take that base information and add bright colors, a well-thought-out logo and a catchy slogan. Which version will people connect with and remember?

Why do we need to communicate or even establish a brand? Because even if you have not identified your brand, you still have one. Much like having a social media presence, if you do not create one, your customers will. Why not be part of that process and help craft the direction of consumers' perceptions?

### What is your claim to fame?

The first step in identifying and communicating your brand is to determine your current claim to

fame or your liability. Peruse your social counts and newspaper articles for clues about your facility struggles and where it shines. Review your customer surveys for trends that reveal strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps you have talented, attentive swim instructors, but your operational swim check-in process is slow and a source of tension for customers.

Building your brand around your strengths can prove to be a much easier task than trying to overcome what the public perceives as weaknesses. For example, there are several jokes or puns around Whole Foods, a primarily organic grocery chain. Many call it "whole paycheck" in reference to the expense of organic food, while others refer to it as "whole ingredients," for its support of healthy products. Either way, customers are talking about the brand and making their own assumptions. The facility is very adept at crafting its message and positioning itself as "America's Healthiest Grocery Store" with the goal to support its success.

When crafting your brand, look at the local market. Is there a larger park, or a small, successful one? Find your niche specialty and capitalize on it. If you are smaller but have a large waterpark or pool, perhaps your niche is "family friendly," where parents can feel comfortable knowing you do not have excessive high-thrill rides that typically attract the teenage-for-the-afternoon crowd that can take over the facility. On the other hand, maybe you are that large waterpark that can tout that your facility is cutting edge, with high-thrill attractions that purchasing a season pass and coming every week is the only way to get all the fun. By differentiating where you are in the market compared with your competitors, you can fill the market and guide customers to subconsciously connect with your business instead of competitors.



**SATURATION EFFECT** To be most effective, branding should be applied at every opportunity, from the chosen color palette to signage, all the way to seemingly routine documents such as swim lesson cancellation notices. Every element and every interaction should reinforce the branding message that sets your aquatics facility apart.

## Communicating your brand message

You have identified your brand, determined how to communicate your message to your customers. You can do this through signage, slogans, color palettes, logos, uniforms, advertising and programming. Begin by selecting a palette of five colors that complement your park. Use these colors when creating advertising materials, stickers, coupons in the grocery store, they'll get a second look because they know it's yours. Consistency and that you offer something new and interesting.

Using the color palette, design a simple sign that contains the facility's name, and an arrow that shows movement. If you already have a great logo, develop your color palette based on that.

At The Cove Waterpark, a 9-acre multi-seasonal waterpark and year-round recreation pool in Southern California, an example of how branding should be implemented. Its family-friendly service brand is based around a vision to "provide a fun, memorable experience through accessible recreation programming." The pirate-themed park features bright, colorful tropical animal statues, palm trees, treasure chests, themed signage and ride signs to support the brand. Its tagline of

"Your Aquatic Adventure Awaits!" is listed on its marketing materials, and team members answer the phone with, "Ahoj Mateys, this is \_\_\_\_\_. How many I assist you?"

The Cove uses every challenge as an opportunity to spread brand awareness. For example, during the peak of one season, the park experienced several fecal incidents at the same time every day, resulting in unhappy customers and lost revenue. A mandatory "potty break," was implemented, during which all guests under 12 were required to exit the water for 15 minutes. Though this greatly cut down on fecal incidents, some customers were unhappy with the new policy. To help parents who didn't need the reminder to take their children to the restroom, Cap'n JAC, the pirate tiger mascot, would come out approximately 5 minutes before the end of the "potty break" and perform a choreographed dance with some staffers. Guests quickly learned the dance, and what was once a dreaded time became a focal point event for the park. As a result, there were fewer fecal incidents, children would quickly use the restroom so they would not miss the dance, and concessions revenue grew substantially.

Mascots provide an incredible opportunity to address customer service issues during inclement weather and maintenance situations, and they build brand

awareness at community events outside a facility's gates. Identify opportunities within your programs to reinforce your brand, whether it is your swim lesson level names, day camp theme, or a special event.

The main point of establishing a brand is for customers to ultimately buy into it and support your facility, but unless you find ways that work specifically for your park, your brand will remain unknown, and customers will decide for themselves.

## Staff = brand ambassadors

One of the most influential ways to communicate or reinforce a brand is through staff. Consistency of guest experience guides your customers' perceptions. If your message successfully communicates that your park offers above-and-beyond service, but the guest interacts with an employee with a poor attitude, the time and money spent creating and communicating a brand may be for naught.

Customers are service-savvy and willing to spend extra to support facilities with integrity and that appear genuine in their brand delivery and support. Implement a consistent training and reinforcement program that will guide staffers into "being" your brand. Teach them that they have a responsibility to uphold the brand at all times, whether on the clock or not.

Children admire aquatics staffs, and their encounters in the real world — whether at the grocery store or outside mowing the lawn — can have a positive or negative impact on your brand. Because people have many options for where to spend, they may stop patronizing your business because of negative interactions or encounters with a single person. Consistently reinforcing this idea with your staff through interactive training exercises and secret shopper programs can help weed out employees who are not fully representing your park's brand.

North-Richland Hills Family Waterpark, better known as NRH2O, believes guest service is of utmost importance to its brand. The brand reinforcement begins with the hiring process, when management explains how important guest

service is to the park. Once a staffer is hired, they receive statistics and examples during training sessions. Those who show outstanding guest service are rewarded.

### Don't fall into the pit

Now that you have created a brand for your park, have communicated the message clearly to your customers, and your employees are ready to “be the brand,” here are a few things to avoid:

- **Failing to monitor the brand:** The brand must be woven into all aspects of your facility and programs so that customers can identify your branding in seconds. Designate a person or team to perform a brand-consistency check on anything the public will see, including signage, social

media posts, and even swim lesson cancellation notices. Every touchpoint a customer is an opportunity for reinforcement, but each time you choose from your color palette or font, you reinforce the efficacy of the brand. Over time, the brand becomes so ingrained in your team that brand checks may become less ne-

- **Incongruous policies and procedures:** If you tout it, don't let customer service fail! Review policies and procedures to identify weak brand promises to identify weak brand promises. Example: You want your brand to communicate “family-friendly,” but you provide changing tables in the restroom. Adjust or eliminate policies that contradict the genuineness of your intent.

## MASCOTS SAVE THE DAY!

We typically see mascots in sports arenas and major theme parks, bringing joy to visitors. What if you want that same energy in your facility?

- **How can a mascot help me?** The benefits are endless. Successfully weaving a mascot into programming and making it a part of community outreach will create many memorable moments for customers. It is an icon of your facility, bringing instant recognition to people who see it. They also

can be used as comic relief during customer-service issues such as fecal incident shutdowns. The mascot's image can be incorporated into marketing materials of all kinds, as well as swim lesson completion cards. Creating promotions on social media with your mascot also can increase customer engagement.

- **How do I pick a mascot?** If your town has a claim to fame, use it. DropZone Waterpark in Pease, Calif. — the sky-diving capital of the world — has an aviation theme, as well as Jumper, a yellow dog that serves as mascot, donned in flight goggles, scarf and Hawaiian board shorts. The most successful mascots typically are furry and have an open mouth: Children are drawn to furry animals, and an open mouth creates a feeling of openness and approachability. The coloring should complement your brand palette.

- **How do I select a costume?** These vary greatly in cost, depending on uniqueness and materials. Generic animal costumes can sell for approximately \$1,000. With a facility shirt, you can customize your mascot economically. If you want something more unique, custom costumes generally run \$5,000 to \$7,000, depending on if they are waterproof. Always invest in high-quality shoes and a cooling vest for summer.



oring customer feedback: While mer requests cannot always be ac-  
 nodated, because of safety or hygiene  
 ards, often there are trends in feed-  
 that we can evaluate. People who ver-  
 give negative feedback actually make

up a small percentage of unhappy custom-  
 ers, but social media has emboldened many  
 to make their feelings known. Responding  
 to these reviews, whether positive or nega-  
 tive, supports the idea that your facility  
 cares about its customers and is genuine in

its branding. Failing to listen to feedback  
 on a consistent basis can deter customers  
 from visiting your park.

- **Becoming static:** While it is important to remain consistent in your brand application by using your color palette and mascot, many things can be altered to keep customers engaged. Use a different layout, print size, or shape on printed media, or add fun music or moving graphics to a website. Look at big brands such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's to see how they have changed their logos and brands over the years. They stay current and relevant, always adjusting to customer demands. Yet they remain true to their brands, deviating only slightly with each update.

- **Deviating from the niche:** Often we must wear multiple hats. We want to do everything and be everything to make our facilities great, but that is not realistic. The same is true of our brands. While we will always strive, it is unrealistic to think we can be the most family-friendly, have the most thrill rides, the best-trained lifeguards, cleanest restrooms, lowest prices in town, and remain open at times convenient to anyone. We have budgets and limitations that help define who we are. Focus on your claim to fame, tout it, and work to always refresh and be the best in that arena.

Developing a brand message, commu-  
 nicating it to customers and employees,  
 and remaining genuine in its delivery is  
 a journey. As you go through the process,  
 you'll find that some strategies don't work  
 for you. Learn from those experiences. By  
 consistently reinforcing your brand, you  
 will ensure that customers consciously and  
 subconsciously continue to support your  
 park through their willingness to spend  
 disposable income on admission and pro-  
 grams, and spread the word that your facil-  
 ity is the best place to (fill in the blank)!

NICOLE VAN WINKLE is an account ex-  
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