

Creating and implementing a new visual identity: The Halton Healthcare experience

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ARTICLE INFO

Article Type:

Case Study

Article History:

Received: December 29, 2017

Revised: January 27, 2018

Accepted: February 5, 2018

Keywords:

Health communications

Visual communications

Visual identity

Hospital branding

Case study

ABSTRACT

In 2015, Halton Healthcare, a hospital corporation in the Greater Toronto Area, began to create and implement a disciplined visual identity. To do so, the organization enhanced and reorganized its communications capabilities. Over the next year, they created a new visual identity and applied it across three hospitals and several community-based care settings. The team used an iterative approach, obtaining buy-in from internal stakeholders, including senior leadership. The result was an award-winning new visual identity consonant with the mission, vision, and values of Halton Healthcare.

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A union of of three hospitals, Halton Healthcare provides a range of acute and sub-acute services to residents of Halton Hills, Milton, and Oakville. It is one of the largest employers in the region, with more than 4,000 physicians and staff in addition to about 1,600 volunteers. The organization is also affiliated with McMaster University.

In early 2015, Halton Healthcare augmented its communications capabilities and began a formal approach to applying a visual identity as part of a larger branding effort that included a revised logo. Prior to this, the organization and its predecessor hospitals had neither a brand framework nor the capacity to effectively steward a brand. Individual departments had been free to design and create their own products, such as brochures, and to use the logo as they saw fit. No formal guidelines or tools existed.

Halton Healthcare is a union of three hospitals, each with deep roots and identities in their communities. Physicians, staff, volunteers, and the broader

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communities held strong loyalty towards individual hospitals due in part to their previous independence.

Work began well before the opening of the new Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital (one of several new “smart” hospitals being built across Ontario) in late 2015 to create a visual identity framework and resource a team to apply it.

Statement of the problem

Halton Healthcare had the chance to create a solid foundation that could enable the growth of brand equity over time. The challenge was to create a compelling visual identity that took into account local loyalties and to apply it across an organization that had historically not had a formal brand or any design management capacity. This involved defining an overall approach, crafting an identity in all its constituent parts and encouraging the needed behaviour change among staff, physicians and volunteers.

Context of the challenge

The value of a hospital brand may not be immediately apparent given Canada’s universal, publicly-funded healthcare system. In this model, many funding mechanisms are used to rationally address current and future demographic and epidemiological factors. Formal competition is absent in this model so one could be forgiven for questioning the value of a hospital brand within it.

There are, in fact, two principal arguments for branding a public hospital: informal competition and reputation management.

Although publicly funded, informal competition is constantly at play in the hospital sector, and it can be influenced by brand. This may take the form of funding negotiations and appeals with provincial and regional decision-making bodies, where, using David Aaker’s model of brand equity (Aaker, 1991), brand associations may help hospitals differentiate themselves, and perceived quality attached to the brand may influence decision-making by patients, governments, and stakeholders. Strong brand awareness also allows hospitals to recruit and retain physicians and staff with specialized skills.

Healthcare is risky, and the outcomes are often uncertain. It is also com-

monly fraught with emotion and stress. Issues and crises arise frequently. Public attitudes to and expectations of healthcare have also evolved from passive patient to active healthcare consumer. In response, government and healthcare providers have adopted approaches and language that reflect patient-centricity and patient experience. Brand equity is an asset in maintaining reputation under stress and in enhancing consumer confidence.

While these arguments are not universally accepted within Ontario's hospital sector (as a cursory examination of the visual identities of the more than 150 hospital corporations in the province will show), Halton Healthcare recognized their validity and resources appropriately to drive the creation and application of a disciplined visual identity.

Research and analysis

In 2014, an external agency was retained to consult internal stakeholders, hospital foundations, and volunteer organizations at all three hospitals about branding options. The findings confirmed local hospital loyalties and differing understandings of brand and its value. This was taken into account in the crafting of an appropriate framework.

Throughout 2015, an informal audit of communications assets (including the corporate website) and a review of staff attitudes and behaviour were conducted. These revealed inconsistencies in design and production as well as a do-it-yourself attitude towards communications among staff.

Action

Halton Healthcare restructured its communications department in 2015 and added new resources. A full-time graphic design position was created, as was a design management position. Production assets were consolidated into a single business unit within the department. This gave the organization the ability to develop and execute a disciplined visual identity. Halton Healthcare also used an external agency, Nubrand (Toronto), to help with the visual identity work.

The team took a somewhat different approach to crafting its visual identity, borrowing from agile principles. Rather than develop the visual identity in isolation and then apply it to the organization, the team established the first

principles of the visual identity before other elements were developed, tested, and refined with the end use and purpose kept in mind. This allowed for novel facts to emerge, end usage to be more fully understood, and the visual identity to adapt to the changed circumstances, while providing a framework for further work.

The first principles addressed the newness of Halton Healthcare and its brand as well as the need for individual hospitals to identify themselves consistently within the visual identity. Halton Healthcare took a corporate branding approach that posited a single, monolithic brand for the entire organization. No sub-brands were countenanced for individual hospitals or departments. Instead, each hospital would be assigned a “signature colour” within a broader colour palette for when individual identification was important.

The development of the signature colours is an example of the agile approach and of the investment of leadership in the visual identity. The branding framework and the rationale for the signature colours were presented to leadership for review and approval. The presentation was limited to the concept itself. A later series of presentations discussed the relationship between the signature colours and the pre-established logo colours. The series also reviewed specific colour combinations. This process identified real-world conditions that shaped signature colour selection (e.g. avoiding red due to its connotations with emergency signage) and also created buy-in for the strategy at the most senior level. This enabled rapid, iterative work and supported the diffusion of the new visual identity through the organization.

Halton Healthcare’s brand promise is exemplary patient experiences, always. Its three values are accountability, respect, and compassion. Its core purpose is to restore health, help patients live with chronic conditions, and support them through more severe health challenges. Halton Healthcare’s new visual identity needed to reflect these aspects. It also had to align with significant trends in the patient population served. Recent initiatives to advance patient-centred care in Ontario respond to the rise of the empowered healthcare consumer. An effective visual identity must communicate value to this consumer, just as any other brand, and it must also engage with the consumer’s desire for wellbeing. It must do all of this by conveying the nature of the healthcare experience at Halton Healthcare.

Certain functional considerations also had to be taken into account. Those using healthcare services typically experience a high degree of stress, disorientation, and difficulty processing information. This is compounded by the fact that Halton Healthcare largely serves an older patient population. The

visual identity needed to be very clear. This need was distilled into the essence of the new visual identity:

- A vibrant colour palette
- Clear typography with a single house font (and a PC alternative)
- An emphasis on clean and uncluttered design
- Image use that is illustrative and purposeful

The team immediately started to work with this informal identity rather than begin with a formal “brand bible” that codified the many aspects of the visual identity. This allowed for real-world testing and refinement. Various products were created for internal clients, reviewed, and improved upon. This had the additional benefit of creating proof points of the value of the visual identity, which would be useful in supporting change. When the team was satisfied with the testing results, they wrote the formal visual identity guidelines, codifying the principles, essence, and refinements captured during the testing.

Implementation of the new visual identity acknowledged that a high degree of autonomy used to be given to non-communications personnel to craft communications. This autonomy was partially restricted; common business tools, such as templates for PowerPoint presentations and posters, were created using the visual identity and distributed throughout the organization via the intranet for “self-serve” use. It was also acknowledged that controlling all aspects of design, both internal and external, would be almost impossible with a small team. The team decided to start by focusing on the communications vehicles with the greatest public effect, such as the website, corporate stationery, and large format posters and banners, including the four-story-high banners adorning the parking tower at the new Oakville hospital.

Evaluation

Previous market research did not pose questions related to brand or visual identity. Further market research is planned for 2018. It is anticipated that brand equity will be addressed in that research.

Halton Healthcare’s new visual identity was recognized by peers in the design community, with the stationery winning a Canadian Regional Design Award (“Redgee”) in 2016 (Design Edge Canada, 2016).

Conclusion

The new visual identity has, in its initial deployment, proven successful. Further research will be able to qualify and quantify this directional finding.

While the value of the new visual identity remains to be quantified, the success of the implementation approach is more clearly seen. The iterative work-flow allowed the team to craft a solution that works in the real world rather than impose a finished solution unilaterally on the organization. Collaboration with front-line staff and early involvement of leadership enabled acceptance, across the organization, of the visual identity and the new way of working that a disciplined visual identity demands.

Key learnings and challenges

- Understand the organization and its history, especially its experience with brand and visual identity.
- Ground the work in the corporate values.
- Reflect the principal target audiences and their aspirations, values, preferences, and needs.
- Design for real-world use.
- Obtain senior leadership buy-in.
- Take an iterative approach.
- Capitalize on early successes as proof points to help diffuse the identity and build traction for it.
- Focus on the big wins – public-facing communications (e.g. web).

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