



What's Your Brand?

Building an IT culture

By: Ward Keever, CTG HealthCare Solutions Executive Director of Executive Services

I have some important news for you! Within a large and growing number of healthcare organizations, CIOs and the services provided by you and your staff are increasingly being viewed as commodities. That is, all CIOs and IS departments are seen as providing pretty much the same services, using similar technology platforms, and following generally accepted principles of IT management. The question to be addressed in this edition of *Insights* is whether this perspective is true. Specifically, is it true for you and your department?

Every CIO—including you—has intentionally or unintentionally created a brand. While yours may or may not be the brand you desire, you most certainly have one. So, what's your brand? It's easy to find out. Just ask five of your constituents this question: "When you consider me and my department, what do you think of?"

If they give you that deer-in-the-headlights look, then you know you have a problem. On the other hand, they might say "When it comes to you and your department, I think of a group of people that is looking out for my best interest, that listens to my ideas and suggestions, that is proactive in seeking and suggesting approaches that facilitate the services I am responsible for delivering within our organization, and that understands and delivers on time and within budget. I think of your team as working collaboratively with my staff, and as good stewards of our IT investments."

When you get that kind of reaction, you know you have developed an unassailable brand that makes you and your teams stand out in a commodity service environment. So how do you build this unassailable brand? Think of three concepts—all beginning with the letter 'V'.

First, as we have urged in many previous *Insights*, start with a **vision**. A clear vision of how you and your team will provide IT support to your organization is an essential foundation for delivering value to your constituents. Great brands are backed by an inspiring vision that engenders loyalty, passion, and emotional involvement among your staff members and constituents. A vision is a compelling picture of your perfect service and goals. Can you imagine building a strong brand when your staff and your constituents are not clear about where you are trying to go? Remember the movie "The Blues Brothers?" In it, Elwood Blues says, "We're on a mission from God." That's the level of passion and enthusiasm you should strive to ignite in your staff members. When they feel that passion and connection, it becomes contagious, affecting the people with whom they come into contact. Once your constituents get wind of it, they can't help but become enamored with your department and participants in your quest.

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The second concept is **values**. Great brands stand for something. They have an enduring core that transcends those challenging periods marked by reductions in budgets, senior management turnover, and the like. Values give you stability and help you make the right decisions in difficult circumstances. One of the big mistakes a CIO can make in defining his or her values is to make them too 'fluffy'. Generic values such as 'best service' or 'quality support' are plastered all over IS departments. Unfortunately, when constituents read this stuff, their eyes glaze over. People are conditioned to discount broad claims because they have no basis for making a comparison. Instead, analyze what is really central to your department's existence. What have you done so well that it has inspired your constituents to want to work with you? You should be able to come up with a list of values that help to set you and your staff apart from other CIOs and IS departments. Make sure you get rid of the fluff and include values you can continue to deliver. By letting your constituents know who you are and what you stand for, you will deepen your relationship and enhance your personal brand.

The last concept is **value**. Great brands deliver value. What value do you and your staff bring to your constituents that they can't obtain somewhere else? Let me give you a clue: it is not the services you provide. It's simply you and everything you stand for and deliver. Ultimately, constituents look you in the eye and say to themselves, "Do I trust that this person will always be a good steward of our IT resources? Someone who is always looking out for my best interests? A valued partner in my quest to provide quality services and value to the organization?"

Delivering value is multidimensional. It encompasses a variety of areas such as service, results relative to expectations, trustworthiness, and caring. It involves making your constituents' lives easier and less stressful. The business axiom "It's not what you do, but how you do it" holds especially true when it comes to defining your brand.

In the lobby of my offices, I had the sign on the right hanging on the wall. It was the first thing you saw when you got off the elevator. Every staff member had to pass it every day. While not perfect, it attempts to set the values and value that I and my teammates were expected to deliver to our constituents as we undertook a series of major new systems in a large academic healthcare organization.

SUCCESS USUALLY STARTS
OUT AS A SIMPLE IDEA.
BUT TO TURN A CONCEPT,
A DREAM,
INTO REALITY REQUIRES HARD WORK,
DEDICATION, COMMITMENT, AND THE
COURAGE TO FLY A LITTLE HIGHER,
TO GO A LITTLE FASTER,
TO PUSH A LITTLE HARDER.
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I would like to think that the values and value reflected in this sign set a direction and became contagious. One indication of its success was the fact that we inherited a turnover rate in excess of 20% per year and reduced it to less than five percent within the first twelve months, as everyone 'caught the fever'.

Take some time to reflect how much real, sustainable value you provide to your constituents. Are you giving the kind of service they just couldn't get from an outsourced IS department? If you bill your services out to constituents, is the value you provide worth what you are charging? Do your constituents understand your vision, values, and value, and wholeheartedly support your mission as excited and enthusiastic partners? Given some focus on this idea and a few specific steps, the answer can be a resounding "YES".