

EFFECTIVE PRACTICE: WHY BRANDING MATTERS

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Issue(s) Being Addressed:

Often associated with private enterprise, community-service and non-profit oriented people may lack experience with the concept of branding, and its professional value, on individual and group levels. Yet, knowledge about branding allows an MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA to control the image and information that first come to mind when others hear of or see your community service center, your college or university, and even you individually.

Overview:

Branding is about positive visibility, whether for you, or for an organization with which you are associated. A good brand conveys a complex message, simply and quickly. Actions by an individual or organization can build up a brand in positive ways, or damage a brand. MCC AmeriCorps* VISTAs should understand branding in order to be able to positively affect their own brand, and the brands of organizations with which they are associated.

Branding as a Key to Success:

A brand conveys information, reputation, and association. A good brand consists of a well-thought-out message, an expectation of excellence, and a positive feeling about an organization or individual.

An MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA should be aware of the value of their own brand, and of how their professional behavior can affect it. Do others understand their role at the institution? Do co-workers and community partners think of them as reliable, intelligent, and industrious? Are they generally well-liked and respected?

Simple techniques, such as preparing an elevator speech, and committing to being reliable and efficient, can help an MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA quickly develop a good brand.

Development offices at every college and university go to great lengths to build brands. It is helpful for an MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA to understand why the brand of their college or university is so crucial, and to understand how to work within that brand. Understanding what an institution is trying to convey, and to whom (e.g., prospective students, alumni, the community) can help a VISTA contextualize their role at the institution. A key question might be whether a college's brand incorporates any reference to service, or should. If there is a center for community service or service learning at the college, understanding their brand is important, as is understanding how to build and add to such a brand. If a center lacks such recognition that a brand could offer, perhaps building a brand could be helpful. Eastern Michigan's, "VISION," and the University of Michigan's, "Ginsberg Center," are two community service centers that have successfully built such brands. Students at each institution know more about the function and mission of each community service center, and have more positive feelings about the centers, than they would be likely to without branding.

Michigan Campus Compact, and AmeriCorps* VISTA also have important brands. It is crucial that people involved in every level of their organizations (e.g. MCC AmeriCorps* VISTAs) help increase the understanding of their missions and activities, and help to reinforce positive images about each organization. It is for this reason that the title, "MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA," is used. It is critical that AmeriCorps* VISTA and the Michigan Campus Compact build knowledge, good reputations, and positive associations in reference to their organizations.

It is worth discussing the concept of branding with administrators at your college or university. It also may be worth asking students what they think of when you mention the name of a community service center on campus (perhaps even with a survey). And it is surely a good idea for an MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA to understand that their professional actions and behavior build their individual brand. Indeed, understanding the role of branding as an MCC AmeriCorps* VISTA can be critical to your success.