



# Are You a Breed Apart?

10 strategies for defining your brand

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

IN THE DAYS OF THE “WILD, WILD WEST,” in cattle country, range wars and deadly shootings of cowboys were sometimes avoided by a practice called “branding.” Cattle owners could register a brand—often a square, letter, or cloverleaf design—with county or state authorities. Cowhands would “cut out” unbranded calves, cows, or bulls and drive or drag them toward a fire. A number of branding irons would be kept red-hot there in the flames and then stamped into the animals’ flanks, sides, or dewlaps. The resulting burn through hair and hide left a permanent scar in the animal’s flesh.

This torturous tradition was the oldtime ranch owner’s management method of communicating ownership and reducing the chance of cows being lost or stolen. When it came time to round up a herd, it also helped to identify ownership and divide the cattle into groups.

So what has changed in the modern concept and practice of branding? Owners and manufacturers still want their products branded for purposes of recognition—a Ford versus a Buick or a Cadillac.

Now, business owners understand that “brand equals culture—and vice versa,” as Level5 Strategy Group says in their promotional material and blogs. This group further affirms that “your brand is your business culture.” Speaking about the business that wants to secure a competitive advantage, blogger David Kincaid wrote, “To manage its culture is inextricably tied to its ability to score competitive dominance.”

AAHA board member Wendy Hauser, DVM, a veterinary business consultant, makes this point with the veterinary practices that she works with: “Brand equals culture’ refers to what makes you unique and special.”

### Why is branding important?

Your brand is your standard, what you want to be known for, and the promises you make regarding your services and your quality. It defines the kind of experience your clients can expect.

Whether it is a computer, shampoo, or a veterinary practice, businesses want to distinguish their brands from others, even when the goods are really quite indistinguishable. They each attempt to make their brand more prestigious, treasured, and socially acceptable in the minds of customers so customers will choose their products or services.

A great laboratory for analyzing branding is your television set. Notice how advertisement after advertisement will attempt to do two things: First, help customers distinguish a product or service from all the others that appear to be essentially the same by ascribing some uniqueness and added value to their products or service. Second, develop organizational identity and clarify the vision and mission for the benefit of both staff and the public.

## Market Your Accreditation



For tips on using your accreditation to market your practice, check out the AAHA Publicity Toolbox, [aaha.org/publicity](http://aaha.org/publicity).

The publicity toolbox includes lots of great resources, like the AAHA logo, the accreditation workbook, which includes ideas on marketing accreditation, Facebook banners and wall photos featuring the AAHA logo, and more.

The oldtime rancher never claimed that his brand of beef was better than another’s brand of beef. He was concerned only with communicating ownership. Modern marketers, by contrast, are creating and defining their uniqueness and then communicating their brand for purposes of marketing.

## 10 strategies you can use to define your brand

The process of defining your brand is important for a new practice that is crafting its mission and vision. It’s also relevant for the practice in the midst of change, such as during a merger or following a decision to offer a new service. It is also a process that can be useful to assess how well you are aligned with your existing mission and vision. Has your culture slipped away from its promises?

Whether defining, redefining, or aligning, you may wish to consider these strategies:

### 1. Understand your objectives.

In branding or rebranding, you want your clients and prospective clients to see your service as the only one that provides a solution to their problem(s). Ask yourself: What does your practice stand for? What do you want your practice to be known for? What do you want your clients to say about you? What do you want to tell your clients?

Debra Hamilton, Esq., provides a mediation service to resolve conflicts involving animals, and she knows what she wants her business to be known for: “the importance of living peacefully with pets.” She says, “My focal point for all our marketing, workshops, and keynote speeches is peaceful interactions and how to have them with respect to you and your counterparts.”

When Debbie Boone, BS, CCS, CVPM, of 2 Manage Vets Consulting, was working with the planning group tasked with the rebranding of Cobb Animal Clinic in Greensboro, N.C., the group determined that they offered two distinct services with two separate objectives. They wanted to brand each separately: They rebranded the medical veterinary hospital as “your pet’s *next* best friend” and rebranded their boarding kennels as Camp Cobb, “vacation without guilt.”

### 2. Gather your stakeholders.

You want the people who care about your business to be involved in the branding process. This certainly means your staff. You may also want to include loyal clients or specialists who are dependent upon your success. Depending on the size of this group, it may be wise to invite a subset of the group to do the initial thinking. In the end, however, you will need buy-in from all of your staff and, hopefully, your other stakeholders. If you’re



rebranding and preparing for change, it is important to understand resistance and to expect that longtime staffers will be more reluctant to make changes than even your most loyal clients will be.

### 3. Know your competition.

How are your services unique among the many others available in your area? Do you have a more qualified staff? Do you provide services and expertise that your competitors do not? Can you provide your services more quickly, safely, effectively, efficiently, or cheaply? Are you more conveniently located to your clients? Answer “yes” to any of the above and you have the start of a unique brand. If you want to redefine your brand, you can move on to discuss how you would *like* to be unique.

### 4. Know yourself.

You may have a unique practice. Kate Turner, owner of Happy Tails Bed & Biscuits, created a unique pet grooming and boarding business that she says she “made up as she went along,” because she loves dogs and knows what pets and their owners want. She has no employees and provides personal attention to all of her boarders herself, walking each dog four times per day, and providing supervised playtime. She maintains eight kennels located in a peaceful one-acre country setting in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. In addition, in special cases, she may board four more dogs in her house—allowing them to even sleep in her bed. Once she realized how unusual her services were, communicating her brand became easy. Word of mouth and Facebook have been all she has needed.

Hauser cites a practice in Seattle, Wash., that she says “knows who they are.” They are client-centered, they implement a true partnership between pet owners and the veterinarians, they are committed to educating their clients, and they believe in shared decision-making with their clients. Can your practice define its values this clearly? Do you know how well your actions are aligned with your values?



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Sometimes, especially when there have been staff changes, it is important to see if everyone is on board with the declared culture and brand. One strategy is the “culture audit” that Hauser has adapted from Kerry Plemmons, professor of the executive MBA program at the Daniels College of Business, University of Denver, and consultant to the veterinary industry. She uses three simple questions:

1. What three words would you use to describe the personality of your practice?
2. How do you celebrate your successes in this practice?
3. Share a story from your work that makes you feel good.

Discussing everyone’s answers can tell you a lot about how your staff members align with your cultural values.

As a result of a retreat led by Hauser for the staff of AAHA-accredited Pembroke Animal Hospital in Ontario, Canada, Anita Voldock, RVT, operation manager, wrote that the team was “able to develop a workplace culture that we all believe [in].”

### 5. Use your right brain.

An exercise that might get your group thinking about

how it views itself (or how it might like to be viewed) can involve pictures. Gather clippings from magazines that evoke different feelings, such as compassion, concern, hope, fear, joy, or success. Distribute them, and invite members of the group to choose one or more that they think describes your practice (or how they would like your practice to be viewed). Invite all members of the group to discuss their choices. You will begin to see if everyone is seeing the same thing or if some in the group have a new or different vision.

### 6. Change the shape of the battle.

That's the advice of Malcolm Gladwell in his 2013 book, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants*. He says that it's a losing proposition to play by the same rules as the established brand. It's instructive to consider the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas, which needed to promote itself against bigger, better-known hotel properties in its area. Instead of competing with them on their terms, the leaders at the Cosmopolitan Hotel created a campaign for the sophisticated traveler. Their brand was that of a smaller hotel providing a more intimate experience.

If you attempt to replicate the brand of another practice that is outspending you two to one, you will probably lose. Don't play their game. Gladwell suggests substituting speed and surprise for strength. Be a "David" brand by seeing opportunities early and gaining an edge by moving faster.

### 7. Know your clients.

How well do you know your clients? You can gather a lot of feedback from regular interactions and by reviewing the comments and questions posted to your social media accounts. You can also prepare a formal survey to find

out what your clients value and what they would like to see changed.

Cobb Animal Clinic based many of its decisions upon the realization that they were serving a higher-end clientele. For example, an appropriate addition for its clients was a pet limousine to fetch animals for hospital care, grooming, or Camp Cobb; the limousine was put into practice, adorned with the clinic logo and images of happy pets.

### 8. Look at other industries.

Marty Becker, DVM, branded as "America's Veterinarian," tells the story of insights he had when he first started his veterinary career. Having studied the 7-11 franchise in business school, he noted that they focused on convenient locations, convenient hours, and convenient one-stop shopping. He said, "That's for me. That's the

way I want to position my veterinary practice." So he established his practice along a commuter route. He set convenient hours, which he communicated with the slogan "Easy Pet Hours: 7 to 7, 7 days a week." And he provided everything from standard medical care to behavior training, all in one shop. It was the only such practice in town.

You might get inspiration from the plumbers. When you have a plumbing problem in your home that erupts into an emergency, what do you do? You might assume that any qualified plumber could fix the problem and stop the devastation. But this is an emergency, so you are more likely to call the firm that guarantees itself as "your emergency plumber, available 24/7."

Perhaps your veterinary practice is the only one in the area that is open 24/7. If so, you have a unique brand that



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will appeal to customers who need emergency pet care services. You have found your niche.

Similarly, a car towing service can come to your aid wherever you have an automobile breakdown. A slogan like “Call, and we’ll be there” provides great assurance. Can your veterinary service produce such mobile care in an emergency? If the answer is yes and you are the only veterinary practice that can provide that kind of service in your area, you have a brand that can be communicated, maybe with a slogan to the effect of “Pet care, we’ll be there, no matter where.”

An electrical service that “won’t leave you in the dark” may be just what you need, one that you can depend upon when the lights go out in your home or office. In the same way, a veterinary service that can bring “immediate relief” to suffering pets might be the branding that appeals to customers facing emergencies.

#### **9. Imagine a need, and create.**

That’s the advice of Becker. He urges practices to be future-oriented. Anticipate and imagine what might be next. He is hinting at this concept through his writings about the signs of anxiety in pets—avoiding eye contact, barking, cowering, lip curling, nipping, and so on. He recommends “taking the pet out of petrified” and “inoculating against fear and anxiety.”

Wasn’t this the genius of Steve Jobs? He imagined needs to communicate and compute in ways that we as a society had not conceived of, and he then created devices to meet those needs.

#### **10. Communicate your brand.**

What will you call your practice? How will you tell your clients and potential clients about what you are doing and how you are delivering your services? You have to choose the right words and colors to convey the meanings you intend. You’ll need to choose consistent font styles, images, and tag lines that people will remember.

This was what the 87-year-old Western Veterinary Conference did when it rebranded itself as WVC. No longer organized for a single annual conference, the “new” WVC adopted a new mission to add a year-round academy of continuing education as well as a comprehensive full-day education experience to be offered at a variety

of locations—and all this was to be communicated under one URL, *WVC.org*.

Carin Giovanni, WVC’s marketing director, said that the rebranding process began with “discovery sessions,” which they held with their board. Staff then managed the execution of the new direction. They developed a new tag line for the website: “WVC, your year-round resource for lifelong continuing education.” Working with a creative agency, they chose visuals that would communicate their new direction—a modern logo, a new website design, and appropriate images, all conveying a professional look and feel.

Veterinary practices with an AAHA accreditation or AAFP feline friendly certification, have an opportunity to communicate their co-brand. By boldly displaying the certification logo, you are telling your clients a lot about your standards.

This brings us back to the story of the branding iron—the image that marked the cow as property of the owner and communicated that fact. It’s the story of Apple, the company that has made a simple image stand for not just a computer, but for innovation, design, and quality.

Jed Schaible, VMD, MBA, CVPM, is a marketing consultant with veterinary consumer brands. To identify the appropriate words and images for a brand, he follows a scientific approach. He understands the fine points of search engine optimization (SEO) and uses software to analyze online consumer behavior. A keyword search enables him to determine where terms (such as “veterinary clinic” or “animal hospital”) appear in web searches.

When a veterinary practice is ready to communicate its name and message, Schaible typically provides multiple designs that propose variations on a logo, words, font style and size, a badge, colors, and images. Then he invites the owners to rate them. Does the contemporary look seem more appropriate than the traditional? Does the practice want a progressive feel or an “oldtime” one? If you are communicating the services of an emergency clinic, your look and feel will be different from that of the neighborhood “mom-and-pop” clinic. Reviewing choices can be an enjoyable exercise. You can even present different images or words and invite feedback from your Facebook friends.



The tag line is also a useful communication tool. That's the short message that can be repeated and repeated until, as Becker says, it creates familiarity and "occupies real estate in the mind." His advice: Keep it to seven words or less; busy people have little time to process your message. Brandom Gaille, a consultant in business Internet marketing, has posted 255 examples of catchy health care slogans and taglines, like "Always caring. Always here." "Bringing excellence home." "Care you can believe in." "Chosen for excellence." Reviewing their list and brainstorming your own can help you put words to your brand.

Boone had the good fortune of working with Harry Gianaris, known for creating the tag line, "With a name like Smuckers, it has to be good." She said his most important advice was "be consistent." Whether it is the color, the tag line, papers handed to clients, or the shape of the letters (such as the animal faces inside the "O" in "Cobb"), keep it the same—everywhere.

### Live the brand

Clearly, defining your brand or redefining it can take time away from other work. It will pay off, however, in getting everyone on track and enabling you to communicate clearly to your market. Remember that your brand is more than your visuals, slogans, or colors. As Becker says, do not end up with "slogans on walls but not in the halls." Live your brand. Demonstrate your values every day. Let your culture shine. ✖



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