

Branding and Recruitment: A Primer for Residency Program Leadership

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Residency programs are complex entities with significant diversity in mission, culture, and structure. During the application process, applicants assess these features to determine whether the given program would be a good fit for them. In some specialties, students' self-assessment of program-specific fit is included in personal statements.¹ Without deliberate thought and action on behalf of program leadership, applicants may miss (or misinterpret) important features of a program, resulting in a less precise judgment of fit. Branding, a construct for describing and developing mental associations that influence behavior,² may be used by programs to clearly define and effectively communicate their unique features and identity to applicants.

Branding may seem foreign to the domain of resident recruitment, but the focus on program aims as part of the self-study process outlined by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) has significant overlap with branding, including the consideration of how a program differentiates itself from others.³ While this area has not been studied empirically, use of branding principles when completing the interrelated activities of self-study and residency recruitment may facilitate improvement in both areas.

In this perspective, we outline the operational elements of branding as adapted from a conceptual framework developed by Botti,⁴ provide a rationale for using these concepts in recruitment, and offer advice for initial steps in residency program branding.

Branding Concepts

What Is a Brand?

Kapferer defined a brand as "a sign or set of signs certifying the origin of a product or service and differentiating it from the competition."² While a brand is often thought of as simply an entity's reputation, there are many other factors at play. An awareness and understanding of these factors allow

leaders to have greater control in building and maintaining their brand.

There are 5 key elements of branding applicable to residency program recruitment: (1) brand identity; (2) brand image; (3) brand positioning; (4) brand experience; and (5) brand auditing.⁴ Each element is described below and further characterized in the **FIGURE** and the **TABLE**. Similar to the importance of alignment across elements of curriculum design (eg, goals and objectives, educational strategies, assessments),⁵ alignment between the 5 elements of branding is essential to successful branding.

Brand Identity

Brand identity is a construct that incorporates an organization's mission, vision, and values. Applied to a residency program, brand identity is the set of associations that defines a program, differentiates it from others in the specialty, and makes it relevant to specific target groups. Leadership is responsible for reflecting on these constructs and incorporating pertinent concepts (eg, history, current stakeholders and target groups, goals) to develop a strong identity. Brand identity may also incorporate external associations, such as geography, institutional affiliations, and the local community. Establishing a clear identity is the most important step in brand development because it will be used to guide all other branding efforts.

Brand Image

Brand image is the external counterpart to brand identity. Instead of being developed by leadership, brand image is the external perception of the organization (eg, in the case of residency recruitment, what associations are elicited in the minds of applicants when they think about the program). This perception may be influenced by many factors, including messaging from the program, messaging among external parties, or circumstantial factors.

Brand image may be independent of product experience. For example, consumers who have never worn Nike shoes may have opinions about the brand.

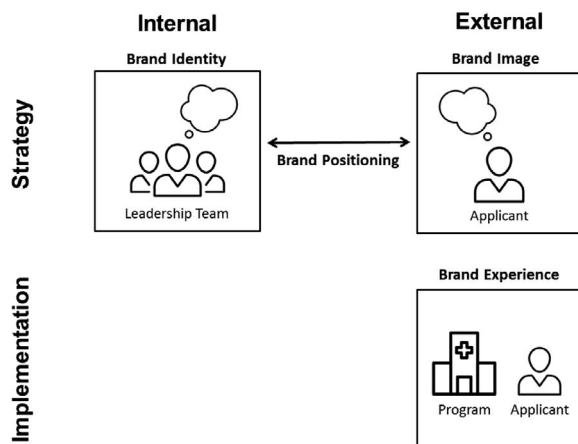


FIGURE
Branding Conceptual Framework (adapted from Botti⁴)

Residency applicants may also hold beliefs about training programs with which they have had no direct experience. Brand image may also be independent of brand identity, and a program may have an image that is not intended by its leaders. For example, an online message board may describe a program's service versus education balance in a way that is far from the view and intention of program leadership.

Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is the deliberate action of leadership to align the views of outside stakeholders with those of local leadership. This process typically "focuses on the product itself,"² in contrast to the organization as a whole and may involve drawing comparisons with other products to emphasize the strengths of the given product. For example, a residency program may highlight rotations with underserved populations in an attempt to align applicants' impressions (ie, brand image) with an organizational identity that values service to disadvantaged communities. Brand positioning ensures the alignment between brand identity and brand image.

Brand Experience

Brand experience, described in the framework of Brakus et al, includes the sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral impressions of a consumer when using a product or service.⁶ For residency programs, product experiences entail visiting students on rotations, applicants interviewing for a position, and residents recruited into the program. Consideration and attendance to each of these factors during the recruitment process will optimize the experience for applicants and matriculants.

Brand Auditing

Brand auditing is the process of reviewing each aspect of a brand and identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Brand auditing can be thought of as being similar to curriculum evaluation. Once areas for improvement and threats have been identified, actions can be taken to strengthen alignment among elements.

Why Brand?

The benefits of branding extend far beyond identifying strengths and creating messages around them. A strong brand can shape culture, unify efforts, and align internal and external stakeholders. Through deliberate discussion of the program history and aspirations in the identity development process, a meaningful vision and mission can emerge that truly resonates with faculty and residents. This shared mental model and sense of purpose can positively affect internal and external stakeholders. Branding also can help focus decision-making (eg, does the proposed change strengthen our program's brand?).

In addition, use of a structured framework can help identify gaps in branding efforts. Without critical review, a program with a strong identity may fail to appreciate its brand image—how the program is perceived by an external audience. Another program with good brand positioning may not provide a positive brand experience, by failing to ensure applicants are, for example, physically comfortable (sensory), inspired by opportunities (affective), cognitively engaged (intellectual), and motivated to act (behavioral).

The implications of branding are far-reaching; while the majority of examples provided are in the context of residency recruitment, any individual with relevant resources or influence is an important consumer of the residency program's brand. Examples include alumni who may donate money or time, faculty members who choose their level of engagement, and hospital leaders who make resource allocation decisions. A strong organizational identity that is shared by others and associated with positive experiences can have a positive effect far beyond recruitment.

Getting Started

The first step in residency program branding is performing a brand audit. After an honest assessment of each brand aspect outlined above, ensure the brand identity is appropriate and clear. This identity should then be shared with all representatives of the brand using clear and concise language that is easily reproducible when individuals are referencing the

TABLE

Graduate Medical Education Examples of Branding Elements

Branding Element	Example Problem	Example Intervention
Brand identity	Faculty interviewers have inconsistent descriptions of the program's mission that seem influenced by their areas of expertise (eg, researchers emphasizing the training of scholars, advocacy-oriented faculty emphasizing the training of policy leaders).	The program director arranges a meeting of representative stakeholders to identify a clear program identity including mission and vision statements. Once developed, a message detailing the program's identity (including mission and vision statements) is sent to the faculty and residents and emphasized periodically.
Brand image	A description of the residency program on a popular online message board is 10 y old and laments antiquated program issues. Applicants are noted to ask questions that suggest they still hold these antiquated beliefs.	See "brand positioning" below.
Brand positioning	See "brand image" above.	The program director uses deliberate messaging to address the misperception depicted on the message board. Written materials for applicants (eg, program website, handouts) are updated to address discordant perceptions. Faculty and residents participating in interview days are informed about the misperception and preferred messaging. Finally, the program director includes language in statements to applicants to align perceptions with the current program identity.
Brand experience	The majority of residents staffing the interview day are on a difficult rotation and frequently post overnight when interacting with applicants. The post-Match survey reveals several negative comments regarding residents perceived as "tired" and "beat-down."	Concerns about this aspect of the applicant experience is shared with the residents. In addition, for residents attending interview activities, the program director strategically arranges the schedule to protect as many as possible from overnight duties.
Brand auditing	A new program director has been hired after a national search. While the new director has a brand image associated with the program and institution, she is largely unaware of previous internal perceptions and messaging.	The new program director holds a meeting with representative stakeholders (eg, assistant program directors, core faculty, department chair, and residents) to discuss each element of the program's brand. This process may be initiated and/or revisited in the annual program review.

program. Clarity and simplicity of messages will help with consistency in delivery. Following establishment and dissemination of brand identity, any lack of alignment between branding elements should be assessed and addressed.

Additional recommendations include:

- Write unifying mission and vision statements^{7,8}
- Highlight program strengths
- Stay positive in messaging; negative advertising is unprofessional
- Audit the brand regularly
- Embrace the branding process as one that builds morale for the program; an authentic brand makes stakeholders proud, engaged, and connected.

Conclusion

Strong branding can unify a residency program and celebrate its distinctiveness from others in the same specialty. Using this framework, program leaders can apply branding principles to clarify and communicate the program's uniqueness and relevance.

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