

BRAND MAKEOVER

How Avant Ministries Solved Its Identity Crisis

By David J. Baseler

Imagine you're a 112-year-old mission organization whose board has just revitalized its purpose and brought in a new president. Your mission name no longer fits in today's world and it's so long it has become shortened to just initials. Your logomark is "dated" and doesn't communicate effectively. So, what should you do?

That's the situation Gospel Missionary Union faced recently. Its name, eight syllables long, was hard to use so it had unconsciously been shortened to "GMU." Even its logomark showed just the initials.

But few understood what it meant, and the number of missionary recruits was steadily declining. Donors were supporting individual missionaries without understanding the organization that was sending them.

The board had refocused itself as a Policy Governance® board, bringing in Paul Nyquist as president, and giving him a clear vision of the main goal—to plant churches—but not telling him how to reach that goal. After much prayer and deliberation, Nyquist and his team determined they had to speed up the process of church planting, coining the phrase "short-cycle church planting" to describe their new methodology.

The challenge was how to infuse an old organization with this new purpose. The communications team was charged with this responsibility and decided to seek outside help. They learned I had helped several other Christian organizations with these same issues.

While not a formal "consultant," I had several decades of experience in corporate marketing and communications, most recently with ServiceMaster. Although recently retired from corporate life and serving as a full-time volunteer at Hickory Cove Bible Camp in North Carolina, I was also counseling with other groups on name and identity changes.

First Things First

Originally, Dennis Meola, the ministry's director of communications, asked for help with a new slogan as they considered redesigning their logo. I felt they needed more than that.

First they needed help understanding some branding issues.

Branding involves all aspects of marketing, including positioning, image and recognition. Brad Cathey, who runs a branding agency in Wheaton, Ill., says it like this: "Branding is all about

what the public thinks of you. It used to be that organizations were only concerned about their visual identity. But their equity is not in their identity; it's in their brand. They can change their name, logo and website, but their brand is still intact. I will support them because of their brand—all they offer and how they offer it—and not just their logo. Brand is the person; identity is the clothes the person wears."

Not every organization is ready for a complete brand makeover. At Gospel Missionary Union, we started by introducing some elements of branding, but concentrated mostly



on the “clothes” more than the “person.” We reviewed the current mission statement and values.

We also crafted a vision statement, and followed up with a punchy positioning statement to quickly interest constituents in the goals of the mission. This statement—“Short-Cycle Solutions for a Lost World”—became the focal point of our future communication efforts.

What’s in a Name?

The plan was then to begin the major task of designing and implementing a new identity—the visual part of branding. But there was still something both-

organization is in trouble. Gospel Missionary Union had new “Ends” statements (philosophy change), a new president (management change), and was experiencing a decline in new missionaries joining the organization (possibly a sign of “trouble”). This was clearly time for a change!

The details of the process to come up with a new name, a new logomark, and a whole new visual identity are too lengthy for the scope of this article. But a summary is in order. We immediately began to design a new logomark—even though we didn’t have a new name yet. The strength of the positioning statement provided a basis for design.

BRAND IS THE PERSON; IDENTITY IS THE CLOTHES THE PERSON WEARS.

ering me. As our initial meeting was drawing to a close, I asked the group, “How does your present name fit with all this new direction?” After a stunned pause, President Nyquist leaned forward across the table and simply said, “It doesn’t!”

This opened a whole new avenue of discussion and moved us closer toward the larger concept of branding. We asked ourselves two questions: “What’s wrong with the old name?” and “Is this the right time to change the name?”

Changing a name that had stood for so long was not a step to be taken lightly. But, as we considered the first question, we realized the old name was no longer appropriate. There were several reasons, as outlined by President Nyquist (see sidebar).

Time for a Change

The second question dealt with timing. I believe there are only three reasons for an organization to change its name or identity: a change in philosophy, a change in management, or the

After choosing a graphics designer, and with some possible designs in hand, we set up a special meeting with a cross-section of mission members (management, staff, missionaries and board members) to spend a whole day going through the process of selecting a new name.

I took the group through the scriptural basis for names, questions to ask when choosing a name, and the qualities of a “perfect” name. Then we went through a naming exercise—a lengthy process requiring a great deal of concentration by all participants.

A New Identity

I believe that, even though we all spend a great amount of time in the process, a new name for a Christian organization ultimately comes from God. He knows what the name should be. We just need to be in a spiritual position to be able to recognize the mind of the Lord.

That happened at Gospel Missionary Union—even though it took many

hours of presentations, discussions, exercises, and especially prayer. In the end, though, the Lord provided the name: Avant Ministries.

Once the name was chosen, the communications staff began working overtime to finalize a logomark design and prepare all the guidelines for its use. They held countless meetings to determine the appropriate uses of the logomark, colors and typefaces, and the design of all the graphic elements—stationery, literature, forms, advertising, the Internet, wearables, signage and giveaways.

The leadership team appointed an identity coordinator, Vicky Slaybaugh, whose job is to make sure all identity elements are used correctly, and fix those that don’t conform to the standards. They also established a committee to review requests for exceptions to the guidelines.

When everything was ready, they introduced their new name and identity as the major event it is. The most critical element of the introduction was a special name announcement newsletter sent to all constituents. It explained the reasons for changing the name, the process of the change, and the design features of the logomark. The FAQ approach was used to answer every conceivable question. This gave all constituents an inside look at what was going on, so they felt they were “part of the team.”

What are the results? A year after the change, Avant Ministries has maintained its strong donor base and has almost doubled the number of new missionaries joining the organization. Nearly all its documents throughout the world carry the new logomark and positioning statement. And most importantly, “short-cycle church planting” is becoming a reality in areas where new teams are being used by God to win people to Christ faster than ever before.

Basic Principles

Through the entire process of the name and identity change, the communication team never lost sight of the following principles:

■ **Communicate clearly.** Whenever a change of this magnitude is made by any organization, you must tell all con-

stituents why the change is being made, how it will benefit them and what specifically will change. You must answer every question. Every person needs to receive enough information to ensure they will accept and be part of promoting the change.

■ **Know where you're going.** Before tackling a new name or logomark change, your organization needs a clear mission and vision statement, and a clear understanding of its core values. It has been well said, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there."

■ **Commit to consistency.** We recognize each other as individuals because we have a certain "look" about us that does-

n't often change. If we go through a "makeover," even our close friends may not recognize us. An organization's "face" is its logomark and how it's used. You must consistently use the design, the colors and the typefaces selected to establish a consistent brand image. Identity, by definition, is "being the same in all qualities under consideration."

■ **Lead by example.** The commitment to identity starts with the members of the board, who must be totally supportive. Senior management has to make its implementation and enforcement a top priority.

■ **Seek expert help.** Anyone can come up with a list of new names. Anyone can design a new logomark. Organizations

which try to take shortcuts usually end up spending more money in the long run, and never get an effective image. Identity experts, marketing agencies and graphic designers have been trained to provide the best solutions in the quickest time and at the most effective cost.

■ **Consider the costs.** Logomark design, design of the various identity elements, and media production all cost money. One of the biggest mistakes any organization can make is to attempt to make changes of this magnitude without recognizing the cost.

■ **Watch out for "thieves."** In today's world of instant communication, your new identity can be "stolen" before you even introduce it. If you're selecting a

"WHY DID WE CHANGE OUR NAME?"

By Paul Nyquist

For more than one hundred of our 112-year history, our organization had the same name—Gospel Missionary Union. Hundreds, even thousands, of missionaries had served faithfully under that banner. So why did we change our name? And why now?

Aware of the shockwave a name change sends through an organization, two compelling reasons moved us forward.

■ **Dramatic changes in the organization.** A new leadership team was installed with a majority of its members coming from the outside. A new "Ends" statement¹ was developed by the board of directors, bringing a fresh alignment and focus to the ministry. A new, innovative approach to church planting emerged from the research of the leadership team that was a significant departure from traditional methods. A new set of values cascaded through the organization, honoring member care, strategic thinking, innovation and a focus on results.

Over the course of a couple of years, we realized a new organization had emerged. In fact, we referred to it as the "new GMU."

■ **Increasing difficulty with our name.** Our old name, while cherished, presented growing problems for us. The first two words, "Gospel" and "Missionary," would not be welcome in Islamic or "creative access" countries. The last word, "Union," was badly dated and tended to remind people of a labor union and not an association of missionaries. Furthermore, our name was similar enough to a rescue mission that the two ministries were often confused by the public.

When we set out to design a new logo, the growing tension

finally convinced us we needed more than a new logo; we needed a new name. We needed a name that communicated the new reality and new vision of this historic organization.

Moving Ahead

It has now been a year since our new name was officially announced. In that year, the new banner of Avant Ministries has allowed us to move strategically forward both internally and externally.

■ **Internal progress—organizational alignment.** A new name communicates a powerful message to everyone in the organization. It proclaims a new era has indeed emerged, intensifying the need to align around the new vision.

■ **External progress—recruitment of personnel.** A new name raises questions and opens doors. When the questions are answered correctly, we have found it produces increased interest in our organization.

As you might surmise, a name change is not without problems. But having navigated through those shark-filled waters, we wonder now why we didn't do this a long time ago.

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¹ Among the things a Policy Governance® board must figure out, according to John Carver's method of board governance, are its "ends" (e.g. results, impact, goals or outcomes expected).

new name, be sure only a carefully chosen few people know about it until you've legally protected it and secured the appropriate website domain name(s).

■ **Introduce with a bang.** People need to be impressed. The best way is to introduce your new name and logomark with every element in place. Hold a special luncheon or media conference to unveil the logomark. Make the introduction on a significant date, like an important anniversary or milestone. At Avant Ministries, everyone arrived at headquarters to see all the old signs in place. During the identity announcement meeting, workers replaced old signs with the new logomark. When people left the building, the new signs reinforced what they had just been told.

■ **Plan and prepare.** Consideration of either a new name or a new visual identity system doesn't happen overnight. Preparation of all new material may take several months. When planning your change, think about the process of letting old material run out, so you don't have to throw it away when you introduce the new material.

■ **Don't wait to get started.** Assuming you need to make some

changes, the longer you wait, the harder it will be. The negative effects of an improper name and an outdated logomark are causing increasing damage to your organization's mission and prestige every day.

The visual identity part of branding is a simple concept. It says people are most comfortable with what they know. They will only accept our message if they know us. And they will only get to know us and have a positive image of us if we tell them the same thing in the same way over and over again.

Avant Ministries has recognized this concept and is using it effectively every day to glorify God through planting and developing churches among the unreached peoples of the world.

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