

Time for Your Nonprofit to Change its Name?

There are many reasons for nonprofit organizations to change their name. Whether out of opportunity and the desire to express the mission better and attract new donors, or out of necessity stemming from external factors. This article describes 15 reasons that prompt nonprofits to change their name.

- 1. Length is too long.** It's common for nonprofits to have Descriptive Names. But these tend to be long and are often referred to by their initials. The abbreviation loses the meaning for those not familiar with the organization and undermines the concept of having a Descriptive Name to begin with.
- 2. Services have changed.** Faced with changing needs or demands by their audience or funders, many organiza-



tions evolve by evolving their services or scope beyond their original mission. At some point, the name no longer represents what the organization does, and mismatch becomes too great enough to prompt the new name.

- 3. Geographic area no longer applies.** When an organization expands beyond the geographic scope specified in its name, or is planning on offering services beyond that area, a name change may be needed.
- 4. Outdated terms are used.** Since society's sensibilities and language changes over time, words like negro, Indian, retarded, and geriatric can be politically incorrect, have negative connotations, or simply no longer be effective. United Negro College Fund is now UNCF, what was the Association of Retarded Citizens is now The Arc.
- 5. The name no longer works.** In some case the organization's name no longer reflects what the organization does or is inaccurate in some way, or conveys a misperception about the organization. Real Estate Advisory and Development Services (READS) is a nonprofit organization serving other nonprofits, but its name made it seem like a business. To address this, they took the unusual tact of using their tagline, Build with Purpose, as their organizational name, and adopted a new tagline, "Real Estate for Social Change."
- 6. No one refers to the actual name.** Organizations such as the YMCA (which used to stand for Young Men's Christian Association), and the JCC (Jewish Community Center), are referred to informally by their members as "the

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Y," and "the J," respectively. Recently, the YMCA (which is a distinct organization from the YWCA, by the way) is taking advantage of that and referring to itself as "the Y," introducing a new logo, which has the small letters YMCA on the side of a large Y.

7. The name is embarrassing.

When the Child Development Center was first established 30 years ago, it was among the first special education facilities in New Jersey. Now, with hundreds of competitors, the name is both inaccurate, since it is an accredited school, not a center, and embarrassing for teenager students who would refer to the school as CDC. The name Westbridge Academy instills pride and fits into the students' and parents' expectations.

8. Confusion with other organizations.

With the proliferation of nonprofits over the past several decades, there are now nearly 1 million nonprofits in the United States making it confusing for the public to distinguish between groups (and businesses) with similar missions, messages or names. Where once, a local charity was the only one of its kind, it must now compete with many other groups with similar missions, and a distinctive name can help it stand out.

9. Program is more prominent than the organization.

For some organizations, their signature programs are more well-known than the parent organization. This might represent a lost opportunity for funding or increasing participation in the organization's other programs. That was the case for the Council on the Environment of New York, the group behind New York's noted Greenmarkets. This prompted them to change their name to GrowNYC. When the Lance Armstrong Foundation's yellow wristband reading Livestrong gained

massive recognition, the organization's name was changed to the Livestrong Foundation.

10. Inconsistent use of the name.

In some cases, organizations have an official name but use it inconsistently or interchanged with other elements. For example, a public radio station sometimes uses its call letters as part of its name, sometimes identifies itself as a public radio station, and uses different taglines to convey different aspects of its message. Developing a single use of the name, or new name, can address these issues.

11. To remove the religious connotations.

As organizations once founded on religious principles attempt to appeal to wider audiences for funding, some are changing their names to remove or minimize the religious aspects. Another reason that Christian Children's Fund had in changing its name to ChildFund International, was the ability to work in Muslim countries.

12. To signal change. Organizations that want to signal a new direction for the organization, choose to change their name. When the Solomon Schechter Day School Association wanted to proactively signal a new brand positioning for the Jewish Conservative Day School movement, they changed their name to Schechter Day School Network and introduced the tagline: Engage the world.

13. To hide from malfeasance. After advocacy organization ACORN was embroiled in a scandal, the negative ramifications rained down hard. Several of the organization's statewide chapters renamed themselves to distance themselves from the problem. Other organizations, such as the American Red Cross, and the United Way, have stronger brands, allowing them to overcome scandals.

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- 14. Legal action.** Whether perceived, threatened, or actual, legal action from another entity claiming naming infringement or other violations may prompt an organization to change its name.
- 15. A merger.** When two or more organizations form one entity, sometimes one organization's name is adopted, and sometimes a new name is developed, often a combination of the two names.

- 16. Donor requirements.** A large donation, request from a funder, or special requirement or bequest may prompt the organization to incorporate the donor's name into the organizational, program or facility name.

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Based on our experience with organizations looking to change their names, this is our list of reasons that we have seen. If your organization needs to change its name for another reason, please let me know, and I'll add it to this list.

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