



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Introduction

This resource brief presents key considerations for branding your reentry program. A *brand* encompasses the elements or features of your program's identity that distinguish it from other programs. Regardless of whether your agency or organization has a marketing and communications team, you can create an attractive brand that appeals to the people you serve as well as to those whom you would like to support your program.

Branding increases awareness of your reentry program across different audiences, including prospective or current program participants, their communities, and the general public; legal system actors, who may refer participants to your program; other program partners; and current and prospective program funders. A brand also clearly communicates the work that the program supports and the population it serves. It is reflected in your program's name, mission, vision, values, logo and design, content, and client experience.

Your program has a brand—and associated reputation—whether or not you intentionally created it. But is your brand consistent? Is it telling the kind of story about your program that you want it to?

An intentionally designed reentry program brand...

- Builds a strong emotional connection with target audiences
- Promotes loyalty and trust
- Establishes your organization or agency's credibility as a reentry service provider
- Motivates clients to participate in your program
- Persuades funders to invest in your program
- Inspires potential partners (agencies and community-based providers) to work with you

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Start Early, If Possible, and Keep Going

It is important to think intentionally about your program's brand early in its implementation. People will develop perceptions of your program's identity as soon as they learn about its existence through word of mouth, publicity, or other informational sources. By developing your program's brand early, you have a greater chance of guiding the perceived identity of the program that you want your audiences to have. At the same time, be careful not to rush development so that you avoid an unnecessary rebrand. If you did not start early, do not worry. Better late than never.

Using a consistent brand for your program continuously reinforces the public's perception or sentiment about the program and sets your services apart from other programs offering similar services to the target clientele. It communicates your program's values and the issues you care about to your target audiences.

Elements of Your Reentry Program Brand

Your brand will consist of several elements.

Values

Consider your program's **values**—your organization's core beliefs that guide your team's attitudes, behaviors, and purpose. If your program does not have a larger set of values already articulated, brainstorm in collaboration with people at all levels of the organization. Create a list or statement of core values, with short definitions for each one, that will help inform all the other elements of your brand.

► Example

The MBI Research Institute Reentry Wellness Program's values include:

- Professionalism
- Encouragement
- Community
- Individuality
- Compassion
- Well-being

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Mission

Your reentry program also needs a strong **mission** statement. This statement should be brief (10–30 words); reflective of your program values; and easily understood by prospective clients, funders, volunteers, and employees. Ask yourselves: What is your current mission? What do you do and why do you do it? Carefully consider language choice. Use humanizing word choices (e.g., *formerly incarcerated person* instead of “offender,” *person with a substance use disorder* instead of “addict”).

► Examples

- MBI Reentry Wellness Program: Meeting the needs of returning citizens by ensuring access to behavioral health and social services for successful community reentry and to reduce the recidivism rate in the District of Columbia.
- Tech2Connect: Addressing treatment barriers with technology specifically tailored to a client’s needs to reduce recidivism and increase public safety.

Vision

You will also want to establish your program’s **vision**, which is different from a mission statement. This statement is a short, one-sentence description of the impact you are trying to have on your community. It should be shaped by your program’s values and mission statements. For a vision statement, ask yourselves: What do you want to achieve with your program in the future? In 5 years? 10 years? 15 years?

► Examples

- Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota: All people in South Dakota will be healthy, safe, and accepted.
- Erie County Jails New Dawn Initiative: Create a successful and healthy future in Erie County.

Name

A reentry program’s **name** is one of the most crucial elements in branding because it represents the identity of the program in consumers’ eyes. Although other branding elements can be subject to modification, the program name is fixed unless your team decides to rebrand your program. Your program name should be clear (e.g., easy to spell and pronounce) and should reflect your values and larger brand identity. It should be unique to avoid confusion with other programs or businesses and to make registering your website domain name and social media handles easier.

► Examples

- Safer Foundation’s Achieving Change Together (ACT)
- Iowa Department of Corrections Second Judicial District’s Tech2Connect

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Logo

Your reentry program's **logo** represents the face of your brand and is essentially the embodiment of its name. The logo should be related to your program and should shape how participants perceive your program. It should be simple, unique, and consistently presented to target audiences in all products and communications. In the logo, you may choose to feature a visual representation of...

- The name
- The initials
- A symbol that represents the program or overarching agency or organization
- Some combination of these

Carefully consider the design of your logo, ensuring that the typeface and color schemes match your brand identity and are unique. The logo should be clear, readable, capable of being scaled up in size, accessible, and understandable. One reason scalability is important is so that your logo looks good and is easy to identify and read whether it's a Twitter profile picture or a sign posted outside your office building.

► Examples



Putting It All Together

Importantly, your program brand will not be built in a day; however, it is important to develop all these brand components at some point. After you develop your branding elements, consider how you will connect your program's brand to any content you create and put out in the world (e.g., website, blog posts, newsletters, flyers, social media posts).

- Use your unique program name to create your website and social media handles. Consistency in their use helps people find your content and strengthens your brand.
- Use your brand elements (logo, colors, etc.) consistently across your web presence.
- Share your mission, values, and vision publicly to help people understand what you do, why you do it, where your program is going, and how they can contribute to your program mission if they share your values and vision (e.g., volunteer, donate, fund).

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Helpful Tips for Branding

Below are some tips for building, launching (or relaunching), and sustaining your reentry program brand. These ideas can improve your brand and better position your program for future funding opportunities.

Build on What You Have

If your reentry program is a part of a larger organization (e.g., a law enforcement agency, a nonprofit organization with other programs), use that brand as a starting point. This approach is likely easier and more affordable in both money and time than creating your brand from scratch.

If you do not have a parent organization, you will need to be resourceful. If you have marketing or communications leaders on staff, work closely with them to establish your brand. If not, consider looking outside your organization for assistance. For example, a local college or university may be willing to provide student-led assistance at no cost.

Identify Your Market Niche

When branding, it can be helpful to identify the market niche for your reentry program—that is, to understand the community’s need for your program. Ask yourselves what your reentry program is doing differently from other reentry service providers in your area. Consider these and other specific questions:

- Are you the only program serving this population in your geographic area (e.g., a specific county or municipality)?
- Are your participants voluntary, court mandated, or a mix of the two? What is motivating their use of your program?
- Are you the only program providing a *specific type of services* for the reentry population in your area (e.g., housing support, a specific type of job skills training, restorative justice circles)? Are you the only program providing reentry services to a *specific population* (e.g., youth and young adults, tribal members, historically marginalized people, non-native speakers of English)?
- If other reentry programs exist in your area, what are you doing differently? Do you have a distinct service provision or case management model? Do you incorporate people with lived experience? What about your mission, staffing, or resources is unique?
- What would the people you serve do if your program did not exist? What gaps would exist without your services?

Advice From the Field: Collaboration With Colleges and Universities


Working with a communications, marketing, or computer science department at a local college or university is one cost-effective way to collaborate with an outside organization to improve your branding materials, such as developing a logo or redesigning your website. Here are some important considerations in creating a successful student volunteer partnership:

- Explore options to incentivize high-quality student work. Consider whether the volunteer work can be structured in a way to provide the student with academic credit, work-study compensation, or some other benefit.
- Ensure that any volunteers have sufficient oversight of their work. It is essential to a successful collaboration to have a professor, volunteer coordinator, or other staffer supervising the students. This supervisor should have the bandwidth to provide constructive feedback to the students as they work and to ensure that important deadlines are met.
- Develop a memorandum of understanding to document your joint understanding of everyone’s respective responsibilities and expectations.

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

The answers to these questions reveal your program’s market niche. Whether your program is the only reentry service provider in your region or is one of several but is, for example, the only one that offers peer support for co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, figure out what makes your program stand apart. Use that uniqueness to help market your program to funders, gain buy-in from prospective participants, and establish beneficial connections with other programs in your area.

► Example

The [Rhode Island Reentry Alliance](#) * evolved from a partnership of community-based organizations in Providence, RI: the Center for Health and Justice Transformation, Amos House, the Nonviolence Institute, and the Reentry Campus Program. Each of these organizations has its own market niche—unique services that it provides to its target population. Knowing their market niches allows these organizations to collaborate and work together to support the same clients without duplicating services. Individually, each organization is unlikely to be focused on, or expert in, every area in which a returning individual may need assistance; working together, they can provide considerably more support. The Alliance’s service areas include higher education, job training, free meals, support obtaining vital documents and public benefits, nonviolence education, and peer mentoring, to name a few.

*Formerly the Rhode Island Reentry Collaborative

Communicate Expertise

Communicating expertise in reentry is one way to build credibility and trust for your program, strengthen your brand, and better position your organization for funding applications.

- Staff (and possibly volunteers) could earn certifications, awards, or other credentials in the reentry space or another field relevant to your program (e.g., substance use or mental health treatment).
- You might also create public-facing content that demonstrates your knowledge—like blog posts, social media posts, or op-eds.

Becoming a visible resource for information on the focus of your reentry program will help encourage funders to invest in your program.

► Example

Tech2Connect, a program of the Second Judicial District of Indiana, won a 2022 Government Experience Award from the Center for Digital Government. As a result, leaders from the program have been consulted as experts on multiple projects.

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

Solicit and Incorporate Feedback From Participants

Solicit—and thoughtfully consider how to incorporate—feedback from your participants. Ask your current and prospective participants if your program’s brand appeals to them:

- Do your logo, colors, and other graphic elements resonate with participants, or, from participants’ perspectives, are there unanticipated or undesirable connotations?
- Do your recruitment materials use clear and accessible language, or do they use industry jargon or stigmatizing words?
- Is it easy for participants to find the information they need about accessing your program services—like hours of operation, phone numbers, and procedures for scheduling and rescheduling appointments?

Remember, materials that are easy to understand and that use thoughtful language can increase buy-in from program participants and improve your program’s image.

Also, consider the role that success stories can play in bolstering your brand image. Ask successful former participants if they are willing to have their stories spotlighted in your newsletter, in your brochures, on your website, or in other public-facing media your program produces.

- Be mindful of using photos, names, and other identifying information. Your program benefits from sharing these humanizing narratives about the positive outcomes it facilitates, but make sure to gain informed consent and to respect people’s confidentiality and desire for anonymity.
- For additional resources on storytelling and using it to support your program’s sustainability, see the Additional Resources section at the end of this brief.

Solicit and Incorporate Feedback From Internal and External Partners

External partners and community members—including courts and community corrections officers, other government officials, community-based organizations, and even journalists—can provide valuable feedback to promote your reentry program. Your program’s strong reputation for collaborating and developing positive relationships with these people and institutions can result in increased trust and public support that will benefit the sustainability of your program.

- Think about who else besides your participants benefits, directly or indirectly, from participants’ success in your program. Examples might include business owners, community leaders, or officials. Can one or more of those people or institutions become a vocal champion for your program?

As the backbone of your program, volunteers and employees can provide valuable feedback. Make sure to seek out that feedback in creating or refreshing the various elements of your brand. Employees and volunteers may have valuable personal opinions about your brand,

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

formed by their experiences serving your target population. Involving people at all levels of seniority at the organization in brand development may also increase buy-in for consistently using those brand elements in individual communications.

Develop a Style Guide

As stated earlier, consistency is key to maintaining a strong (readily recognizable and trusted) brand. One way to ensure consistency across your brand elements throughout your organization is by creating a style guide that informs the design of your website and all outward-facing documents and social media associated with your program.

- Keep it brief and relevant to the communications your program staff produce. Style guide templates are available online for free but may include elements that are not relevant to your reentry program, such as the preferred citation style to use for referencing academic articles. If you use an already existing template, make sure to adapt it and remove anything that is not relevant to your program.
- Review and update the style guide as your program grows or circumstances change. If your style guide includes preferred language to reduce stigma for your participants, it may need to be updated over time to remain current.

Once you are consistent in using your brand elements across your entire organization, people will begin to readily recognize your brand. In combination with a positive reputation that is associated with your brand, your program will be in a better position to attract the attention of funders, volunteers, partnering organizations or agencies, employees, and prospective participants.

Conclusion












Establish your branding goals. They could be things like building credibility and trust in your program; being seen as a reentry expert in your community; or increasing funding for your program from local government, foundations, or other sources.

Your program may not be able to implement every tip or strategy outlined here all at once. Instead, think about where you might get the largest returns on investment and whether any of these strategies would be quick, easy, and cost-effective for your program to implement. Prioritize those areas that allow you to gain the most from the resources you will need to invest and set reasonable, actionable goals.

As with any goals you set, it is important to track your progress toward achieving them. It is easier to see if you are heading in the right direction or need to change course if you keep and regularly review a goal tracker. This can be as simple as a spreadsheet, text document, or other file to record the steps you have taken, their outcomes, and future steps you plan to take. Set calendar reminders at regular intervals to remind you to update and review these records.

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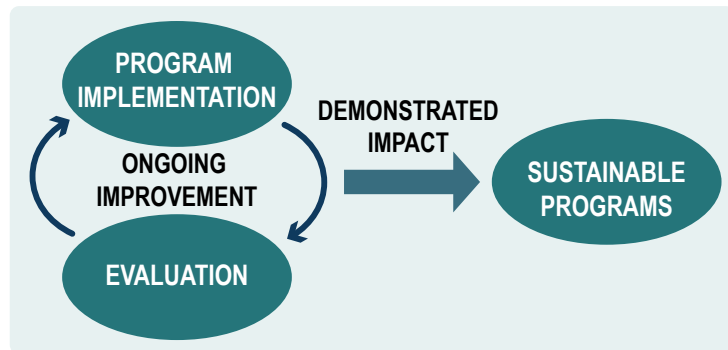
Additional Resources

- [Reentry Program Sustainability Toolkit](#) , prepared by RTI International and the Center for Justice Innovation
- Infographic: [Sustainability Basics: How to Develop Your Reentry Program Brand](#) 
- **Language guides**—Resources on clear, destigmatizing language
 - **Mental health**, from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): [Your Language Matters](#) 
 - **Substance use**, from the Addiction Policy Forum: [Language Matters Infographic](#) 
 - **Inclusivity**, from The Diversity Movement: [Say This, Not That](#) 
 - **Person-first language**, from Advancing Pretrial Policy & Research: [Words and Phrases to Effect Positive Change in the Pretrial System](#) 
 - Note: This guide, designed for pretrial practitioners, also includes words that apply to the reentry space, such as alternatives to stigmatizing words like “felon” or “ex-con.”
 - **Removing legalese**, from the National Center for State Courts: [Interactive Plain Language Glossary](#) 
- **Resources on Storytelling**
 - Brief: [Narrative and Visual Storytelling: Strategies for Conveying the Impact of Reentry Programs](#) 
 - Webinar: [Storytelling for Reentry Programs: Using the Power of Story to Build Strong Support for Your Program](#) 
 - Webinar: [Empowering People with Criminal Records to Change Policy: A Legal Advocate’s Guide to Storytelling](#) 
 - Report: [Do No Harm Guide: Applying Equity Awareness in Data Visualization](#) 

Building and Sustaining Your Reentry Program Brand

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project supports Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in conducting more rigorous evaluations that lead to data-driven program improvement and demonstrated impact and that support programs' long-term sustainability. For more information about the project, contact ESTTA@rti.org.



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