

Lesson 8: Social Branding

Building a brand that youth identify with can make or break after-school programs.

by Jenny Parma; tutorial provided by Hillary Salmons and Elizabeth Devaney

Just because you have built a high-quality after-school program doesn't guarantee you'll get good attendance. After all, many youth would prefer to hang out, unsupervised, with friends than participate in after-school learning activities. What's the trick to getting youth to engage in your program? According to PASA, marketing after-school programs so they're cool and engaging to kids is key to gaining and retaining student participation.

Here are some of the ways PASA has captured student attention.

Brand Development

During the beginning stages of branding the program, PASA held focus groups with middle-school youth to understand their perception of after-school. Many youth saw after-school as "detention" and "more homework." To help turn this negative perception around, PASA worked with Rescue Social Change Group, a social marketing firm. PASA, and a cadre of students coined the term "AfterZone"; then the firm helped to further develop the AfterZone brand to appeal to youth.

Findings show that developing a program brand that youth can relate to makes after-school programs more successful. PASA developed programs and an image around youth independence and program authenticity, letting young people know that the AfterZone was very different from school and a place where they could try new skills, meet new people, and have fun.

Branding Techniques

You can emulate the AfterZone branding model by sticking to the same key components: separating the school day from after school, treating youth as young adults, and creating a fun environment. Here are some tips for achieving this:

- » Make the environment conducive to interaction and noise using music and special areas like "chill zones" for reading.
- » Surround students with other young adults, such as college volunteers or AmeriCorps members.
- » Give students complete flexibility to choose the programs they like, which will make the program more enjoyable and engaging, while differentiating it from the mandatory nature of school time.
- » Stay on message. The entire staff, from providers to AfterZone volunteers, are required to participate in Branding 101, a training meeting about retaining the AfterZone identity. Staff, volunteers, and providers are taught how to market their programs to appeal to youth, and how to deliver on that promise of an engaging, fun program that is not like school.

VOCABULARY

- » **Chill zones:** A physical location in Club AfterZone where youth can read and relax. Creating unique areas with youth-friendly names makes after-school programs more acceptable.
- » **Club AfterZone:** Daily "learning time" for youth involved in one-hour enrichment programs on school grounds; administered by young staff members or volunteers.
- » **Social brand:** An identity that includes personality, voice, and style.

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Social Branding (continued)

Recruitment and Celebrations

In addition to staying on message, PASA has created the following recruitment events, showcases, and celebrations to attract and retain students.

Recruitment events put after-school programs on display for youth. Providers are required to attend fairs two to three weeks before the AfterZone session begins in schools throughout all the AfterZones. Often, recruitment events are held in the cafeteria or gymnasium where students can “shop” for their favorite programs.

Post-session showcases allow youth to demonstrate to families, peers, and teachers the skills they have learned in their AfterZone program, which can build momentum for prospective attendees. Showcases sometimes blend youth from several middle schools. On occasion, targeted celebrations are held at the end of sessions for youth who have met specific attendance and participation levels. These celebrations include DJs, refreshments, and student performances at a location off school grounds.

Citywide End-of-Year celebration is held the week immediately following the end of both the AfterZone program and the school year, usually at a local college campus. Celebrations include performances and recreational activities and youth are invited based on their attendance throughout the year. Families, teachers, community partners, and AfterZone providers are also invited.

KEY POINTS

- » Branding after-school programs as cool and fun for youth is important for program participation and retention.
- » The AfterZone brand resonates with youth; it depicts a fun and relaxed environment in which youth are treated like young adults.
- » After-school environments should be a place where youth want to hang out. Music, young volunteers and staff, and aesthetics help.
- » Staff should stay on message; develop training to this end.
- » Post-session and end-of-year celebrations keep students interested and engaged in after-school programs. Combine recruiting events and celebrations with fun activities, all of which appeal to youth.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To learn more about branding techniques see:

- » “A New Brand of Learning” at edutopia.org/pasa-branding
- » PASA’s PowerPoint presentation “The AfterZone Brand: Using Social Branding to Increase Program Participation and Retention” at edutopia.org/pasa-lesson-branding-marketing