



Building a strong services brand: Lessons from Mayo Clinic

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Abstract A strong services brand is built and sustained primarily by customers' interactions with the provider. A services branding model depicts the dynamics of brand creation. From the interrelationships among the presented brand, external communications, and customers' experiences emerge brand awareness, meaning, and, ultimately, equity. The Mayo Clinic case study illustrates the services branding model by showing how one organization has created, extended, and protected a powerful brand through an unwavering commitment to the well-being of its customers. Managers outside of healthcare can benefit from three branding lessons embedded in the Mayo Clinic story: (1) attend to organizational values; (2) play defense, not just offense; and (3) turn customers into marketers.

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1. Mayo Clinic: A brand to behold

Mayo Clinic has developed one of the most powerful services brands in the world and, arguably, the leading healthcare brand in the United States. In a 2003 national study, primary decision-makers in US households were asked what healthcare institution they would choose for themselves or a family member if insurance or finances would enable them to go anywhere for a serious medical problem such as cancer treatment, heart surgery, or neurosurgery. Responses were unaided and Mayo Clinic was not identified as the study sponsor. As shown in [Table 1](#), Mayo Clinic was mentioned by nearly 19% of respondents, with an additional 8% including Mayo Clinic in

a follow-up question asking for "other institutions" they would consider. Preference for Mayo Clinic is almost three times greater than for the second-ranked institution ([Mayo Clinic Brand Monitor, 2003](#)).

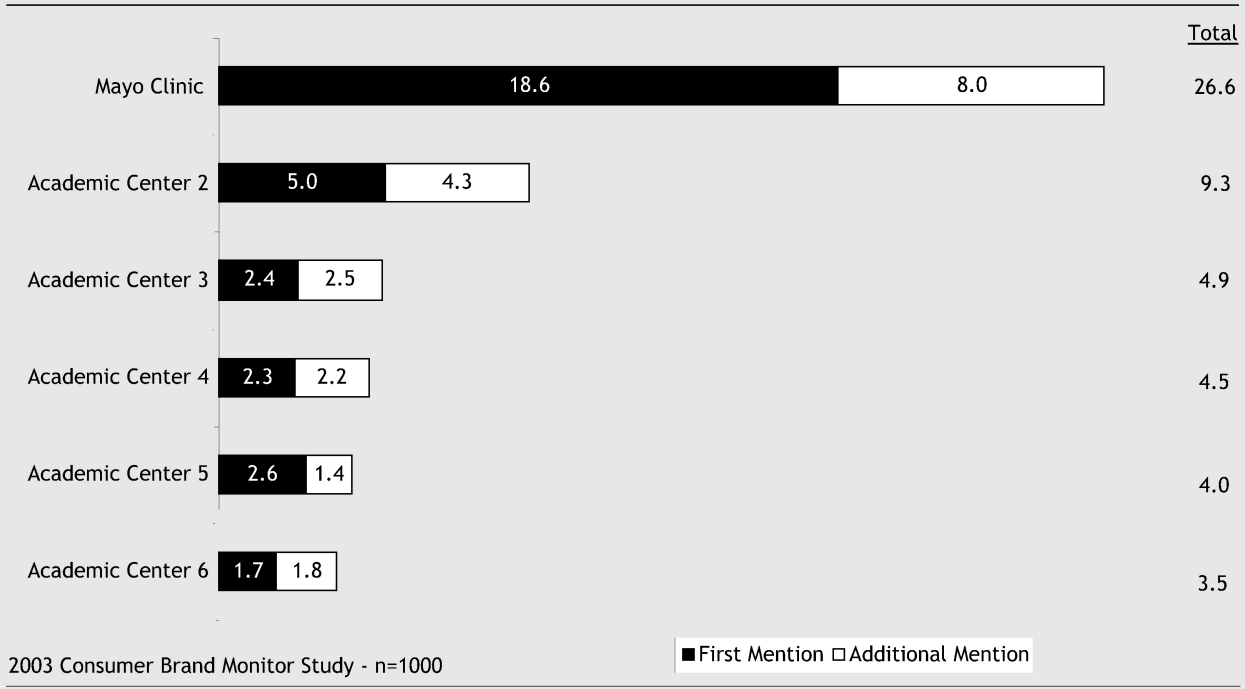
The purpose of this article is to distill how Mayo Clinic has built and sustained such a strong services brand, and to suggest branding lessons managers in other service organizations can glean from the Mayo case study. The Mayo Clinic brand story is nothing short of remarkable: the organization opened shop more than 140 years ago in a small, isolated Minnesota town, had a one-person marketing staff from 1986 until 1992, and uses little media promotion to this day (defying the commonly held assumption that great brands require great advertising).

In undertaking our study, we begin by summarizing a generic model of services branding. Next, we present the Mayo Clinic case study, which illustrates

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Table 1 Total unaided brand preference for healthcare institutions



the model. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the lessons Mayo Clinic teaches us about services branding.

2. Customer experience creates the brand

A services brand is essentially a promise about the nature of a future experience with an organization or individual service provider. Fig. 1, based on Berry (2000), presents the relationships among the principal components of a services organization brand. The bold lines indicate primary influence and the dotted lines, secondary influence.

The *presented brand* is the *organization-controlled* communication of a desired brand image. Advertising, brand name, logo, websites, employee uniforms, and facilities design are among the vehicles used to disseminate the desired branding message. Brand presentation directly impacts *brand awareness*, which is a customer's ability to recognize and recall a brand. It also impacts brand meaning, as discussed below.

External brand communication is the *organization-influenced* communication about the brand. Publicity and word-of-mouth communication (increasingly conveyed via the Internet through blogs, message boards, and personal websites) are its main forms. These communications can impact both brand awareness and meaning but not necessarily in the desired manner, given the independent sources of the information. Customers

tend to be eager recipients of unbiased information about a service, given its intangible core and the inherent challenge of evaluating it prior to purchase. There are no tires to kick when buying a service. The more consequential, complex, and variable the service, the more interested prospective customers are likely to be in the opinions of customers who have experienced it (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Conceptually, word-of-mouth and publicity should have less influence than an organization's controlled communications, which often will reach a wider audience and are developed to strengthen the brand. However, specific developments, such as a major news story about a company, may transform the services branding model's dotted lines (secondary influence) to bold (primary influence).

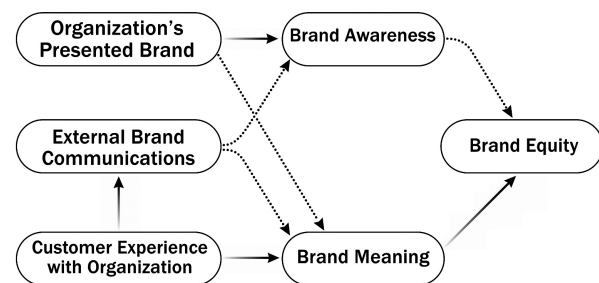


Figure 1 A services branding model.

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