

Current Perspective

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Living the Brand

Recently, I was reviewing the history of the American Academy of Ophthalmology. As difficult as “ophthalmology” is, it could have been worse: One proposal for our first official name was Western Ophthalmological, Otological, Laryngological and Rhinological Association. As an early Academy President remarked, “The weight of the name was enough to sink the society into oblivion.”

All of us are used to being asked, “What’s an ophthalmologist?” Today, when nearly every occupation calls itself a “profession,” and when impact, outcomes, and value are increasingly scrutinized in light of health care reform, that question is even more important. As ophthalmology’s public voice, the Academy bears the primary responsibility of presenting our profession to the public in an appropriate and understandable fashion. Academy activities generate nearly 4,000 media clips annually, reaching millions of Americans. More than 1 million people visit our EyeSmart website each month. This is not about hype or advertising; it’s about communicating the value of the care we provide.

In the business world, this drives a process known as branding. We all recognize some of the iconic brands of our time, such as Apple, Google, and Nike. We also know that these companies periodically spend hundreds of millions of dollars to rebrand themselves—and they do it because it works. Done well, this rebranding process is much more than a logo or a tagline. It refocuses everything the company does around the values expressed in the brand. It drives strategy, tactics, communication, product design, and operations.

Consider how the profession of ophthalmology and the health care environment have changed in just 20 years. Such changes made it imperative to critically reevaluate how we are viewed by the public and to reframe how we should present ourselves, to effectively convey the value of what we do for patients and society.

The Academy spent almost 18 months and thousands of staff and volunteer hours in doing research and interviewing patients, Academy members, policymakers, and business partners, with the assistance of a professional firm with substantial rebranding experience.

The key outcome of the process is a refocused set of priorities to drive our view of our profession, of the Academy, and

of the value each of us brings to our communities. You will see it reflected in educational programs, in communications, in advocacy, and in data sciences. The Academy’s—and the profession’s—objective is to better reflect the impact of what we *do* as ophthalmologists—not simply who we are.

The Academy’s new logo was an overwhelming first choice when tested by hundreds of people. It conveys images resonant of the core impact of the profession, whether it is seen as symbolizing rays of light in the darkness or technical innovations—or even, with each ray representing one element of the diversity or complexity of ophthalmology. Regardless, it is fresh and modern.

The new tagline, “Protecting Sight. Empowering Lives,” encapsulates the value of our brand, focusing on the life-changing impact of ophthalmologists’ skills. It is reflected in the Academy’s new Mission Statement: “The mission of the American Academy of Ophthalmology is to protect sight and empower lives by serving as an advocate for patients and the public, leading ophthalmic education, and advancing the profession of ophthalmology.” This places the patient front and center. It also recognizes the Academy as an educational organization and commits it to advancing the profession (on numerous fronts).

These are more than inspiring words. They should serve as the touchstone for all our activities. Taken in isolation, logos and taglines are just fluff. Our mutual obligation now is to “live the brand”—making good on the implicit promise to individual patients and to our communities to protect sight and empower lives by providing the highest-value care. Of course, we’ve been doing this for years. But now we have articulated and refocused this shared professional commitment at a time when clarity and focus are needed more than ever.



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