

# An Integrated Strategy for Nonprofit Success and Sustainability

By Shelli Bischoff-Turner

*This article defines an integrated strategy to help nonprofits create more sustainable organizations that realize their fullest potential to achieve mission.*

## Introduction

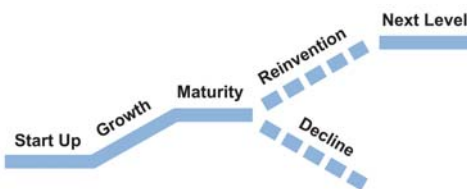
Are you a nonprofit executive director, program manager, or board member interested in achieving more powerful results towards mission success? Are you ready to leverage your organization's assets to go the next level of impact? Are there untapped opportunities to reach and engage a broader constituency of donors, members, or volunteers? The integrated strategy is a proven approach to creating more successful and sustainable organizations.

The integrated strategy was developed over thirty years of nonprofit organization experience and has been used with more than 400 clients to achieve results, take organizations to their next level, and broaden their support. The integrated strategy updates fundamental principles of organizational effectiveness and presents a simple framework for organizational success and sustainability components.

## Going to the Next Level

Nonprofit organizations play a critical role in meeting the needs of their communities and society. To be successful—achieving substantive results towards mission—organizations must be clear about their identity, have the capacity to do their job, and have meaningful relationships with their constituents.

An organization's identity, constituents, and capacity are interrelated; they are the necessary components of organizational success and sustainability. At each phase of development, whether start-up, growth, or maturity, superior organizations strive to achieve results efficiently, effectively, and with potency. At the maturity stage, organizations typically find it necessary to rejuvenate, reinvent, or face decline.



*Maturity is signaled by a stagnant membership base or finances.*

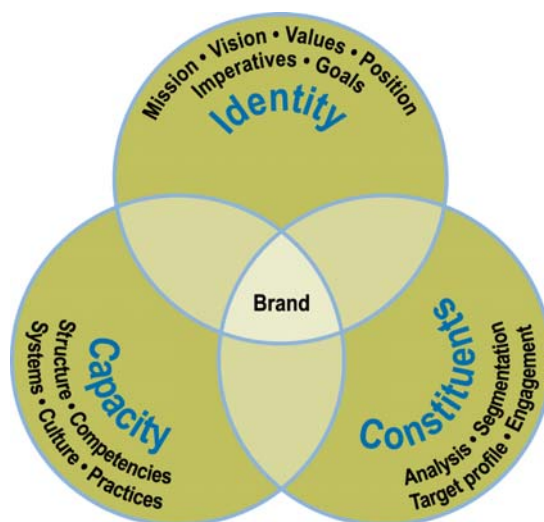
It may also mean that the organization's incremental growth does not keep up with the competition or with unmet needs. Maturity may mean that the organization has simply achieved what it has set out to do and it has specific strengths, expertise, power, or assets from which to build.

The integrated strategy is a framework to help organizations be more potent during start-up, growth, or maturity and to go to the next level of success and sustainability.

### **A Holistic Approach**

The integrated strategy focuses on aligning identity, constituency, and capacity to concentrate all organizational resources to achieve results towards mission. By aligning and integrating identity, constituency, and capacity an organization builds brand equity.

The integrated strategy expands on the traditional definitions of strategic planning, marketing, and organizational development. It presents concepts that are better suited to today's nonprofit realities and that reflect increasingly sophisticated nonprofit operations. The concepts move beyond an internal focus to comprehensively integrate external forces.



**Brand:** An organization's essence. Its distinguishing, enduring, and endearing characteristics. Brand defines the total experience of an organization; what a constituent comes to expect.

**Capacity:** The human, technological, financial, and organizational resources – organized, managed, and deployed to achieve results.

**Constituents:** A constituent element is integral to the whole. An organization's constituents – its members, donors, volunteers, clients, participants – are those people who are critical to an organization's success.

**Identity:** That which defines the organization – why, what, and how it does what it does. Typically stated by the mission, vision, values, goals, and objectives.

**Integrated Strategy:** Framework for developing and aligning identity, constituents, and capacity for organizational success and sustainability. Alignment creates brand equity.

**Sustainability:** Having the capacity to provide services to meet needs and attain results towards mission on an ongoing basis. Sustainability requires the organizational / programmatic infrastructure to carry out core functions independent of individuals or one-time opportunities.

Identity is an organization's mission, vision, and values, and its strategic methods and goals. Typically, an organization's identity is defined by its strategic plan. We suggest that identity is more about strategic positioning—defining and filling a distinct niche within a deliberate sphere of influence—than it is about traditional strategic planning.

Rather than defining an organization's identity based solely on mission, vision, and values as outlined in its strategic plan, the integrated strategy expands identity to include an external analysis of how the organization is positioned within its sphere of influence and how it fulfills its mission relative to the larger marketplace.

Constituents are the people who are integral to an organization's success—the people without whom the organization would not succeed. Being constituent-centered is a relationship building approach that creates long-term, loyal, engaged participants, activists, members, donors, or volunteers. Building a constituency is critical to sustainability. The integrated strategy moves organizations from being organization-centered to being constituent-centered.

A clear identity and engaged constituency are needed to achieve organizational capacity. We suggest, however, that capacity is not simply having the people and money to do the job. Rather, capacity depends on an aligned organization whose internal structure and operations fully support its identity, meet its constituents' needs, and efficiently and effectively use *all* organizational assets and strengths.

Refining and aligning identity, constituents, and capacity creates brand equity and enables an organization to be successful and sustainable at whatever stage in its lifecycle, or to rejuvenate towards the next level.

A brand distinguishes one organization from another and emerges from an organization's unique essence. Brand is the center of the integrated strategy. An organization creates and communicates brand only by consistently building and strengthening its own identity, constituency, and capacity.

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Brand becomes powerful when it is at the heart of everything an organization says and does. Brand flourishes when it is the embodiment of the organization's enduring and endearing characteristics. Only by being clear and consistent about identity, constituency, and capacity can an organization deliver on the promise of brand

## **Identity**

### ***Strategic Planning and Positioning***

Strategic planning is a process used to clarify and define an organization's mission, vision, values, goals, and objectives. The outcome of the process, a strategic plan, typically defines the future direction of the organization and its strategic focus—those things it must pay attention to and accomplish in order to be successful.

A viable strategic planning process requires making deliberate decisions and choices based on the trends, issues, and current and future conditions related to the organization's external, market, and internal environments. A situation analysis provides context and informs the strategic planning process. A true analysis (not just a laundry list of strengths and weaknesses) will define the fundamental strategic issues that must be addressed by the organization's leadership in order to create a meaningful plan.

While strategic planning is sufficient to maintain an organization at a particular level, it rarely takes it to the next level. In today's environment, advancing to the next level has as much to do with strategic positioning as it does with strategic planning.

Strategic positioning is a systematic, analytical process used to define an organization's identity and niche. Positioning examines the organization's potential for growth and development based on its assets and the larger context in which it operates. It analyzes the real or potential gap between need and opportunity, organizational identity, and capacity. It challenges assumptions about sphere of influence and considers the organization's place relative to the institutional landscape as a whole. Going to the next level is often about seizing an opportunity to redefine that landscape.

*Being constituent-centered means that the organization considers its constituents in everything it does and sees the organization through the eyes and mind of that constituency.*

Positioning is also a process of defining and occupying a specific niche. For example, analyses sometimes reveal that an organization is, or should be, synonymous with a cause. When someone thinks of local river protection, they think of a specific organization. While strategic planning focuses on what needs to be done to protect a river, strategic positioning reminds an organization that it must fully occupy its niche, or risk losing that niche

Positioning raises the bar on how and what an organization does. It literally defines the tables at which the organization's leadership must sit and with whom they interact. Successful organizations not only have clear strategic focus, they are well positioned for influence within their sphere

## **Constituents**

### ***Marketing and Constituent-Centered Organizations***

Marketing is more than an organization's outreach strategies and communication messages. It is the process of defining and analyzing the core constituents—those most likely to take positive action on an organization's behalf—and then defining strategies to reach and engage those people. Strategies include an organization's programs and how it delivers them, as well as its direct contact, advertising, public relations, and promotional activities.

Because nonprofits operate with limited resources, it is essential to define and understand the core constituents or target markets. Targeting directs limited resources towards a specifically defined constituency to ensure a higher return on investment. A deep, informed understanding of the target market is eighty-percent of marketing. Once the market is clearly understood, the appropriate programs, outreach, and messaging become obvious.

Defining and profiling the market is an important part of creating a constituent-centered organization, but it is only the beginning. Marketing has connotations of promoting *to* someone, rather than engaging them in a meaningful relationship of mutual trust and understanding. Without real engagement, an organization may

	Organization-centric	Constituent-centric
<b>Goal</b>	Project focus	Constituent focus
<b>Methods</b>	What organization wants to do	What constituent needs or relates to
<b>Positioning</b>	Relative to other agencies / services	Relative to constituents' needs and interests
<b>Offerings</b>	Based on organization's existing programs/ services	Based on constituents use of services / programs organization offers
<b>Outreach Messages</b>	The organization, I messages; us and other, our needs	Community, you messages; us, your needs and interests
<b>Board</b>	Less representative of constituents	More representative of constituents
<b>Processes</b>	Demographic-based programs, membership, and donor programs	Programs use integrated approaches that make constituents central to all work and operations

achieve a specific one-time behavior, a membership check for example, but it will not likely create a loyal, engaged constituency.

Being constituent-centered means that the organization considers its constituents in everything it does and sees the organization through the eyes and mind of that constituency. Like positioning relative to planning, being constituent-centered is an outward focused exercise. It asks, “what do they need from us?” rather than “what do we need from them?”

It defines constituents by how they relate to an organization’s programs or causes. In comparison, most organizations define their constituents as donors, members, or volunteers—an organization-centric definition.

A constituent-centered organization integrates the constituent not only into outreach efforts, but throughout all parts of the organization. It is not just the membership, fundraising, or communication staff member’s job to reach and engage the constituency. Rather, the entire organization must understand who the constituent is and actively engage them through their work.

Examples illustrate the difference between an organization-centric approach and a constituent-centered approach. In one situation, in response to a visitor having to pay an entrance fee at a nature preserve, an organization-centric staff member talks about the programs, operating overhead, and number of staff.

A constituent-centered staff person understands what is most relevant to the visitor and therefore discusses how the preserve is one of the most beautiful hiking areas in the region!

Further, it is the difference between the organization that sends out the once-a-year direct mail ask, versus the organization that creates a more personalized relationship with a constituency by catering to their needs, providing them something of value, or simply saying thank you on a regular basis.

In one excellent example of a constituent-centered organization, board members personally call everyone who attends the annual fundraising dinner to say thank you. That organization builds

*Taking an organization to its next level is about aligning the organization's work based on its strategic position and constituency.*

focused, multi-year, significant relationships with its donors and has figured out a unique way to integrate their supporters in all their activities. This goes much beyond simply reporting the organization's highlights in monthly newsletters or annual reports. Being constituent-centered is a relationship-building approach. It is about a willingness and ability to adapt programs and outreach strategies to better resonate with and engage constituents, on *their* terms.

## **Capacity**

### ***Organizational Development and Alignment***

Organizational development addresses how individuals and groups work together to achieve results. It looks at internal systems, practices, structure, competencies, and culture to create operating efficiencies and effectiveness and bring about organizational growth or change.

Taking an organization to its next level is about aligning the organization's work based on its identity and constituency. Alignment is not just about operating more efficiently and effectively, but about better integrating programs, services, and outreach to leverage and optimize the organization's assets. Again, it is about analyzing operations and growth from a more outward-focused context.

Organizational alignment ensures the entire organization is working towards ends it knows its constituency values. This enables the organization to deliver on the promise of the brand.

Increasingly, organizations are recognizing that a siloed organizational structure is an obstacle to going to the next level. A siloed organization is one in which fundraising, marketing, membership, volunteer, and program efforts operate independently of one other. Even in larger organizations, there are not enough resources to have separate systems and practices for members, for major donors, for volunteers, and for program participants. Going to the next level requires integration across operating areas and breaking down silos between programs and constituents.

*In an integrated organization, brand becomes the shorthand for identity, constituents, and capacity.*

*The Integrated Strategy Plan is the blueprint of the next level.*

The process of aligning an organization often identifies shortcomings in an organization's capacity that hinders its ability to position itself in its sphere of influence or to broaden its constituency. In one example, the organization's structure (who reported to whom) was an impenetrable barrier that hampered its ability to engage a broader constituency. The structure, and the culture built around it, caused internal competition for donors and volunteers, limited sharing of information, and precluded coordination that would optimize the use of precious resources.

### **Delivering on the Promise of the Brand**

When identity, constituents, and capacity are well defined, fully developed, and aligned, the organization is poised to deliver on the promise of its brand. Alternatively, organizations whose strategic focus and position are unclear, who try to be all things to all people, or have systems and structures that do not support the accomplishment of strategic goals, cannot successfully communicate brand (no matter how poetic a tag line or beautiful a logo!).

Creating, articulating, and delivering on brand is *not* a process separate from the fundamental work of the organization. Rather it is something that emerges as a result of an organization consistently being what it is and what it does.

At true strategic integration, the brand becomes an organization's best compass point. Does this action, this message, and this program, best deliver on the promise of the brand? In an integrated organization, brand becomes the shorthand for identity, constituents, and capacity. Every strategic decision, operational activity, or external message can be measured by whether or not it stays true to, or enhances, the brand.

### **The Integrated Strategy Plan**

For those who are more comfortable with a linear approach and want to see how the pieces of integrated strategy tie together, we suggest creating a written document that we call The Integrated Strategy Plan (the equivalent of a comprehensive business plan in the private sector). The Integrated Strategy Plan is distinct from the strategic plan, marketing plan, and organizational development plan

## The Integrated Strategy Plan

1. *Introduction*
2. *Situation Analysis*
  - a. *Context, trends, issues*
  - b. *Current and future influencing forces*
  - c. *Institutional landscape*
  - d. *Strategic decisions*
3. *Identity*
  - a. *Mission, vision, values*
  - b. *Primary methods*
  - c. *Impacts, imperatives, and strategic goals*
  - d. *Core focus and strategic issues*
4. *Constituents*
  - a. *Segments: How the constituent relates to the organization*
  - b. *Core constituents: Demographics and psychographics profile*
  - c. *Publics: Those with whom the relationships must be maintained to create a positive public image to create an environment in which core constituents can be engaged*
  - d. *Offerings: Programs, products, services, issues, or campaigns*
  - e. *Outreach strategies: Marketing, public relations*
  - f. *Strategic partnerships*
5. *Organizational Alignment*
  - a. *Structure: Roles, responsibilities, authority, and accountability*
  - b. *Competencies and functions: Skills, surplus and gaps*
  - c. *Systems: Information management and protocols*
  - d. *Culture: collective attitudes and values*
6. *Revenue Model*
  - a. *Donations and earned income*
  - b. *Sources and uses*
  - c. *Policies*
7. *Transition and Implementation*
  - a. *Transition issues*
  - b. *Action plan*

because it ties all the components together. It is the blueprint of the next level. Articulating identity, constituents, and capacity, whether in a four-page outline or a 30-page document, is a test of true integration. If the Plan does not resonate, then identity, constituency, and capacity are probably not aligned.

If these components are fully integrated, the Plan will be a clear and focused document that guides the organization's journey into long-term sustainability and success.

The Plan also serves two other important purposes. It provides institutional memory that defines why and how things need to be done. It is also a tool for high-level investment that demonstrates to staff, board, donors, and stakeholders that the organization has systematically analyzed and deliberately charted a path for growth and rejuvenation based on a thorough understanding of its place in the external environment.

The integrated strategy has been used with organizations at every stage of development. In one case, a small, all volunteer organization used it to move to the growth phase where it doubled its members and investors. It has been used with a 20-year-old organizations to move from growth to maturity by leveraging strengths to become major players of power and influence. The integrated strategy has helped mature organizations reinvent themselves. One was a 75-year-old human services agency that succeeded in "defining and owning the market in family self-sufficiency." Another was a cultural heritage organization that moved from a local platform to a national one.

## Conclusion

The integrated strategy helps organizations achieve mission-related results. By harnessing the power of focused identity, engaged constituency, and organizational capacity, organizations build powerful and distinguishable brands. Whether a start-up organization, one that is growing, one that has built institutional infrastructure and distinction in maturity, or one that recognizes the importance of reinvention and rejuvenation, the integrated strategy framework is a systematic and proven framework for being potent, successful, and sustainable.



### About the Author

Shelli Bischoff-Turner is president and founder of Conservation Impact and Nonprofit Impact. She has 30 years experience in nonprofit management, marketing and organizational development. She has provided consulting services to hundreds of nonprofits, public agencies, and small businesses nationwide, in Canada and the Philippines. Shelli uses an integrated strategy framework in her consulting which focuses on practical implementation and organizational efficacy towards mission.

Shelli is adjunct faculty at the Regis University master of nonprofit management program and visiting professor on nonprofit marketing at an east coast college. She has held several nonprofit management positions, created successful revenue generating nonprofit ventures, and has served on numerous nonprofit boards. Shelli can be reached at 303.223.4886 or [shelli@nonprofitimpact.com](mailto:shelli@nonprofitimpact.com).

### About the Company

Nonprofit Impact provides strategic planning and positioning, marketing, and organizational development services to nonprofit organizations and public sector agencies. Nonprofit Impact is a woman-owned, small business, with offices in a historic loft in lower-downtown Denver.

We focus on organizations and agencies dedicated to improving the health and well being of individuals and communities, and those working to create a more civil, just, and equitable society

Services are highly customized to meet the needs of each organization and to provide distinct value. We provide our dedicated attention to both our small, start-up clients, as well as to our large, national, and international, well-established clients. We are committed to achieving results through services that are practical, scaled to the situation, and useful. We care that we have a significant impact in helping our clients be more potent, successful, and sustainable.

For more information, contact us at 303.223.4886 or visit [www.nonprofitimpact.com](http://www.nonprofitimpact.com).

