

BRANDING YOUR COLLABORATION



We live in a changing religious landscape. Areas that once featured a Catholic Church on every block now find themselves unable to support the infrastructure, while suburban parishes boom and expand. New immigrant arrivals mean ethnically and linguistically diverse parishes. Newly ordained priests don't always replace the numbers who retire.

In many dioceses, this means adaptability and collaboration on the part of the average parish. These collaborations often bring tensions between staff and parishioners, even perhaps the fear that one day a beloved parish will close or lose its unique identity.

THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

The truth is, the religious landscape has always been changing. From its origins, the Church faced a collaborative identity crisis. As Christians spread out as missionaries, St. Paul noticed some unique Christian communities identifying with the Apostles who had evangelized them. *"I belong to Paul"* or *"I belong to Peter"* became a distraction. Perhaps today's version would be *"I belong to St. Hyacinth"* or *"I belong to Immaculate Heart of Mary."*

The task of the early Church was to forge a common identity united in "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," one body in Christ (Ephesians 4:5). The word "Catholic" means "of the whole."

As Catholics, we recognize that we are stronger when we are unified in one mission, when we're telling one story.

When parishes are asked to cluster, to collaborate, or even to combine, this unity is essential. A unified mission to engage more people for Christ and his Church has eternal significance and is far more powerful than the geography or history that once separated us.

FINDING YOUR COMMON STORY

There's already a perception of your parish and your upcoming collaboration within the community. Is it the story you want told? In the business world, "branding" is a term for a consistent company identity. At the heart of a brand identity is the "why." Consider the following statements.

"Our faith formation programs are combining because we don't have enough money."

"It's essential for our children to grow in faith and to love those around them. We want our faith formation to be as strong as possible, so we're joining forces."

Which one sounds more compelling? There are many mental and emotional barriers to collaborations in parishes. A great brand tells a great story. It captures the essentials and builds trust in your mission. This invites interest from others and creates a sense of belonging. A parish staff must dig deep into how their collaboration efforts will serve the greater "why" for which their parish or program exists and how it will help people grow in a life of vibrant faith and discipleship.



OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

No two collaborative situations are quite the same. Branding can make a difference in unifying your parishioners, but, in order for it to work, all parishes involved must commit to a philosophy of collaboration. How can you effectively tell one common story?

Embrace Change as an Opportunity (Not a Loss)

For the early Church, St. Paul's call to align around Christ helped Christians stay united, rather than separating into factions. This common identity strengthens the Church to this day! As circumstances change, individual parishes can be stronger together than they are apart. Collaboration means more gifts and talents, making it easier to proclaim the Good News!

Engage in Strategic Teamwork

This involves identifying key stakeholders in the collaboration process. Gathering these people together and clearly casting the common vision lays crucial groundwork for success. When the facts are laid out and the mission is clear, provide these stakeholders with real decision-making power as to how changes are practically applied.

Extend a Vibrant Invitation to a Shared Mission

Parish leadership should convey enthusiasm and conviction about the new course of action, but with realistic consideration for the impact on parishioners' lives. Include a concrete plan for implementation. Help parishioners believe in your shared mission and understand how the changes will be carried out.

Cultivate Spiritual Ownership

Praying for the collaborative programming is essential, whether it's an established group of intercessors or incorporating prayer into liturgies and meetings. Creating opportunities for parishioners to meet and mingle outside of the programs themselves can help break barriers and build new relationships.

ESTABLISHING YOUR BRAND

Telling one common story is essential to gather people around a common mission. Showing that story is equally important. Much of communication is nonverbal, and we process visuals far faster than text. Having an attractive, consistent presentation of your collaborative effort is necessary.

A brand combines your common story with a distinct visual identity. This means making clear decisions about imagery, fonts, colors, and the words used to describe your collaborative effort, then following through on those decisions in all your communications.

Your parish wants to be as vibrant and fruitful as possible at all times. The early Church wrestled with identity, but they knew the story that united them and they communicated it consistently. Like the Apostles, we, too, are invited to be bold, consistent, and joyful in our proclamation of Jesus Christ, whatever structural form it takes.



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