Insights from charity &
nonprofit brand leaders

The Co—
Foundry

Behind
the brand

2026

Foreword

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At CharityComms, we see first-hand the vital role that brand, marketing and communications leaders play in helping charities connect with the people who matter most – from beneficiaries and supporters to funders, policymakers and partners.

Yet too often, this work happens behind the scenes, and without the support or recognition it deserves. As charities face growing uncertainty and complexity, the need for strategic brand leadership has never been greater.

This report explores some of the challenges leaders are facing, whatever their cause or size of organisation, and starts to bring to light the realities of brand leadership across the third sector.

It's vital to work together to help to amplify the voices of brand leaders across charities, funders, cultural institutions and policy bodies. We hope these insights can help organisations make stronger decisions about how they support brand work, so they can deliver their missions more effectively and create lasting change.

CharityComms

Why we ran this project
To better understand the realities of brand leadership across the third sector – the challenges, pressures and opportunities facing those responsible for shaping and stewarding organisational brands.

Who we included
Brand, marketing and communications leaders working across charities, funders, cultural institutions and policy bodies in the UK.

Who responded to the survey
- 37 respondents
- Senior brand, marketing and communications professionals
- Organisations ranging from small charities to large national bodies
- A mix of service delivery, advocacy, funding and cultural organisations

Who we interviewed
- 6 senior brand leaders
- In-depth interviews exploring lived experience, decision-making and organisational dynamics

How to read this report
This is an exploratory, mixed-methods study, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative insight from open responses and interviews.

Given the small sample size, the findings are directional rather than definitive, intended to highlight patterns, tensions and areas for reflection rather than presenting firm conclusions.

A full methodology and limitations section appears at the back of the report.

Contents

Introduction

The research that follows contains some hard-hitting insights. Whilst many third-sector organisations are modelling best practice supported by sustained investment, elsewhere brand has suffered from chronic underinvestment – often the first thing to be cut during periods of economic uncertainty.

The future is difficult to predict – particularly in the current climate – but I believe there's reason to be cautiously optimistic. Many participants share this view: that we may be nearing the peak of this cycle, after which more organisations will begin to recognise the damage caused by deprioritising brand and start treating it once again as a core asset rather than a nice-to-have.

This report is structured around five key themes that emerged from the survey responses and interviews. Together, they paint a picture of where brand leadership stands in the third sector today – the progress that has been made, the pressures brand leaders face, and the conditions and support needed for brand to be more effective.

My aim is to shine a spotlight on the people behind third-sector brands – the often unseen brand, marketing and communications leaders doing vital work behind the scenes. I also want this report to be practical and useful. It concludes with recommendations and takeaways: tangible ways to bring brand leaders out from behind the brand, and better support them to do their work well.

Sue Bush
Brand design consultant
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February 2026

Insight themes:

1. **Brand leaders are influential... but influence is fragile**

2. **Capacity, budget and 'random acts of branding' are universal challenges**

3. **Rebrands are common... and often driven by the same three things**

4. **Organisations value evidence in theory... but not always in practice**

5. **Brand leadership is becoming more complex – emotionally as well as structurally**
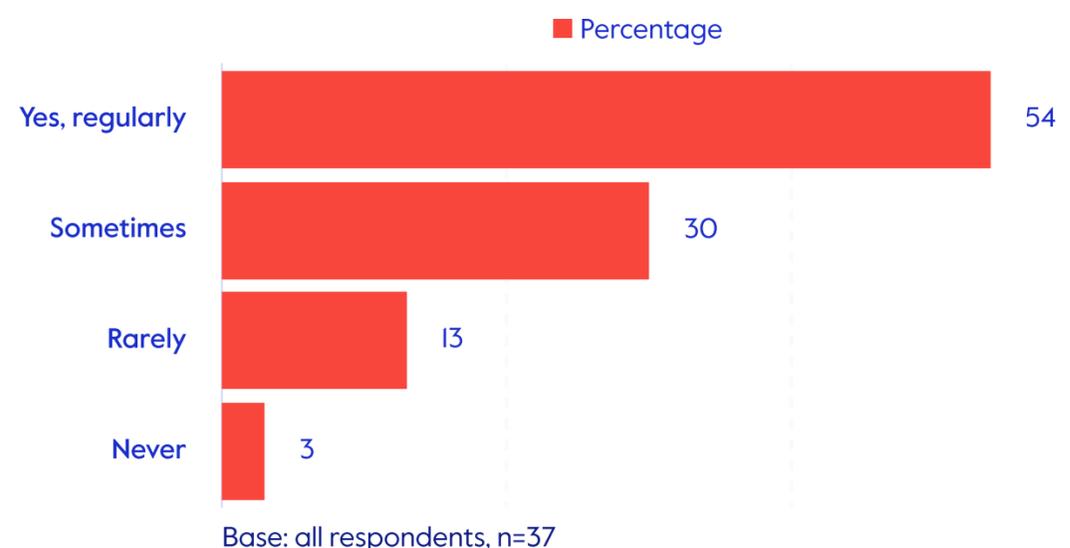
Five key insights

I.

Brand leaders are influential... but influence is fragile

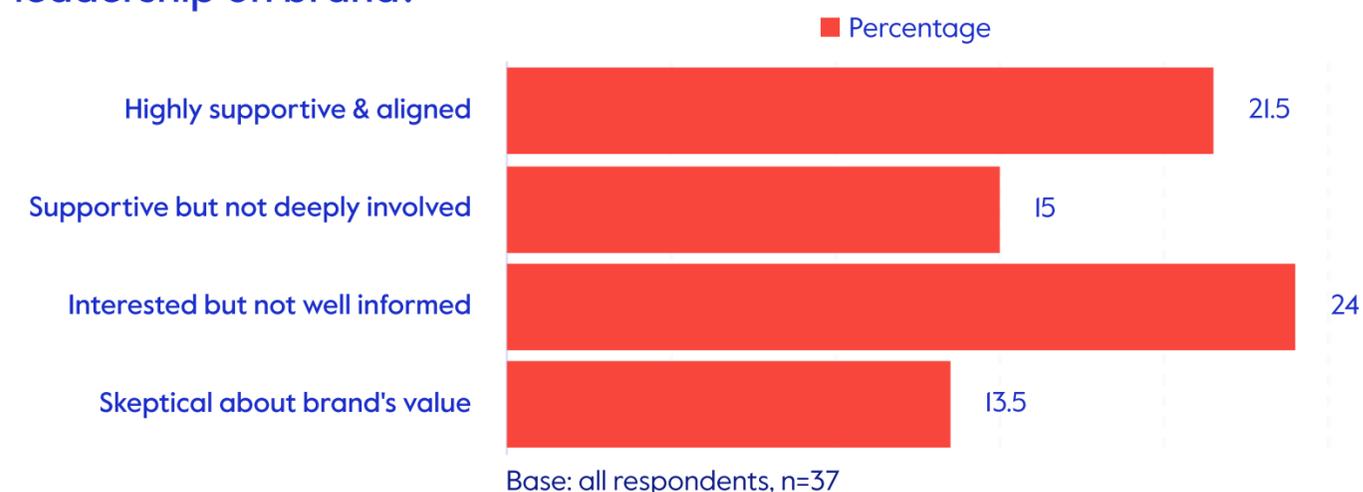# Brand leaders are influential... but influence is fragile

Many brand and communications leaders now sit closer to decision-making, but their influence remains fragile. Access exists – power doesn't always follow.

Access to trustees and senior leadership is relatively common among respondents. But access alone does not guarantee shared understanding or alignment.

Do you have regular access to your board or trustees?

■ Percentage

Yes, regularly	54
Sometimes	30
Rarely	13
Never	3

Base: all respondents, n=37

How would you describe your relationship with trustees or senior leadership on brand?

■ Percentage

Highly supportive & aligned	21.5
Supportive but not deeply involved	15
Interested but not well informed	24
Skeptical about brand's value	13.5

Base: all respondents, n=37

While over half of respondents report regular access to trustees or senior leadership, a significant proportion describe them as only partially informed about – or, in some cases, sceptical of – brand's value. This suggests that proximity to decision-makers does not automatically translate into confidence in, or understanding of, brand as a strategic function.

65% agree that *internal preferences (trustees, staff, etc.) often dilute brand decisions. Base: all respondents (n=37)*

Together, these findings point to a clear gap between access and actual influence. Variations in organisational culture, decision-making norms, and understanding of the strategic role of brand all appear to shape how far brand leaders' voices are able to travel.

What explains this tension?

Brand is still seen as peripheral to 'real' strategy

Several interviewees pointed to a persistent perception of brand as secondary or even frivolous – something nice to have, rather than central to organisational strategy.

This perception helps explain the gap between being invited to participate in senior discussions and being able to shape outcomes. Where brand is not understood as integral to mission, positioning and long-term impact, brand leaders may be heard politely, but their input carries less weight when decisions are made. In these contexts, influence is conditional: brand is consulted, but rarely allowed to lead.

Brand as a shared strategic responsibility

One interviewee, a chief executive, emphasised that brand sits firmly within the realm of organisational strategy – and that boards therefore have a legitimate role in shaping brand direction.

From this perspective, board involvement in brand is appropriate and necessary, part of governance responsibility – particularly where brand is closely tied to mission, positioning and long-term strategy.

"That's the whole reason you have a board – they're supposed to lead on strategy." — *Chief Executive, arts organisation*

This view introduces an important counterbalance. While limited brand expertise at board level can create challenges, effective brand leadership does not mean removing boards from the conversation. Instead, it depends on constructive dialogue – where strategic oversight and specialist brand expertise inform one another, rather than compete.

Limited brand or communications expertise at board level

Interviewees described boards that were supportive in principle, but lacked specific expertise in brand, marketing or communications. This created a dynamic where opinions were plentiful, but informed challenge was limited.

"The board were very involved in the process, but none had marketing or communications expertise at the time. They were supportive of the brand, but not deeply involved." — *Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

Resistance to change and board sentimentality

Several interviewees linked resistance to change to board sentimentality – a strong attachment to 'how things have always been done', even when evidence suggests the need for evolution.

"A lot of it was sentimentality – this is how it's always been done, and therefore how it should continue." — *Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

One interviewee noted that introducing trustee term limits had improved openness to new ideas over time, bringing fresh perspectives and reducing resistance rooted in legacy thinking.

Playing it safe at senior level

One interviewee suggested that influence can also be undermined by an over-reliance on consensus and a reluctance to challenge at senior level.

From this perspective, brand decisions are often diluted not through active resistance, but through a collective desire to 'play nice' – with brand leaders, and sometimes their executive sponsors, softening recommendations to avoid friction.

This raises a difficult but important question: when bold brand decisions are required, are organisations – and the individuals within them – willing to tolerate the discomfort that change can bring?

Personality, confidence and perceived authority

Beyond formal structures and access, interviewees highlighted the role of personality, confidence and perceived authority in shaping whose voices are heard at senior level.

Several brand leaders described a difference between being present in the room and being listened to.

"There is a difference between having access to the board and them actually listening. We had a very tough crowd." — *Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

Others pointed to the influence of dominant personalities, regardless of expertise.

"There are certain people who will always think they're right – and somehow still sound like the most qualified person in the room."
— *Head of Brand, national health charity*

Perceived seniority also emerged as a factor. One interviewee reflected that being the youngest member of the team sometimes affected how her contributions were received, regardless of experience or knowledge – a dynamic echoed by a chief executive interviewed as part of the research. They went on to argue that influence tends to build over time, rather than being granted automatically with a role or title. From this perspective, brand and communications leaders are more likely to gain influence when boards and senior teams have seen evidence of their impact, and when they are able to clearly articulate and advocate for their ideas.

"If they've shown success, you tend to trust them – but it still comes down to how well they can articulate it." — *Chief Executive, arts organisation*

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the gap between access and influence is shaped by more than governance structure alone. How brand is perceived, how strategy is shared, how confident individuals are when it comes to challenging senior voices, and how power operates in the room all play a role – making influence fragile rather than assured.

What this means for trustees, CEOs and brand leaders
Access to decision-making does not guarantee influence.
See recommendations on building shared brand literacy, clearer decision rights and evidence-led board conversations on pages 28-31.

2.

Capacity, budget and 'random acts of branding' are universal challenges

2. Capacity, budget and 'random acts of branding' are universal challenges

Despite varied missions and organisational sizes, brand leaders describe the same three recurring pain points: limited time, limited money, and limited internal consistency.
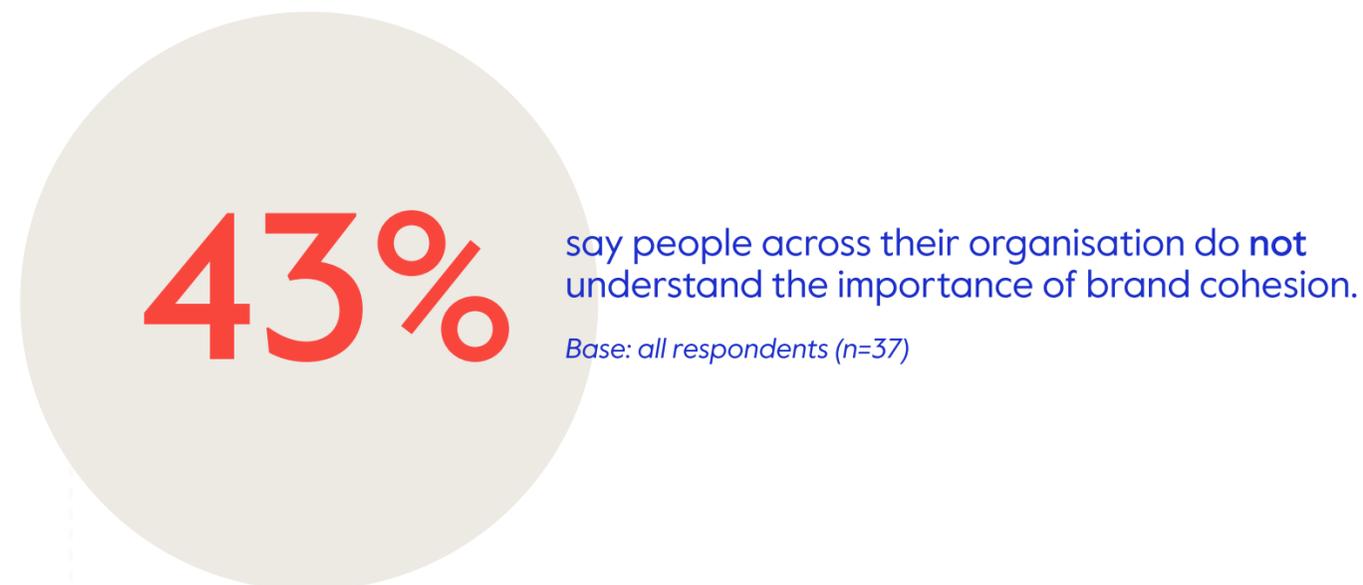
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings point to small teams under sustained pressure. Brand is rarely resourced as a strategic function, and inconsistency itself becomes a drain on already stretched capacity.

Which of these brand challenges have you experienced?

■ Percentage

Challenge	Percentage
Limited in-house expertise or team capacity	81
Limited budget for brand or communications	78
Uncoordinated design or messaging	76
Resistance to change from colleagues or leadership	54
Brand not linked closely enough to organisational strategy	46

Base: all respondents, n=37

Taken together, these responses describe a familiar pattern: brand leaders are expected to deliver clarity, coherence and impact – without the time, authority or resource to do so consistently.

For many respondents, brand cohesion sits at the centre of these frustrations.

43%

say people across their organisation do **not** understand the importance of brand cohesion.

Base: all respondents (n=37)

Where brand literacy is weak, brand systems struggle to hold. Guidance is ignored, adapted, or bypassed entirely – often for the sake of speed or convenience.

Together, these findings point to ingrained systemic issues, with brand cohesion undermined as much by culture as by resource constraints.

What drives 'random acts of branding'?

Pressure and limited understanding of why brand matters
A recurring theme in interviews was a combination of intense time pressure coupled with limited understanding of why brand cohesion matters – particularly outside communications or marketing teams.

"People in delivery roles often think, 'Why is that relevant? Why does that matter?' … It just comes from a lack of understanding of why it does." This lack of understanding is often exacerbated by a reactive communications culture, where urgent needs override planned, coherent brand work.

"For me, it's that reactive culture – often plugging a gap with a solution that, in the longer term, won't actually do anything. It's inefficient."
— Head of Brand, national health charity

Under pressure, teams default to 'getting something out' rather than getting it right – even when they recognise that this undermines consistency.

Lack of senior, organisation-wide brand ownership
Several interviewees pointed to a structural issue underlying many of the challenges described above: in complex organisations, dispersed brand responsibility makes coherence nearly impossible to maintain.

Where brand leadership has been reduced, removed, or diluted through cost-cutting, responsibility often becomes embedded across multiple roles without clear ownership. While this may appear efficient in the short term, it weakens oversight and makes consistency harder to maintain across teams, directorates and sub-brands.

"There isn't a focused brand expert or leader anymore. Brand has been embedded a little bit into other roles, but not really – and that makes it much harder to truly hold and own the brand in a coherent way."
— Director of Communications, national health charity

Interviewees suggested that complex organisations are more likely to experience fragmentation, unless brand is held at a sufficiently senior, cross-organisational level – with explicit ownership, expertise and the authority to influence across departments.

Without that, even well-designed brand systems struggle to survive day-to-day pressures, and inconsistency becomes structural rather than accidental.

Brand is not yet seen as an enabler
Several interviewees suggested that brand and communications often start from a position of low perceived value inside organisations. Rather than being seen as enabling delivery, brand guidance can be viewed as a blocker – something that slows progress rather than supports it.

Where this perception dominates, alignment becomes conditional. Teams engage with brand only once they've seen clear, practical benefits.

"Comms is often seen as a blocker. A big part of my role is showing that we're actually an enabler – that projects are stronger when we're involved, not weaker." — Director of Communications, national health charity

Over time, demonstrating how brand and communications help projects succeed – rather than delay them – can shift this perception and build buy-in.

Overwhelm and intimidation around brand

Brand was also described as intimidating, particularly for colleagues without design or communications backgrounds.

"It can be overwhelming if you're not familiar with branding or design. People struggle with it because it can feel intimidating."
— Communications Manager, heritage organisation

One interviewee also questioned whether the language of 'brand' itself creates distance in the third sector. They suggested that brand is often associated with commercial advertising or consumer culture – making it feel misaligned with charitable missions and values.

"Brand can be seen as quite bubblegum. It gets knotted into the advertising industry – and maybe in the charity sector, it has to be something else."
— Director of Brand and Communications, racial justice charity

This association can make brand feel superficial or inauthentic, reinforcing reluctance to engage and contributing to avoidance or improvisation. Where the concept itself feels uncomfortable, people are more likely to work around it rather than with it.

In the absence of confidence, shared language or clear support, inconsistency creeps in – not through malice, but through uncertainty.

Lack of shared belief and internal buy-in

Several interviewees pointed to the same issue: if people don't believe in the brand, they won't use it.

"Even the most beautiful rebrand – if your staff won't use it or don't get it – that's going to be a problem." — Head of Brand, national health charity

Without shared belief, brand becomes optional rather than collective – leading to fragmentation across teams, channels and touchpoints.

What this means for trustees, CEOs and brand leaders
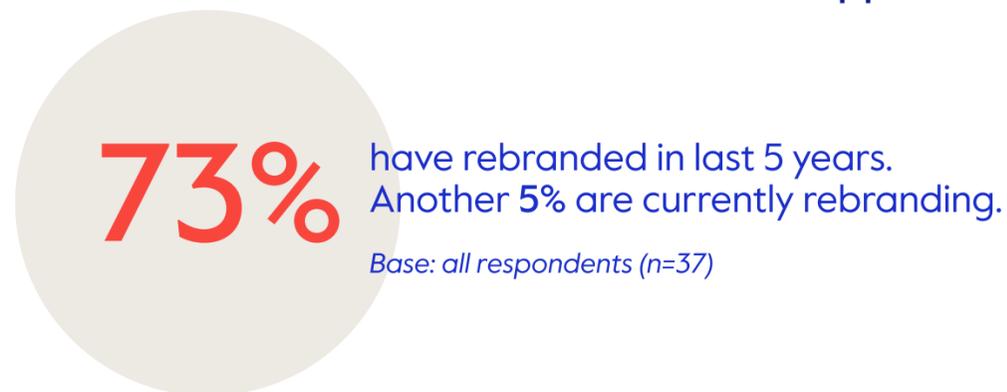Inconsistency is often structural, not behavioural.
See recommendations on resourcing brand properly, clarifying ownership and reducing fragmentation on pages 28-31.

3.

Rebrands are common... and often driven by the same three things

3. Rebrands are common... and often driven by the same three things

Rebranding has become a regular response to strategic pressure, but the conditions under which rebrands happen are often far from ideal.

73%

have rebranded in last 5 years.
Another **5%** are currently rebranding.

Base: all respondents (n=37)

What were the main drivers for the rebrand?

■ Percentage

Driver	Percentage
1. To refine or clarify positioning	79
2. To contemporise the brand's look and feel	72
3. To reach or resonate with new audiences	59
To reflect a shift in mission, scope, or strategy	45
Brand not linked closely enough to organisational strategy	46
To address reputational challenges	45

Base: all respondents, n=29

What would have made the process smoother or more effective?

Rebrands often happen under severe time and capacity pressure
Many respondents described rebrands taking place under significant time and capacity constraints. In several cases, teams felt they were moving too fast to properly explore options, engage stakeholders, or build supporting content – even when the strategic rationale for change was sound.

"Lack of time/resource is the biggest challenge."

"We're a small team with competing priorities."

"More time… lengthening the process would have supported better decision-making."

"It happened in a very short space of time."

Rebrands are often constrained by access, autonomy and governance
Several respondents pointed to governance and decision-making structures as critical factors. Limited access to senior decision-makers, unclear autonomy, or late-stage involvement of trustees and executives often slowed progress or diluted clarity.

"Easier and more regular access to key decision makers."

"More autonomy."

"Exec involvement."

"Better buy in from top management."

"Trustees invited to see brand (not contribute though!)."

Base: Survey respondents (n=17)

What would have made the process smoother or more effective?

Internal buy-in is the make-or-break factor
Respondents repeatedly emphasised that internal buy-in – from staff, leadership and operational teams – mattered as much as the design outcome itself. Where buy-in was weak, rebrands delivered cosmetic change rather than meaningful transformation.

"Better buy in from internal staff as to the importance of the change."

"Better communication from operational staff to their clients."

"Continued ownership of the brand."

Evidence and measurement are valued, but often lacking
Several respondents expressed a desire for stronger evidence, measurement and post-launch evaluation – particularly around language, messaging and audience response – but noted that limited data, time or research access often constrained this ambition.

"Understanding how to measure the impact of the rebrand and help to implement KPIs."

"More data available for our audiences."

"In future I would select language only after significant A/B testing."

Base: Survey respondents (n=17)

What helps rebrands succeed in practice?

The most successful rebrands were not necessarily the most ambitious or best funded – they were the ones that were well phased, well prepared, and had clear success metrics from the outset.

Better phasing: strategy before identity
Several respondents and interviewees reflected that rebrands worked best when they followed a clear sequence – strategy first, then naming and visual identity. When this order was reversed, teams reported confusion and ineffective outcomes.

"We should have done a business development strategy first, then a renaming and then a new brand – but we're kind of doing it backwards. I wouldn't recommend that to anybody." *— Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

This reinforces a wider theme across the research: brand is most effective when it is anchored in organisational clarity, not used as a shortcut to achieve it.

Start from strong research and insight
Interviewees emphasised the importance of a clear evidence base at the outset of a rebrand. The research demonstrated confusion – internally and externally – about what the organisation stood for, creating a shared rationale for change.

"We had the voice of clients, staff and commissioners all saying, 'I don't really know what you stand for – it's confusing.' That evidence became the influence tool to show why change was needed." *— Director of Communications, national health charity*

Starting from a place of insight not only clarified the case for change, but also helped secure buy-in across the organisation.

Preparation – particularly with boards and senior leaders

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of significant upfront preparation, especially when trustees or senior leaders were closely involved in decision-making.

This preparation included:

- agreeing roles and decision rights early
- setting expectations about what brand can and cannot do
- creating space for discussion *before* key decisions were required

"It took a lot of prep work from myself, the director and the branding consultancy to manage the whole process. Without that preparation, I think it could have gone highly wrong." — *Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

This echoes findings from Theme I: access alone is not enough – careful orchestration of the process is often what prevents friction later on.

Planning for impact, not just launch

Finally, respondents reflected on the importance of thinking early about how success would be measured – something that was often overlooked in practice.

Several noted that while visual change was delivered successfully, the ability to demonstrate impact afterwards was limited by a lack of agreed metrics or baseline data.

"We couldn't really track the brand. You have to demonstrate impact through things like social engagement or website traffic and that needs to be considered right at the beginning." — *Brand Lead, national charity*

This points to a recurring gap between intention and execution: brand leaders want to evidence impact, but are not always supported to do so systematically.

Brand is not a one-off project

Several interviewees stressed that successful rebrands are not treated as finite projects with a clear end point, but as something that needs to be actively tended over time.

One interviewee reflected on how easy it is to fall into a 'project mindset' – seeing brand as something that is set, launched and then left – despite operating in fast-moving, complex environments.

"That's the rookie mistake – seeing brand as a project with a beginning and an end. Of course it isn't. When you operate in such a dynamic environment, and the world is changing so rapidly, you have to be thinking about brand continuously. Otherwise you just reach a crisis point, have to reinvest, and start all over again." — *Chief Executive, arts organisation*

This perspective reframes brand not as a moment of transformation, but as an ongoing strategic discipline. Without continuous attention, organisations risk drifting out of alignment, forcing periodic and more disruptive resets.

Install ongoing brand stewardship

Several interviewees linked this point directly to brand ownership. Rebrands were more likely to embed successfully where responsibility for the brand was clearly held, and where someone was empowered not only to steward guidelines, but to maintain the policies, processes and decision-making frameworks that support consistent use over time.

"Brand only really works when someone owns it – not just the guidelines, but the policies and procedures that make sure it's actually used properly across the organisation." *— Director of Communications, national health charity*

Without that ongoing stewardship, even well-phased, insight-led rebrands risk losing coherence as pressures re-emerge and priorities shift.

Resist the 'silver bullet' instinct

One interviewee cautioned against treating rebrands as a default solution to deeper organisational challenges. They expressed frustration that charities sometimes reach for a rebrand in the hope it will resolve issues that sit elsewhere – such as clarity, consistency or capability.

"There's a belief that you just do a rebrand and the problem gets solved. People keep throwing it at the issue because they think, 'That'll fix it.'"
— Director of Brand and Communications, racial justice charity

From their perspective, the more productive starting point is often to ask why the existing brand is not working – and what activity, investment or consistency has (or hasn't) been put behind it.

They also emphasised the importance of giving brands time to embed, rather than constantly refreshing or changing direction.

"You've launched it – now be consistent. If your team is fed up seeing the same image every day, then tough, because the millions haven't seen it."

"In the early stages, be consistent. Live it. Give it time."

In some cases, the most effective approach is to work with what already exists – refining and humanising elements of the brand rather than starting again.

"Don't reinvent the wheel. See what's working, see what's not working."

Taken together, these reflections suggest that successful brand change is not always about doing more, or doing something new – but about focus, consistency and knowing when change is genuinely needed.

What this means for trustees, CEOs and brand leaders
Rebrands succeed when they are well-phased, stewarded and treated as organisational change.
See recommendations on preparation, governance and ongoing ownership on pages 28-31.

4.

Organisations value evidence in theory… but not always in practice

4. Organisations value evidence in theory... but not always in practice

Brand leaders overwhelmingly value audience research, yet many feel it has less weight than it should within their organisations.

This gap between perceived importance and actual impact is one of the most significant tensions uncovered in the study.

92%

felt that audience research was vital or important in persuading internal stakeholders

Base: all respondents (n=37)

8%

believed that audience research was **always decisive**. 48% said it was **often influential, but not always decisive.**

Base: all respondents (n=37)

When evidence lands, it lands powerfully, but organisational culture determines whether it is heard.

Can you recall a time when evidence helped you defend or advance a brand decision?

Evidence helps resolve ambiguity and build shared clarity
Of the 37 brand leaders surveyed, 25 described using audience research to bring clarity where internal understanding was fragmented – particularly around brand architecture, naming, navigation and positioning. In these cases, evidence acted as a shared reference point, helping teams and boards align around a clearer direction.

"Members survey results showed that policy and campaigning mattered most, which helped shape a sharper strategy and brand voice."
— Brand Lead, membership organisation

"User research showed that our current approach limited user journeys between the different brands – with users recognising only one element of what we do, rather than the whole package." *— Brand Lead, national charity*

Evidence strengthens confidence – even when minds aren't changed
Respondents also noted that evidence doesn't always change minds – particularly at senior or trustee level – but it can still play a critical role in strengthening confidence, influencing others in the room, or legitimising decisions that might otherwise be dismissed as subjective.

"We used research and insight to defend the brand proposition when the Chair didn't like it. It didn't change their view, but it did influence other Board members." *— Brand Lead, charity*

Base: Survey respondents (n=25)

Taken together, these responses suggest that audience research is widely seen as essential – not just for validating brand decisions, but also for building shared understanding, confidence and alignment.

However, the influence of evidence cannot be taken for granted. Whether it is acted upon depends on organisational culture, decision-making norms and whose voices ultimately carry weight.

Why is evidence not always acted upon?

Across interviews, brand leaders and senior leaders agreed on one thing: evidence matters. Where views diverged was in *how decisive it should be* and what gets in the way when it fails to land.

Bias shapes how evidence is commissioned, presented and received

Several interviewees pointed first to bias – on both sides of the table – as a fundamental reason evidence loses traction.

"What stops research from being persuasive? Bias... bias from the team that have commissioned or interpreted it, and bias from the people who are hearing it." — *Director of Communications, national health charity*

On one side, commissioning teams may – consciously or not – frame research questions or interpret findings in ways that reinforce a preferred direction. On the other, senior decision-makers may selectively hear or dismiss evidence that conflicts with their instincts, politics or prior beliefs.

In these situations, evidence is present, but its persuasive power is weakened before discussion even begins.

Ego, taste and power can override audience insight

Several interviewees described moments where audience evidence was sidelined in favour of personal preference – particularly at trustee or board level.

One brand leader was clear that this often reflects a failure to separate personal taste from audience need.

"Then it is ego... you're not the audience. You have to let go of that. It's not meant for you." — *Director of Brand and Communications, Racial justice charity*

Others described how brand is sometimes reduced to subjective opinion, with trustees collapsing brand into marketing or aesthetics. "I don't like the orange, I prefer the red." (Trustee feedback, recalled by interviewee).

Where power dynamics are strong – and where brand or audience expertise is limited at board level – the loudest or most senior voice can outweigh data. In these environments, evidence may be presented, but influence depends on who holds authority in the room.

Evidence can strengthen confidence – even when it isn't decisive

Interviewees noted that evidence does not always determine the final outcome of brand decisions – particularly at senior or trustee level. However, this did not make it redundant. Instead, evidence was often described as playing a critical supporting role: strengthening confidence, legitimising professional judgement, and helping brand leaders hold their ground in contested conversations.

One interviewee described consistently 'front-loading' brand conversations with evidence, not because it guaranteed agreement, but because it changed the terms of the discussion.

"I always fight to show that brand is not just about pretty pictures. I front-load everything with evidence all the time. How else do you sell what we do?"
— Director of Brand and Communications, racial justice charity

Others reflected that even where compromise was still required, evidence helped move conversations beyond personal opinion. It created a shared reference point, reducing the sense that decisions were based purely on taste or hierarchy.

In this way, evidence was valued not only for its ability to persuade, but for its capacity to stabilise decision-making – improving the quality of discussion, even when it did not ultimately decide the outcome.

For complex decisions, evidence is an input – not a substitute for leadership

One interviewee, a chief executive of a cultural organisation, offered a more nuanced perspective on the role of evidence in major brand decisions. While strongly supportive of audience research in principle, they cautioned against treating it as automatically decisive in complex, long-standing organisations.

They noted that survey responses often reflect the views of those who already know and value the organisation, creating an inherent bias. Qualitative research, while rich, can also surface a wide range of divergent views without pointing clearly to a single direction.

"You often get responses from people who already know you and probably like you. You end up with 101 different opinions, and sometimes there isn't a clear steer about what the organisation should be."

From this perspective, evidence is essential for surfacing blind spots and informing thinking, but it cannot replace leadership judgement, sector experience or strategic responsibility.

"At some point you have to ask, what's the point of my being here if we're just going to do exactly what the research says?"

In these contexts, evidence is one input among several – valuable and necessary, but not sufficient on its own.

A shared tension

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a central tension. Brand leaders want – and need – evidence to carry weight, particularly when navigating internal politics or advocating for change. Senior leaders value evidence too, but see it as one input among many in complex strategic decisions.

Where evidence succeeds, it is often because it is well-designed, well-framed, and introduced into cultures that are open to challenge. Where it fails, the barrier is rarely the data itself – but bias, power, confidence and decision-making norms.

This helps explain why evidence is widely valued in theory, but inconsistently acted upon in practice.

What this means for trustees, CEOs and brand leaders

Evidence is most effective when cultures allow it to be heard.
See recommendations on neutral facilitation, evidence-led decision-making and power dynamics

5.

Brand leadership is becoming more complex – emotionally as well as structurally

5. Brand leadership is becoming more complex – emotionally as well as structurally

Across survey responses and interviews, brand leadership emerged as a role that is expanding in scope and intensity. Brand leaders described growing responsibility, continual case-making, and accountability without commensurate authority. The role is becoming more complex, even if that complexity is not always formally recognised.

What follows are the key pressures shaping that experience.

What are the pressures?

Holding responsibility without the conditions to do the job well
Many brand leaders described being accountable for brand outcomes while lacking the time, budget, authority or access needed to deliver them effectively.

Survey responses repeatedly referenced:

- lack of time and resource
- the need for greater autonomy
- limited access to decision-makers

As one survey respondent put it simply: "Lack of time and resource is the biggest challenge."

This creates a structural strain. Brand leaders are often answerable for results they do not fully control – a condition that generates constant pressure, even where it is accepted as part of the role.

The hidden labour of persuasion and explanation
Alongside delivery, brand leaders described spending significant emotional energy justifying and explaining the value of their work internally.

Survey respondents repeatedly called for:

- better internal buy-in
- greater senior understanding
- clearer ways to evidence impact

One survey respondent articulated the emotional cost of this misrecognition and the missed opportunity it represents.

"I'd love it if internal stakeholders appreciated the work we do to give our audience a consistent and positive brand experience as much as our external stakeholders do. It would move us away from being seen as the 'brand police', and towards a more engaged group of internal brand ambassadors."
— Head of Communications, education & skills

This points to a form of emotional labour that is largely invisible – repeatedly making the case for brand's value, translating it into acceptable language, and managing resistance with care.

Absorbing organisational complexity and legacy issues

Several respondents described inheriting brands that had been neglected, fragmented, or shaped by poorly phased decisions.

"When I joined the organisation it had been 'left'. [...] The process was more painful than it should have been."

In these situations, brand leaders are often expected to repair structural problems they did not create – rebuilding coherence, restoring confidence, and absorbing the consequences of past decisions.

This work carries a strong sense of responsibility for recovery, not just improvement.

The emotional weight of mission-driven work

For many interviewees, brand leadership was described as emotionally charged by default. Working in mission-driven organisations means the work is closely tied to values, identity and lived experience – and rarely feels neutral.

One chief executive described the personal demands of holding that responsibility.

"You have to give so much. As a leader, you've got to give yourself – fighting tooth and claw to make something work, working long hours, pushing yourself out of your comfort zone day in, day out." — *Chief Executive, arts organisation*

They also spoke about the constant tension involved in stewarding a brand with integrity.

"You're trying to be respectful of the organisation, whilst also holding that in tension with what the organisation needs to do. It's flipping hard – and often you feel people don't quite understand that."

Others highlighted the emotional exposure that comes with visibility – from handling distressing stories and media scrutiny, to riding the highs and lows of public response.

"You're unpacking the client experience – you're right in the detail of that emotion – and then you're presenting it to a completely different audience."
— *Head of Brand, national health charity*

"When something you've worked on doesn't land as you hoped, it can be really heartbreaking." — *Communications Manager, heritage organisation*

Growing complexity inside structures that haven't caught up

Several interviewees argued that the emotional strain of the role is intensified by a structural mismatch. As brand becomes more central to organisational strategy, many roles and reporting lines still position it as tactical or secondary.

One brand leader described the cumulative effect bluntly:

"I think it's one of the most brutal roles in the organisation. You're always fighting battles." — *Director of Brand and Communications, racial justice charity*

Brand leaders described navigating:

- misunderstanding of brand as logos or aesthetics
- senior cultures shaped by ego and power rather than expertise
- constant change alongside chronic under-investment

Together, these conditions mean brand leadership increasingly involves holding tension – between mission and message, care and conviction, stability and change – inside systems that are still catching up with the strategic reality of brand.

A role under strain, but not without resilience
Despite these pressures, interviewees also spoke about what makes the role sustainable – supportive teams, trusted peers, and leadership cultures that recognise emotional as well as strategic labour.

Where that support exists, brand leaders described being able to cope and even thrive. Where it does not, the same demands quickly become overwhelming.

This raises a critical question for the sector: as brand leadership becomes more complex, are organisations adapting fast enough to support the people doing this work?

What this means for trustees, CEOs and brand leaders
Brand leadership is becoming more complex, but support has not kept pace. See recommendations on role clarity, authority, and recognising emotional labour

Despite the challenges described so far, brand leaders are far from pessimistic. Across interviews and open comments, there was a clear sense of ambition – not just for stronger brands, but for healthier ways of working. This next section brings together those hopes and aspirations: a picture of what brand leadership *could* look like if organisations choose to invest, trust and think long-term.

A shared ambition for the future

Brand as a source of pride and momentum

"When I see the brand being used really well, I get so excited. When people compliment it, I get so, so excited."

Treating brand as an asset and investing accordingly

"I have a feeling it's coming back. Organisations cut brand first, then see the dip get worse – and realise they've stopped investing in one of their biggest assets."

"I'm seeing more senior brand roles coming up in really impressive organisations. The ones that get it right understand what an asset they have – and they keep feeding it."

Brand leadership at the top table

"I want to see a brand or communications expert at the top table in all organisations."

"I'd love to see brand leadership recognised as something strategic – not just a 'nice to have', or a compliance exercise."

Brand as a continuous, strategic agenda – not a one-off

"For brand to be a standard item on board and staff agendas – not something considered once every few years as a one-off challenge."

Embracing change, technology and new definitions of brand

"We want to embrace AI. If you're not embracing it, you're going to fall behind. It frees the role up to be much more strategic – big picture thinking, campaigns, future business planning – not just the brunt of delivery."

"We have to be hopeful. We have to set ourselves up to be adaptable and embrace new technologies, rather than run away from them."

"Maybe we need to really look at the word 'brand'. Why do we have to follow commercial lines? Maybe that's our answer."

"In five years' time, the brand role – whatever it's called – should be fully integrated at a strategic level across the organisation."

Recommendations

For trustees

- **Treat brand as a strategic asset, not a communications output**
  Where brand is tied to mission, positioning, and long-term impact, it requires strategic discussion – not just final approval.

- **Separate personal taste from audience need**
  Use evidence to distinguish what feels familiar or comfortable from what best serves beneficiaries, supporters and partners.

- **Create clarity around decision rights**
  Agree early where trustees advise, where they challenge, and where specialist expertise should lead.

- **Build brand literacy at board level**
  Understanding brand beyond logos and campaigns improves the quality of oversight and reduces friction.

- **Strengthen board capability through relevant expertise**
  Governance reviews and trustee recruitment that include skills such as brand strategy, marketing, finance and membership can materially improve conversations.

- **Support continuity, not just moments of change**
  Brand needs ongoing stewardship – not attention only at rebrand points.

- **Introduce term limits to counter legacy thinking**
  Regular board refreshes and term limits can help counter fixed mindsets rooted in the way things have always been done.

Recommendations

For CEOs and senior leadership teams

- **Model brand as part of organisational strategy**
  When leaders treat brand as core, others follow.

- **Give brand leaders positional authority – not just responsibility**
  Accountability without access, time or autonomy creates pressure rather than clarity.

- **Create conditions for evidence to be heard**
  Encourage challenge, reduce hierarchy-driven decisions, and allow research to inform thinking – not just justify decisions already made.

- **Resist dilution for comfort**
  Playing safe often weakens impact. Support teams to hold conviction when change feels uncomfortable.

- **Invest for the long term**
  Cutting brand first may offer short-term relief, but the long-term cost is often greater.

- **Involve trustees earlier and more openly**
  Mixed workshops allow board members to witness how decisions are shaped, rather than being presented with a fait accompli.

- **Acknowledge the emotional load – brand leadership carries pressure**
  Provide peer support, boundaries and trusted allies to your team.

- **Build confidence and gravitas in brand leaders**
  Provide mentoring and support – particularly for younger team members – to help them articulate clearly and hold space at board level.

- **Treat rebranding as change management, not a design exercise**
  Understanding, buy-in and behaviour change matter as much as the final output.

For brand, marketing and communications leaders

- **Anchor brand work in organisational goals**
  Strategy-first builds credibility and protects brand from being seen as superficial or optional.

- **Use evidence to frame, not fight, conversations**
  Research works best when it creates shared reference points rather than trying to 'win' arguments.

- **Build internal champions, not just compliance**
  Belief and understanding drive consistency more effectively than rules alone.

- **Name and protect ongoing stewardship**
  Clear ownership – supported by policies and processes – matters as much as guidelines.

- **Equip the organisation to succeed**
  Templates, tools and practical guidance help teams apply brand confidently and consistently.

- **Phase the work carefully**
  Start with strategy and positioning before moving into naming or visual identity.

- **Plan for measurement from the outset**
  Agree what success looks like, how it will be measured, and what data is realistically available – making long-term impact easier to demonstrate.

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For agencies and external partners

- **Support decision-making and governance, not just creative output**
  Help organisations clarify roles, decision rights and phasing alongside the creative work.

- **Support internal buy-in, not just senior sign-off**
  Brands embed when staff understand the 'why', not just the 'what'.

- **Plan for what happens after launch**
  Build capability, confidence and systems that outlive the project.

- **Respect sector context**
  Charity brands operate under scrutiny, emotion and constraint – approaches need to reflect that reality.

- **Help clients tell the internal story and improve brand literacy**
  Clear narratives, plain English and practical materials (including presentation tools) make it easier to build internal support.

A note on facilitation and external support

Across the research, respondents highlighted the value of structured facilitation in navigating complex brand decisions – particularly where trustees, senior leaders and specialists bring different perspectives, levels of confidence and decision rights to the table.

Interviewees pointed to several reasons for this, including the ability to introduce evidence in a way that feels neutral rather than personal, to clarify roles and decision-making boundaries, and to support difficult conversations without them becoming politicised.

70%

In the survey, over 70% of respondents said they saw consultants or external facilitators as valuable in supporting brand and rebrand work.

Base: all respondents (n=37)

"Perspective is power. Coming at it objectively – without all the internal detail – really helps."
— *Head of Brand, national health charity*

"We could have done the brand journey ourselves, but it wouldn't have been as strong. The specialist research expertise, the outcomes – and the ability to influence – made a real difference. And it would have taken us much longer."
— *Director of Communications, national health charity*

"Using externals is really empowering for internal teams. It gives them space to think – and to contribute – rather than always having to facilitate."
— *Chief Executive, arts organisation*

Research methodology

This research was designed as an exploratory, mixed-method study to understand the realities of brand leadership across the UK third sector. It combines:

- a short quantitative survey
- open-text qualitative responses
- in-depth interviews with senior brand leaders

The approach prioritised breadth of perspective and depth of insight, rather than statistical representativeness.

Survey
An online survey was distributed through professional networks and sector channels, including CharityComms, and shared via direct outreach and peer recommendation.

The survey received 37 responses from senior brand, marketing and communications professionals working across charities, funders, cultural institutions and policy bodies in the UK.

Interviews
To deepen and contextualise the survey findings, six in-depth interviews were conducted with senior brand leaders.

Interviews were semi-structured, allowing consistent themes to be explored while leaving space for reflection and nuance.

How the data was analysed

- Quantitative survey responses were reviewed for patterns and directional signals, rather than statistical significance.
- Open-text responses were thematically analysed and grouped into recurring themes.
- Interview insights were used to explain, nuance and bring the survey findings to life, rather than to validate them statistically.

Themes were developed iteratively, with attention paid to how frequently issues were raised, the strength of language used, and the consistency of experiences across different organisational contexts.

Limitations
As with any exploratory study, there are limitations to be acknowledged.

- **Sample size** – With 37 survey respondents, findings should be read as directional rather than representative of the entire sector.
- **Self-selection bias** – Participants chose to take part and may have a particular interest in brand or communications, which may skew perspectives.
- **Senior-level lens** – The research reflects the experiences of those leading or responsible for brand. It does not capture frontline or trustee perspectives directly.
- **Timing and context** – The research was conducted from November 2025 - January 2026. Responses reflect a period of ongoing economic pressure and organisational uncertainty, which may shape views on investment, capacity and risk.

These factors frame how the findings should be interpreted.

Using this research
This report is intended to:

- bring to light shared challenges and tensions
- prompt reflection and discussion
- support better conversations between brand leaders, senior leadership and trustees

It is not intended to prescribe one-size-fits-all solutions or to act as a benchmark study.

Organisations and cause areas

Respondents and interviewees represented a wide range of organisational types and cause areas, including:

Arts & culture

Community

Democracy

Education & Skills

Environment & Food

Farming and forestry

Governance and sustainability

Government

Health and Social Care

Heritage & conservation

Housing

Human Rights

Military

Older adults

Place-based grant funding

Poverty alleviation

Racial justice

Search and rescue

Social change

About The Co-Foundry

I'm Sue, a brand identity consultant with over 30 years' experience. I'm a big believer in the transformative power of branding and great design to help organisations thrive. I work with incredible not-for-profits and third sector organisations – entities fuelled by purpose and genuine belief, doing what they can to create a better world for us all.

My team of specialists and I work collaboratively with clients in efficient, focused steps to help them find and communicate their distinct identity.

I set up The Co-Foundry because I believe in a more personal, more inclusive way of approaching branding. We work closely with our clients and their teams to forge brands imbued with meaning, using co-creation and interactive discovery sessions to bring everyone on the journey.

I conducted this research because I see, every day, the passion and ambition of the people behind the brand – chief executives, brand leads, and marketing and communications teams – working against the tide to build their organisation's impact through the power of brand.

Reinvigorating your brand with a brand refresh or rebrand will get to the heart of what makes your organisation unique. It will authentically define your vision and values while positioning you as the ideal choice for the people you're looking to reach. The Co-Foundry team is on hand to help re-cast your vision.

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Looking to rebrand but unsure where to start? This is the only guide you'll ever need. It will help you navigate the process and get on the right track, so you can create a brand that drives greater impact.

Where to
start with your
rebrand project

A guide for third sector organisations

Every journey begins with a single step

But it needs to be a step in the right direction. And if you're looking to rebrand, that's where our guide comes in.

'Where to start with your rebrand project' has been written specifically for third sector organisations that recognise brand as a driver of greater impact. It's a five-step framework that will help you lay the foundations for a confident brand, one that has the buy-in of teams and stakeholders baked in from the start.

No big creative promises or sitting through glossy presentations – our guide is focused on what matters to you most: your purpose and the people you serve.

Creative and energising, it'll lead you to a brand identity that will last. One that will fit, resonate and perform. One that can evolve with your organisation and that you won't feel the urge to change in a year's time.

It's a printed guide, made to be held and designed to look great on your desk where it will be referred to over and over again. Definitely not one to languish half-forgotten in a downloads folder.

So, take the next step →

This report is dedicated to the brand leaders who work quietly and persistently behind the scenes, often under pressure and with limited support. Thank you to everyone who contributed their time and insight – your voice matters.

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