Rewriting the Story: Navigating Nonprofit Brand Evolution

Abstract

This case examines the strategic crossroads faced by Library Legacy Builders (LLB)[1], a nonprofit originally founded as a family initiative to build libraries in rural Mexico. By the end of 2022, LLB had evolved into an international organization with a broadened mission: constructing libraries and offering mentorship programs to support youth literacy and education. As the organization prepared for its most critical fundraising gala, the Chief Marketing and Development Officer received a proposal from its marketing agency to rebrand LLB to reflect its expanded services and mission.

The case traces LLB's trajectory from its grassroots origins to a nonprofit navigating financial growth, employee turnover, program scaling, and impact measurement. It highlights LLB's branding evolution, culminating in a dilemma: whether to rebrand just weeks before the upcoming gala to position for future growth or wait until after the event to avoid donor confusion and marketing disruption.

Like service-based for-profit brands, nonprofits rely on intangibles such as clarity, trust, and emotional resonance while also emphasizing mission alignment and stewardship to donors and beneficiaries. The case examines rebranding through four lenses: (1) identifying what problem rebranding aims to solve, (2) what story the rebranding tells and to whom, (3) whether rebranding leads to additional funds raised, awareness, and positive stakeholder sentiment, and (4) internal alignment and buy-in from the board, staff, partners, and community.

Introduction

Library Legacy Builders (LLB) had come a long way since its humble beginnings in 2015. What started as Arnie Carter's family project to build one library in Atexcac in rural Mexico—inspired by his deep connection with the villagers during a two-year mission trip—had grown into an international nonprofit serving thousands of children weekly through libraries and mentorship programs. Along with this growth, LLB faced pressures relevant to many service and credence-based organizations, including nonprofits: maintaining adequate cash flow and generating sufficient revenue, evolving programs to meet the needs of the communities they served (their primary target market), and needing to communicate their mission to diverse stakeholders.

The story of how Library Legacy Builders reached this crossroads reflected its evolution from Arnie's deep connection with the villagers of Atexcac, to its position as a professional nonprofit managing nearly half a million dollars in contributions. As LLB grew from a family's mission to bring books to one Mexican village, into an international organization seeking corporate partnerships, it faced the challenge of scaling its impact while still preserving the personal connections that had sparked its founding mission. Understanding LLB's journey, and the tension between its grassroots origins and continuing growth, was central to appreciating why this rebranding decision was significant.

By early 2023, LLB faced mounting pressure to align its brand with its expanded mission. With its most important fundraising gala approaching, leadership needed to decide whether a rebrand could strengthen positioning or risk undermining donor confidence.

[1] The organization's name, the names of individuals, and logos have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Prologue: From Mission Trip to Mission Driven (Phase 1: 2015 - 2018)

Humble Origins. Arnie Carter, CEO and founder of Library Legacy Builders, fell in love with the people of the remote Mexican village of Atexcac during a two-year mission trip living in the community. "They are some of the best, most loving people you'll ever meet. Even though many of them had so very little in material possessions, they freely gave me so much in the form of love, support, and treating me like family. There's a lady in Atexcac who hardly has anything, who used to travel three hours a day to sell vegetables she grew in her garden, and she'd give us lunch."

When friends in the village mentioned wanting books for their children, Arnie knew he had to act. Books had transformed his own life during difficult times. "Books are something that brought hope to my life. Growing up, my family was torn apart, and I went through various struggles, from being homeless for a time to depression. This is when I was given a Lord of the Rings set by my mother. Before this point I didn't care much for books, but I couldn't put these books down. I read the entire series in two weeks." He knew the power of books and how they can turn not just a single person's life around, but an entire community's. He wanted to give the children of Mexico the same opportunities.

First Library. In 2015, Arnie and his wife, Rachel, began raising funds to renovate a building into Atexcac's first library. It was a fun family project for them where they could make a difference for people they knew and loved. Through GoFundMe campaigns and odd jobs, they raised $5,000 to provide 500 books, eight computers, software, printers, and a projector. "Though our donation seemed small, when we arrived, the Village met us with a brass band and dignitaries from around the region. The greatest joy of this experience was seeing the look of amazement on a small girl's face when she opened the pages of a book for the first time," Arnie fondly reflected.

Unexpected Growth. The success of the first library sparked immediate interest from others, when a librarian from another village who attended the grand opening reached out about building a library in their community. Though the Carters hadn't intended to start a nonprofit, requests to build libraries kept coming. In 2018, they decided to formalize their efforts by establishing Library Legacy Builders as a nonprofit organization, determined to provide reading and learning opportunities needed to break the cycle of poverty in developing communities.

Turning the Page: Formalizing the Mission (Phase 2: 2018-2019)

Hope Through Books. While the Carters received numerous requests from other communities to replicate the success of their first library in Atexcac, they knew they had to be careful. Arnie was keenly aware of the risk of unintentionally harming the communities they aimed to serve: "The problem with charity work is if you don't do it right, you can do more damage than good."

The organization's mission consequently evolved to creating longer-term solutions that could help break the cycle of poverty these communities were experiencing. The organization's guiding principle became clear: providing hope through books (Figure 1). As Helene, a volunteer, reflected on her LLB experience in Malawi, "When I first signed up, I thought I was just bringing a library to a random village. What I didn't realize was that I was bringing much more than that. I was bringing these people hope and opportunity."

Figure 1. Locally constructed library, exterior and interior. Source: LLB founder.

Brand Elements. To turn their mission into reality, LLB needed to create public-facing brand elements to represent their new brand, beginning with design. Arnie wanted these elements to reflect their mission of providing hope through books and define their strategy for building libraries in rural communities. Although he originally wanted to name the organization Village Libraries, the Internet domain names were unavailable, reducing discoverability and brand legitimacy. Instead, he settled on "Library Legacy Builders," which reflected their mission and their work's grassroots nature. Without prior experience in graphic design or branding, Arnie turned to 99designs.com for a low-cost logo and recommended brand colors (Figure 2). Arnie also built the organization's first website himself using these brand elements, ensuring LLB had a digital presence. While these initial branding efforts were sufficient for a small nonprofit, they would later prove inadequate as LLB's mission expanded and its partnerships grew.

Figure 2. LLB's initial logo and brand colors. Source: Authors' own work.

The Expedition Experience. LLB's early success stemmed mainly from its distinctive approach to community engagement and volunteer expeditions. Unlike some volunteer organizations that focused on volunteer construction work, LLB created a unique model where library construction operated through a parallel implementation structure. LLB partnered with vetted local contractors and village leadership committees which provided labor and oversight. Community members contributed land, materials, volunteer labor, and maintained library operations, while LLB funded construction materials, books, and technology. Volunteers raised construction funds and then traveled to visit the completed facilities. While this model reduced costs and fostered local ownership, it also required clear coordination and branding alignment. A name change could affect how these construction partners presented LLB in local communities and in formal agreements.

The transformative nature of LLB's volunteer expeditions often inspired deeper engagement with the organization. One notable example was Brian P., a successful wealth planner who was profoundly impacted by his first experience with LLB. He observed that his experience with LLB was a life-changing one that led to his falling in love with the people in Ghana, the country he visited. His connection to LLB's mission deepened through multiple expeditions. Despite a lucrative career earning six figures annually, and though ready to take over his family's business, he felt unfulfilled. In a bold move, he left his career to run LLB's operations at a significantly reduced salary. His business acumen and operational experience proved invaluable in providing LLB with the organizational structure needed for growth.

Corporate Partnerships. One benefit of Brian's involvement was his business expertise and strong network. At his suggestion, Arnie attended a conference where he met Karen Stevens, co-founder and CEO of ShakeSolutions, who was seeking a nonprofit partner. Impressed by Arnie's passion, she launched a March 2019 collaboration featuring a Special Edition bottle with 100% of profits supporting LLB. While the partnership provided valuable exposure and revenue, it also exposed critical branding issues. The logo was too complex to scale and its religious imagery, including a representation of Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue, led some to mistakenly view LLB as a religious organization, creating brand misalignment. These branding inconsistencies raised concerns about whether LLB's identity could support future partnerships.

Expanded Services. LLB recognized the need to rethink both its brand and mission. Its ultimate mission was providing high-quality educational experiences to children, and building libraries was not enough to achieve that mission. After discovering that a lack of reading culture impeded library success, they added a mentorship program. This program connected college students as pen pals with children from the communities they served, helping build English reading and writing skills while supporting academic goals (Figure 3). Although still small in scale during this phase, the mentorship program represented a strategic shift from infrastructure provision to educational outcomes. This shift marked a fundamental change in LLB's value proposition, intensifying pressure to align its brand with its broader educational mission.

Figure 3. Communicating with pen pals. Source: LLB founder.

Expected Growth. LLB was growing consistently, with eight additional libraries built serving over 8500 children during this time. While 2019 revenue did not exceed $50,000, that figure represented total operating revenue—not total project costs. Library construction expenses were offset through designated donations, corporate in-kind contributions, and community co-investment. *This distinction became important as leadership evaluated whether the organization's growth trajectory justified a broader brand identity.* The ShakeSolutions collaboration had revealed technical limitations of LLB's logo and misconceptions about its identity, while the mentorship program indicated that the organization had evolved beyond its initial focus on libraries. As LLB grew from a family project into an established nonprofit offering diverse educational services, it became clear that its brand needed to reflect this transformation better. The organization needed a brand identity that could scale with its growth.

The Next Chapter: Strategically Rebranding for Mission Alignment (Phase 3: 2020-2022)

Brand Guidelines. By 2020, it was clear that LLB's branding failed to reflect the broader scope of its mission. Under the leadership of Arnie Carter and Monica Kennedy, the new volunteer marketing director, LLB began developing an integrated brand strategy to guide the organization toward a cohesive and professional brand.

LLB first used aspirant organizations, such as Pencils of Promise and Charity Water, as inspiration before formalizing its brand foundation around three brand pillars: building *change* by providing access to education and imagination, building *hope* by empowering children through books, and building *connections* by uniting people with purpose. LLB then identified their current audience to develop three key market segments of passionate humanitarians, adventurous travelers, and young working professionals to better target their volunteer recruitment.

LLB next refined its brand identity to be empowering, youthful, and joyful. To ensure this was the case, LLB developed a color palette inspired by nature and people to celebrate youthful joy. The rebranding process culminated in the redesign of LLB's logo and new brand colors (Figure 4). The new logo incorporated the visual element of a book while being simple, scalable, and transferable across platforms. By mid-2020, the rebranding was complete, including an updated website and an internally disseminated brand deck to guide decision-making. With this rebranding, LLB's leaders knew how important it would be to make sure they had a solid business strategy to align with its branding.

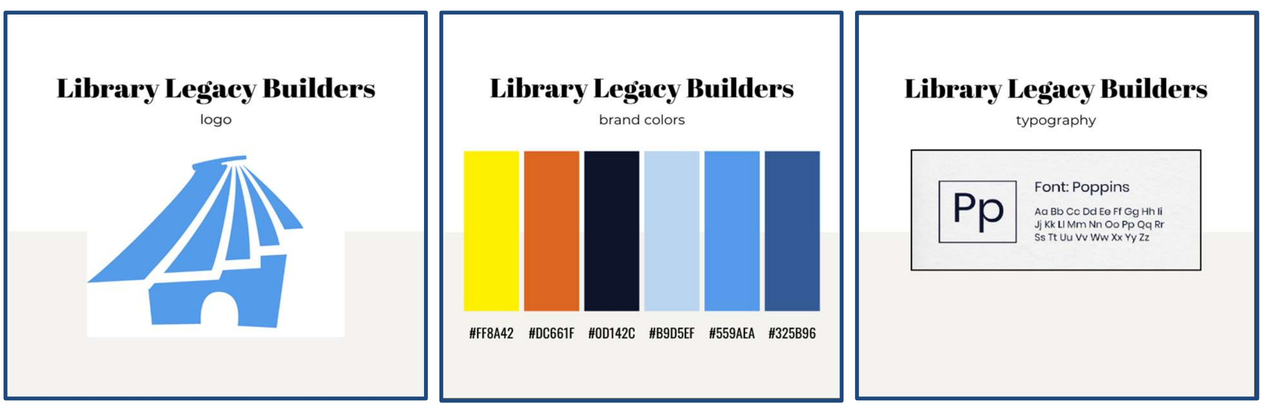

Figure 4. LLB's second logo and brand colors (2020). Source: Authors' own work.

Expanding Mentor Program. As LLB grew, it clarified that its ultimate mission was delivering high-quality educational experiences to children, including mentoring. In early 2020, Brian P., now deeply involved in LLB's operations, visited libraries in Ghana, and learned of a local online mentoring initiative. Intrigued, he visited and discovered an innovative program run by Summit Systems under Kevin Bennet's leadership, connecting children in developing countries with volunteer mentors in Utah via Google Hangouts. "I believe that education is the silver bullet that will alleviate global poverty. That's something we can give," Kevin said about the organization.

Realizing the program was not sufficiently developing reading culture, Brian saw clear synergistic potential. Sharing a vision of ending poverty through education, the organizations merged, retaining the LLB name and welcoming Kevin as a co-founder. With this expansion, LLB's mission evolved from providing hope through books to giving hope through education more broadly, enabling it to address literacy gaps and educational needs more holistically.

Strategy. To achieve its goal of becoming a global platform connecting volunteers with service opportunities, LLB adopted a more structured and sustainable approach. While voluntourism remained a key revenue source, the mentorship program required significant funding without a clear revenue stream. To address this, LLB targeted individuals through digital marketing and fundraising events to recruit volunteers, mentors, and donors. In 2022, LLB hosted its most successful gala, raising over $100,000, but rising program costs and a competitive nonprofit landscape highlighted the need for more sustainable funding. To diversify revenue, LLB expanded corporate partnerships, particularly with multi-level marketing companies, which funded library construction, supported ongoing operations, or allowed employees paid time to mentor. These partnerships strengthened LLB's financial position and expanded its impact.

Measuring Community Impact. As LLB grew, measuring impact became more important but also more complex. While the organization achieved strong outputs (see Exhibit A), including 30,000 mentor sessions and high retention rates, these metrics did not fully capture long-term outcomes such as educational attainment. Data on improved sixth-grade dropout rates[2] were limited by self-reporting and population mobility, and stakeholders prioritized different measures, with corporate partners often seeking compelling narratives and others requiring more rigorous data. This ambiguity complicated the rebranding decision, as leadership questioned whether clearer brand positioning could better communicate LLB's broader impact ahead of the gala and attract larger donors. However, limitations in outcome data made it unclear whether a rebrand would enhance credibility or expose gaps in demonstrated impact.

Exhibit A – Key Metrics & KPIs (through 2022)

Metric	Value
Libraries built	20
Mentor sessions held	30,000
Mentors active	270
Mentor attendance	90%
Mentor retention	98%
Children served weekly	2,000+
Number of colleges and corporate partners	13

[2] In Uganda, sixth-grade dropout rates declined from 68% to 9% after a library was built in a particular community. This percentage decrease was self-reported by the librarian in charge.

Financial Growth. In 2019, its initial reporting year, LLB had generated less than $50,000 in revenue. That revenue figure represented operating revenue, with construction projects largely funded through designated gifts and corporate in-kind contributions. Between 2020 and 2022, LLB achieved remarkable financial progress. Revenue grew by 375%, reaching $449,908 by the end of 2022. Cash on hand also increased from $13,000 to $80,000 during this period. While strategic fundraising events like the annual gala and corporate partnerships drove these improvements, LLB's leadership frequently discussed solvency challenges and the additional funding needed to sustain programs such as its mentorship program, which lacked a sustainable funding source. This growth heightened the stakes of the rebranding decision. With the upcoming gala expected to generate significant funding, leadership considered whether a rebrand could strengthen positioning and attract larger donors or risk undermining momentum if executed poorly. The organization needed to balance opportunity for growth with the risks of disrupting existing donor confidence.

Exhibit B – Financial Summary (selected years)

Year	Summary
2019 (initial reporting year)	< $50,000 revenue
2020	Revenue: $91,558; Net income: ($1,200)
2022	Revenue: $449,908; Net income: $35,394
Cash on hand	$13,000 → $80,000 (2020→2022)

Employee Turnover. Employee turnover challenged LLB's ability to sustain momentum, as resource constraints limited compensation and led to turnover in key roles, including operations and marketing. To stabilize leadership, LLB maintained board continuity with a former executive and hired Jennifer S. as Chief Marketing and Development Officer. Jennifer quickly strengthened donor relationships, including securing a connection with author Linda Newman, whose involvement elevated the upcoming gala. Her leadership was critical as LLB faced the rebranding decision, highlighting the need for clear, consistent messaging to maintain stakeholder confidence during a period of organizational transition.

The Plot Thickens: Promoting the Gala (April 2023)

Marketing the Gala. In early 2023, Library Legacy Builders (LLB) faced a critical juncture as they prepared for their annual fundraising gala on April 15. The stakes were high: the previous year's gala raised over $100,000, and this year's event, hosted at famed author Linda Newman's home, aimed to double that success to $200,000. The gala highlighted learners' achievements in the village of Biwi, Malawi, where over 900 students had benefited from library access. However, with approximately three months to prepare, time was not on LLB's side.

To overcome these time constraints, Arnie and his team hired Impact Innovators, an agency known for delivering exceptional returns on investment for nonprofits. Impact Innovators was contracted at $7,500 monthly to manage public relations, marketing, and talent engagement services to promote the gala. The decision to incur this monthly expense required significant budget adjustments, such as adopting free alternative software to help with assessment and reducing planned travel, to accommodate the expense. Impact Innovators' strategy included securing media appearances for Ms. Newman and leveraging entertainment industry contacts to attract influential attendees.

Rebranding Considerations. As planning for the gala intensified, LLB's brand identity became a central concern. Impact Innovators questioned whether "Library Legacy Builders" accurately reflected the organization's expanded mission, arguing that the name signaled a narrow focus on infrastructure rather than scalable educational impact. At the same time, the internally preferred new name, "Community Collective," presented a critical constraint: the corresponding domain was already owned by an unresponsive third party, forcing consideration of less intuitive alternatives such as "joincommunitycollective.org."

These challenges were amplified by external pressure. Two prospective donors had expressed interest in six-figure commitments tied to scalable mentorship and educational programming, reinforcing the potential upside of repositioning the organization. Marketing agency representatives argued that the current name risked signaling a narrow infrastructure focus. They proposed that unveiling, or at a minimum teasing, a broader brand identity at the gala could position LLB as an educational platform rather than a small construction-focused nonprofit. However, the timing created risk. Leadership had little time to decide whether rebranding could enhance credibility and attract funding or introduce confusion and execution challenges that might undermine the event's success.

On March 13, just five weeks before the gala, Jennifer S. emailed board members on the marketing committee to discuss a potential rebrand. The email outlined potential new names and sought input from marketing advisors on the board.

> *Hello,*
>
> *We've been discussing with Impact Innovators the possibility of changing our name from Library Legacy Builders. While Impact Innovators agrees that a name change could be beneficial, we're only at the stage of trying to come up with some alternatives. In fact, the possibility of a name change isn't even something that has been fully discussed yet internally.*
>
> *A couple of questions:*
>
> *1. What are your thoughts on changing our name from Library Legacy Builders?*
> *2. What do you think of the names: Community Crossroads, Community Core, Community Ed and Community Collective?*
> *3. Do you have any name suggestions?*
>
> *Many thanks!*

Figure 5. Email to LLB's board members. Source: LLB founder.

Decision Point. The email sparked a flurry of activity within LLB as they grappled with whether to rebrand just weeks before their most important fundraising event of the year. While Arnie expressed openness to exploring new branding options, saying, "I never loved the name Library Legacy Builders; it was always unique but super long," the team recognized that the current name had served them well in building recognition and credibility. However, they also acknowledged that it required extensive explanation and might not fully encapsulate their expanded mission.

Impact Innovators emphasized that a memorable name could enhance storytelling and align with LLB's mission. They advised against acronyms due to potential confusion and stressed that memorability outweighed brevity in branding decisions. However, some stakeholders raised concerns about whether a rebrand so close to the gala would create confusion or detract from the event's existing marketing efforts. While the gala typically drew a mixed audience of donors, corporate partners, volunteers, and media—thereby creating an upside for a carefully managed reveal or teaser—it also invited risk if the messaging was incomplete.

As the executive team discussed rebranding, they considered several options. Should they pursue a full rebrand launch prior to or during the gala, knowing that the short timeline increased the rebranding's execution risk? Should they instead tease a new brand, with save-the-date visuals and a "future brand" vignette shared during the gala? Or should they defer any messaging about a potential rebrand until they had more time to carefully assess the possibilities? A full rebrand before the gala offered the potential to reposition LLB immediately and attract major donors, but risked execution challenges and confusion. Delaying the rebrand allowed for careful planning and stakeholder alignment but could miss a critical opportunity to leverage the gala's visibility.

Tied to these options were considerations about the feasibility of purchasing a domain related to the rebrand. LLB knew from prior experience the importance of securing a domain for their chosen name. Should they proceed only if a secure, memorable domain was available or if they could create a deliberate dual-domain transition plan? Or should they consider a descriptive tagline under the current name and revisit a full rebrand after the gala? Finally, there was the issue of rebranding for their field operations. No matter the pre- or post-gala timing, signage, MOUs, and community recognition would require phased updates to prevent confusion for local partners and beneficiaries.

With limited time before the gala, LLB's leadership faced three strategic questions:

1. Should LLB rebrand to better position itself for the future? Why or why not?
2. If LLB's leadership decides to go ahead with the rebrand, should the rebranding change happen before or after the gala? Evaluate the trade-offs of rebranding before versus after the gala.
3. Should LLB commit to a name without securing a strong digital presence?

Readers should consider applying the following frameworks to guide their thinking about these questions and more.

Primary frameworks

- Keller's Brand Equity Pyramid (Does the name limit salience or resonance?)
- Aaker's Brand Equity Model (How would rebranding affect loyalty and awareness?)

Supplementary frameworks

- Brand Evolution Theory (Is mission expansion driving brand misalignment?)
- Brand IDEA Framework (Does the brand reflect integrity, democracy, ethics, and affinity?)