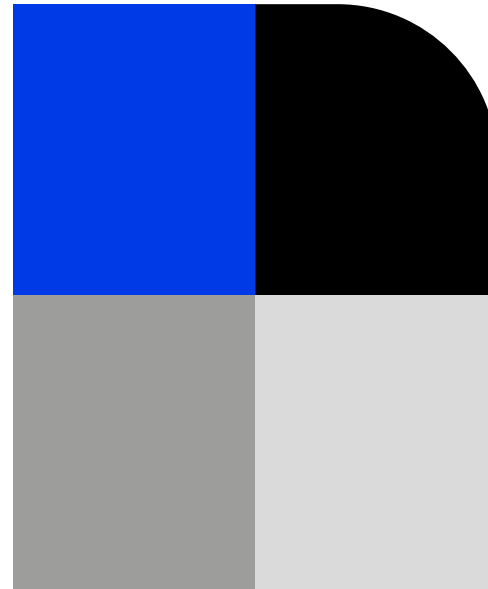


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# Institutional Branding Is Not Corporate Branding with Better Manners

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CORPORATE BRANDING  
PERSUADES



INSTITUTIONAL BRANDING  
SERVES



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# Introduction — A Different Brand Logic

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The branding of a European institution or a European association is still too often judged through criteria borrowed from the corporate world: visibility, differentiation, desirability, expressiveness and preference.

That is exactly where many poor diagnoses begin.

A European institution or association does not always suffer from a lack of impact. More often, it suffers from a lack of clarity, coherence, governance, precision in the way it formulates its mission, and robustness in the way its signs are deployed.

The difference is not cosmetic. It is not a matter of creative corporate brands on one side and well-behaved institutional brands on the other. It is a difference in brand function.

In the corporate world, the brand often acts as a central strategic asset, able to guide the organisation, its culture, its promise and its reputation. The literature on corporate brand orientation even describes the corporate brand as a centripetal force that guides the organisation and informs its strategy.<sup>[1]</sup>

In the public and institutional sector, the logic changes. Research on public branding stresses that private-sector branding principles cannot simply be transferred to the public sector, precisely because public organisations face specific challenges of legitimacy, accountability, governance and stakeholder relationships.<sup>[2]</sup>

This publication draws on more than 30 years of work with international institutions, European agencies and representative organisations, helping them give clearer form to complex mandates, collective voices and public responsibilities.

This is the central argument of this publication: institutional branding is not corporate branding made more cautious. It is a different exercise, governed by a different logic of legitimacy, governance, responsibility and design.

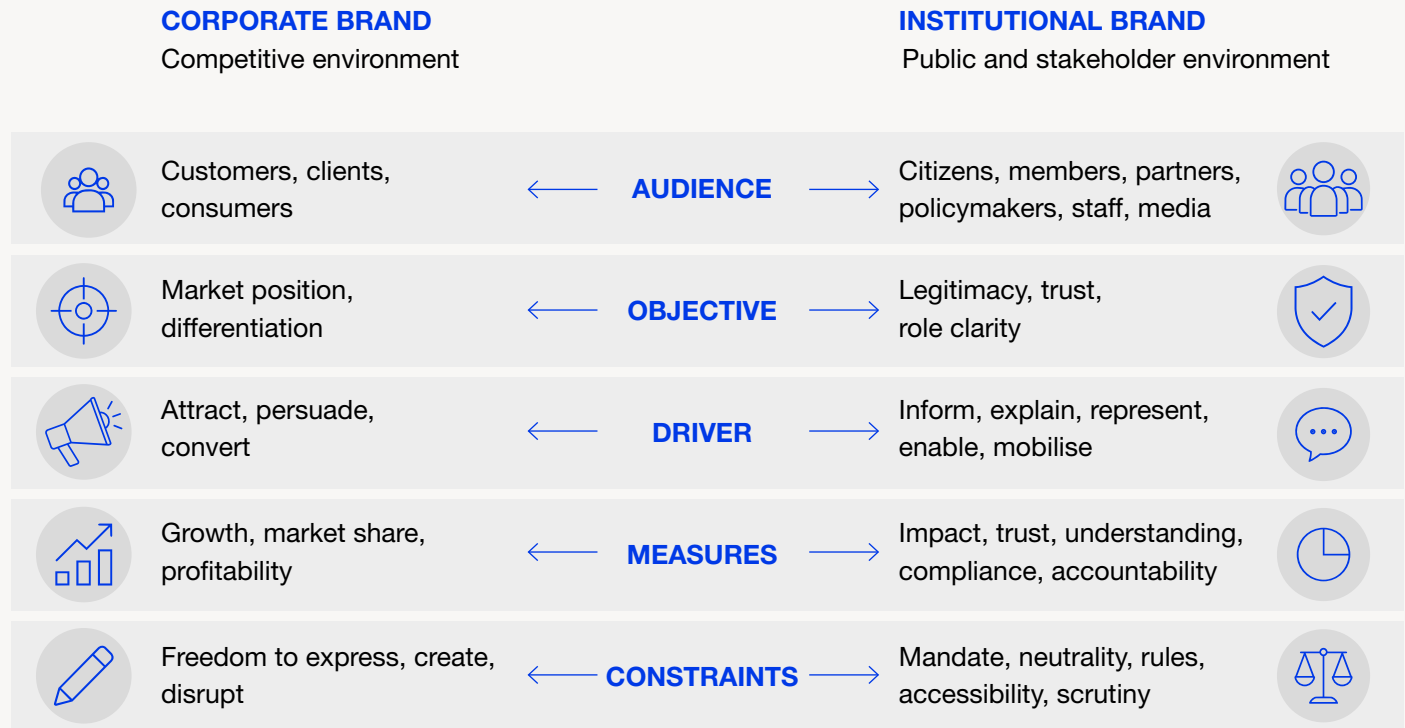
A strong institutional brand does not seek, first and foremost, to impress. It seeks to make an organisation more credible, more legible, more coherent, more governable and more able to hold up over time.

## ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS


- Institutional branding is not a softer version of corporate branding. It follows a different strategic logic.
- European institutions and associations often need more clarity, coherence and governability — not simply more visibility.
- A strong institutional brand does not primarily seek to impress. It makes the organisation more credible, legible and resilient over time.
- The real challenge is not cosmetic expression, but the alignment between legitimacy, responsibility, governance and design.

# The Context Shapes the Brand

Corporate brands operate in competitive markets. Institutional brands operate in environments of legitimacy, accountability and public scrutiny. The constraints are different. So are the design choices.



↓



**DESIGN IMPLICATION**  
**Institutional design must bring clarity within constraints.**  
**It creates recognition without seeking disruption.**  
**It builds presence without compromising the organisation's role.**

# 1. The Brand Does Not Serve the Same Purpose

---

The first difference is the most fundamental: a corporate brand, a European institution and a European association do not expect the same thing from their brand.

An international corporate group often asks its brand to create preference, strengthen competitiveness, clarify its offer, attract customers, talent, investors or partners. Its brand helps it exist more powerfully in a competitive space. It must differentiate, appeal, simplify and be remembered. It must help the market choose.

A European institution or association operates according to a different logic. It does not seek, first of all, to be preferred like a company. It seeks to be understood, recognised as legitimate and perceived as trustworthy. Its brand is not primarily there to win against a competitor. It is there to make its role identifiable, its voice credible, its action acceptable and its presence coherent.

That changes everything.

In corporate branding, the central question is often: how can we make the brand more attractive and more distinctive?

This does not mean corporate brands are unconcerned with trust, nor that institutional brands can ignore visibility. The distinction is not about the presence or absence of these dimensions. It is about hierarchy. Corporate branding often starts from preference. Institutional branding must start from legitimacy.

In institutional branding, the question should be: how can we make the organisation clearer, more legitimate and more solid in the fulfilment of its mission?

The official texts of the European institutions confirm this logic. The European Commission defines the purpose of its visual identity as giving the institution a recognisable image and a unified voice in its communications.

The European Parliament, for its part, presents its graphic guide as a tool designed to define the elements of its visual identity and strengthen the recognition of Parliament among the general public, its Members, its staff, the Member States and the other institutions of the European Union.<sup>[3]</sup>

The vocabulary is revealing. It does not speak first of disruption, desirability or proprietary territory. It speaks of recognition, coherence, legibility and rules of use.

In other words, the institution does not ask its brand to produce noise. It asks its brand to organise clarity.

The same nuance applies to European associations. They do not have the same source of legitimacy as a European institution. An institution draws its legitimacy from a public mandate, a legal framework, a service function or a regulatory role. A European association draws its legitimacy more from representation, coalition-building, expertise and its ability to give collective voice to a sector, community or cause at European level.

European civil society networks are thus described as umbrella associations bringing together national organisations and representing them at European Union level.<sup>[9]</sup>

But in both cases, the brand is less about selling than about situating.

It must answer simple and strategic questions:

Who is speaking?

On whose behalf?

With what authority?

Within what framework?

For what mission?

With what responsibility?

The design implications are immediate.

Institutional design cannot be judged only by its capacity to create an effect. It must clarify, prioritise, structure and establish stable recognition. It must create a presence strong enough to be identifiable, but controlled enough to remain compatible with the organisation's function.

In corporate branding, singularity can be a driving force. In institutional branding, singularity must be subordinated to appropriateness.

A logo, typeface, colour palette, grid, iconographic style or signature is not simply an expressive choice. These are signs of posture. They say how the organisation understands itself, and how it accepts being understood by others.

The first mistake leaders make is therefore to believe that an institutional brand should first become more visible.

It should first become more accurate.

Visibility can follow. But if visibility comes before legitimacy, it risks amplifying weaknesses instead of correcting them.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Corporate brands often aim to create preference; institutional brands must first create understanding, legitimacy and trust.
- A European institution or association does not need to “win” like a company. It needs to make its role, voice and mandate clear.
- Institutional design should not be judged only by visual impact. It must clarify, structure and support stable recognition.
- Visibility matters, but only when it follows legitimacy. Otherwise, it risks amplifying the wrong signals.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Start every major communication piece with the mandate, not the message.**  
Before designing a report, campaign or event identity, clarify what role the organisation is playing.
- **Make attribution visible early.**  
A reader should immediately understand who is speaking and in what capacity.
- **Avoid campaign ideas that could belong to anyone.**  
The creative idea should be rooted in the organisation's institutional role, not just in a generic communication objective.
- **Use templates to discipline the hierarchy.**  
Source, topic, status, date, audience and institutional signature should be easy to identify.

# The Brand Does Not Serve the Same Purpose

Corporate brands help the market **choose**.

Institutional brands help stakeholders **understand**, **trust** and **recognise** the organisation's role.

## CORPORATE BRAND

Market-facing purpose

## INSTITUTIONAL BRAND

Role-facing purpose



### Create preference

Designed to make offerings attractive and distinctive.



### Build legitimacy

Designed to communicate mandate, role and responsibility.



### Strengthen competitiveness

Supports differentiation and market advantage.



### Clarify role and mission

Makes the organisation's purpose and actions clear.



### Attract customers and talent

Builds appeal and drives demand.



### Support trust and credibility

Builds confidence through transparency and accountability.



### Help the market choose

Makes the offer easy to compare and select.



### Make the organisation recognisable

Ensures the organisation is identified and understood.



**The goal is not only to be seen.  
It is to be understood, trusted and recognised.**

## 2. Legitimacy Is Not Built Like Preference

---

Corporate branding often seeks to make people prefer. Institutional branding first seeks to make people recognise the validity of a place, a voice and an action.

This difference between preference and legitimacy is decisive. Preference accepts intensification. A company can assert an ambitious promise, dramatise its difference, create an emotional territory, simplify its message strongly and seek to occupy a distinctive place in the public mind. In a market, that intensity can be an advantage. It reduces hesitation. It creates memorability. It accelerates choice.

Legitimacy requires a different discipline.

A European institution or association cannot simply overpromise in order to emerge. It must assert without exaggerating, simplify without impoverishing, mobilise without instrumentalising, and become visible without giving the impression that it is placing itself at the centre.

This is where many institutional branding exercises go wrong.

They apply to organisations of collective legitimacy reflexes designed for organisations of competition. They try to make the brand more appealing, more dynamic, more expressive, more “impactful”. But they forget that, in the institutional world, a brand can become more visible while becoming less credible.

Research on public communication underlines this dilemma: public organisations depend on their legitimacy, and their communication must arbitrate between the pursuit of a favourable reputation and the need not to compromise that legitimacy.<sup>[4]</sup>

That point is central.

An institution can communicate brilliantly and still lose authority if its posture feels excessive, self-promotional or poorly calibrated.

For a European institution, legitimacy rests on a mandate, a responsibility, continuity and an ability to act within a public framework.

For a European association, it rests more on representativeness, expertise, member trust, the ability to articulate collective interests and the capacity to speak within a complex European space.

In both cases, the brand should not produce abstract seduction. It should support a voice that can be received as valid.

That changes the brand promise.

A corporate brand can promise transformation, performance, experience or a desirable future. An institutional brand must be more careful — not because it is weaker, but because its credibility depends on the fit between what it claims and what it can genuinely uphold.

It cannot rely on a powerful formula alone. It must be able to sustain that formula through evidence, use, behaviour and consistency over time.

It also changes the tone.

An institutional tone does not need to be administrative, cold or distant. But it must remain credible. It can be clear, lively, human, committed and sometimes even emotional. But it must not feel manipulative, oversimplified or self-celebratory.

Design is directly concerned here.

In a logic of preference, design can seek salience, contrast, desirability and ownership of a style. In a logic of legitimacy, it must first produce an impression of mastery, balance,

seriousness and openness. It must support trust before seeking effect.

This does not mean institutional design should be boring.

Quite the opposite.

Good institutional design requires a higher intelligence of proportion. It must give presence without overplaying it. It must create recognition without locking the organisation into an authoritarian aesthetic. It must modernise without flattening. It must clarify without erasing complexity.

Legitimacy is not built like preference.

Preference can be accelerated through intensity. Legitimacy is built through appropriateness, evidence, coherence and time. In institutional branding, the brand is not only what makes the organisation more visible. It is what makes its voice more acceptable, more understandable and more reliable.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Preference can be accelerated through intensity; legitimacy is built through accuracy, evidence, coherence and time.
- Institutional brands must avoid overpromising, oversimplifying or placing themselves too visibly at the centre.
- A credible institutional tone can be lively, human and committed, but it must never feel manipulative or self-promotional.
- Good institutional design creates trust before effect. It gives presence without exaggeration and clarity without flattening complexity.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Create a claim-and-evidence check before publication.**

Every strong statement should be supported by mandate, data, expertise, consultation, member input or documented action.

- **Set tonal boundaries for campaigns.**

Define what the brand can say with energy, and what it should never exaggerate.

- **Use restraint where authority matters.**

For sensitive topics, credibility often comes from precision, not from emotional intensity.

- **Review headlines for overclaiming.**

Replace broad promises with specific, defensible formulations.

# The Brand Answers Different Questions

Corporate brands are built to win choice.  
 Institutional brands are built to earn trust.  
 Different questions. Different objectives.  
 Different design logic.

## CORPORATE BRAND

- How do we stand out?
- How do we attract?
- How do we win?

## INSTITUTIONAL BRAND

- Who are we?
- On whose behalf?
- What is our role?
- Why should we be trusted?
- How are we accountable?

## CORPORATE BRAND



**WIN CHOICE**  
 Create preference  
 and competitiveness

## INSTITUTIONAL BRAND



**EARN TRUST**  
 Ensure legitimacy  
 and accountability

Attract  
 Differentiate  
 Persuade  
 Be remembered

Clarify  
 Be recognised  
 Build credibility  
 Stay accountable  
 Endure over time

# 3. Governance Changes the Very Nature of Branding

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The third difference is less spectacular, but probably one of the most structurally important: governance does not come after institutional branding.

It transforms its very nature.

In an international corporate group, the brand can be managed as a centralised strategic asset. Even when the organisation is complex, present in several countries or structured across multiple entities, the brand is often attached to a clear authority: executive management, brand leadership, communications leadership, the executive committee, sometimes the CEO.

The literature on corporate brand orientation also stresses the importance of corporate identity, internal identification and internal images in the management of brand-oriented organisations.<sup>[1]</sup>

In a European institution or association, governance is more distributed.

An institution must deal with mandates, services, directorates, cabinets, legal obligations, political levels, languages, long timeframes and requirements of neutrality.

A European association must deal with its members, board, secretariat, working groups, experts, partners, funders and sometimes different national or sectoral sensitivities.

In this environment, the brand is not only what the organisation wants to project.

It is what the organisation can get its own system of actors to accept, understand, apply and maintain.

This is where many rebrandings fail.

They produce an appealing brand platform, an elegant visual identity, a well-written narrative. Then they discover that the system does not hold.

Too many actors need to validate.  
Too many formats need to be covered.  
Too many contexts need to be anticipated.  
Too many teams need to produce.  
Too many partners need to co-sign.  
Too many exceptions become possible.

The problem is not that the brand lacks inspiration.

The problem is that it was not designed to be governed.

A strong institutional brand must therefore be governable.

It must be capable of being explained to a board, defended to members, applied by non-specialist teams, understood by partners, translated without distortion, deployed across multiple formats and maintained after a team or agency has moved on.

This changes the very definition of design.

In corporate branding, design is often assessed on its capacity to express a personality, create recognition, produce desirability and strengthen differentiation.

In institutional branding, it must also produce governance.  
The real question is not only: is it beautiful, modern or distinctive?

It becomes: does this system allow several actors to produce coherent communications without reinventing the brand each time?

The European institutions show this logic very concretely.

The European Commission's Europa Web Guide is presented as the official rulebook for its web presence. It covers editorial, legal, technical, visual and contractual dimensions, and all Commission websites must comply with these rules.

Similarly, the Web Guide of the Publications Office of the European Union acts as the official reference for its web presence and covers accessibility, visual, technical and legal specifications.<sup>[6]</sup>

These are not merely style guides.

They are governance infrastructures.

They define the conditions under which the organisation can appear in a coherent, understandable and compliant way.

For European associations, the stakes are just as high.

An association must assert its own brand without overpowering the brands of its members. It must carry a common voice without seeming to confiscate representation. It must be visible as a European actor without becoming self-centred.

Its brand must therefore organise a balance: strong enough to exist, open enough to represent, structured enough to be used.

The design system then becomes a strategic tool.

It is not enough to define a logo, colour palette and typeface.

Rules of architecture are needed.

When should the main brand be used?

When should a campaign identity be created?

When is a variation allowed?

How should members be integrated?

How should partners be treated?

How should co-funded projects be managed?

How can the proliferation of sub-brands be avoided?

In the institutional world, coherence is not an aesthetic preference.

It is a condition of credibility.

If every department, programme, event or working group develops its own universe, the organisation becomes less legible. And if the organisation becomes less legible, it becomes weaker.

Governance therefore changes the very nature of branding. An institutional brand does not become strong because it has been decided at the top. It becomes strong because it can be understood, adopted, applied and maintained by a whole system of actors.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Governance is not something that comes after institutional branding. It shapes the very nature of the brand.
- A strong institutional brand must be understood, accepted, applied and maintained by many different actors.
- The real test is not whether the identity looks good, but whether it enables coherent communication across teams, formats and contexts.
- In institutional branding, design systems are governance tools. They help prevent fragmentation, inconsistency and the uncontrolled spread of sub-brands.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Map decision rights before designing the system.**

Define who can approve identity, content, legal wording, partner visibility, campaign variations and exceptions.

- **Create rules for exceptions.**

The most important part of a brand system is often not the standard case, but what happens when a project asks for something different.

- **Document what teams may adapt.**

Separate fixed elements from flexible ones so people know where they have autonomy.

- **Design the brand guide for actual users.**

A board member, project manager, communications officer and external supplier should all be able to use it without interpretation.

# Governance Changes the Very Nature of Branding

In institutional branding, the real challenge is not only to design a strong identity. It is to build a system that many actors can understand, apply and maintain over time.

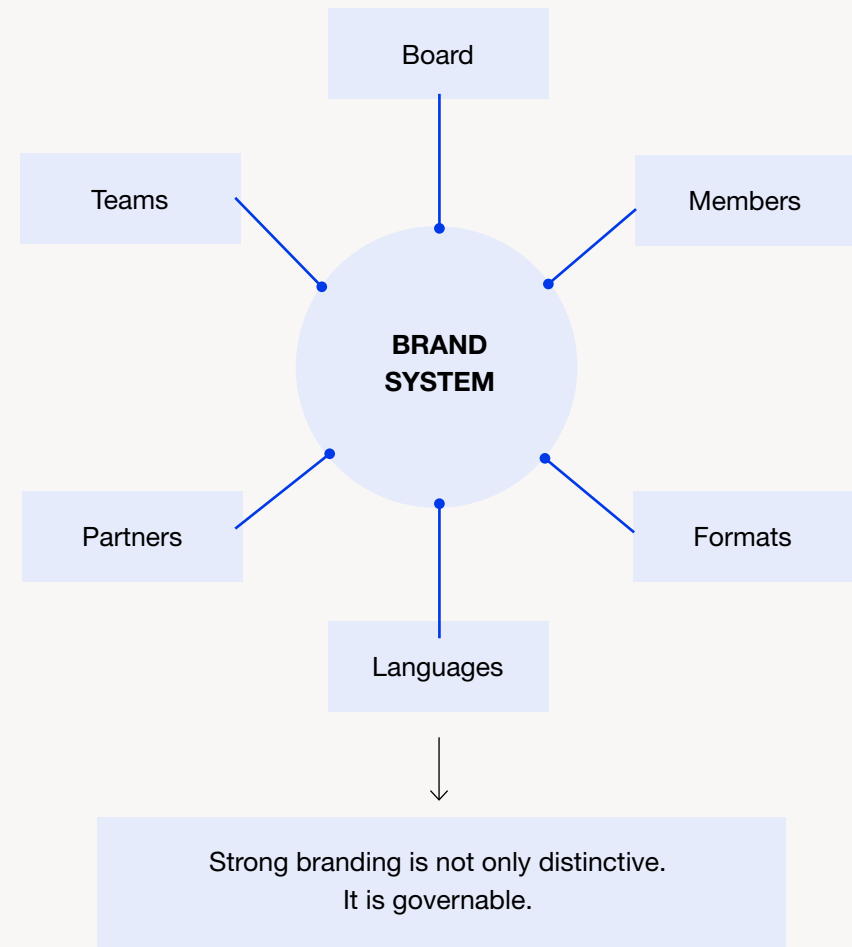
## CORPORATE MODEL

- Central authority
- Fewer validators
- Faster decisions
- Brand managed top-down

## INSTITUTIONAL BRAND

- Distributed governance
- Multiple stakeholders
- More approvals
- Brand must be shared and governable

### A BRAND SYSTEM MUST HOLD



# 4. Institutional Audiences Are Not Corporate Targets

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The fourth difference concerns the notion of public.

Corporate branding often thinks in terms of targets: customers, prospects, talent, investors, influencers, partners, opinion leaders. These categories are useful. They make it possible to adapt messages, channels, offers and experiences.

But in the European institutional world, the idea of a target becomes insufficient.

A European institution or association does not simply speak to audiences it wants to convince. It operates before, with and sometimes under the scrutiny of stakeholders who interpret, assess, challenge, relay, co-produce or legitimise its action.

An institutional audience can be, at the same time, a beneficiary, citizen, member, funder, partner, expert, regulator, decision-maker, relay, critic or opponent.

It does not merely receive a message.

It judges the appropriateness of a posture.

The European Commission explicitly links the participation of citizens and stakeholders to the process of developing policies and laws. Its pages on consultations state that increasing the participation of citizens and stakeholders is an important objective of the Better Regulation agenda.

The Commission also states that citizens and stakeholders can contribute to the policy and legislative process through consultations, feedback, implementation dialogues and calls for evidence.<sup>[5]</sup>

This framework profoundly transforms communication. The organisation does not simply address audiences. It acts within a space where its voice can invite response, evidence, participation, scrutiny and contestation.

That changes branding.

An institutional brand must be credible for heterogeneous audiences who do not read the organisation in the same way.

It must speak to experts without excluding non-specialists. It must be accessible without being simplistic. It must carry a vision without erasing nuance. It must represent a collective without becoming vague.

It must be clear enough for the general public, precise enough for decision-makers, stable enough for members, serious enough for partners and transparent enough for funders.

In corporate branding, the brand can seek to influence a decision journey.

In institutional branding, it must organise a relationship of trust within an ecosystem.

That is very different.

European associations embody this tension particularly clearly.

Their members are not merely internal audiences. They are part of their legitimacy. An association that talks too much about itself may seem to detach itself from its base. An association that disappears too much can no longer exist as a credible European voice.

Branding must therefore give form to a collective voice without crushing the diversity of those it represents.

This also changes design.

If institutional audiences are not corporate targets, design cannot simply be an attention-capture machine.

It must become an engine for organising understanding.

It must structure several levels of reading: quick reading, expert reading, political reading, member reading, partner reading and citizen reading. It must help each audience understand where it stands in relation to the organisation.

It must clarify who is speaking, on whose behalf, with what authority and within what framework.

In concrete terms, this affects information hierarchy, headlines, subtitles, executive summaries, data visualisations, pictograms, navigation systems, report covers, presentation templates, event pages, social posts, signatures and co-branding rules.

In an institutional brand, coherence should not produce uniformity. It should enable adaptation without fragmentation.

The brand must be able to move from a technical report to an educational campaign, from a political event to a LinkedIn post, from a public consultation to a member tool, without changing identity every time.

The real question is therefore not only: how can we target better?

It is: how can we govern relationships with multiple stakeholders better?

A corporate target can be activated.

An institutional stakeholder must be recognised in their role.

That is a major difference. And it requires design that is more attentive to relationships than to effects.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Institutional audiences are not simply corporate targets. They are stakeholders who interpret, question, legitimise and sometimes challenge the organisation's action.
- A European institution or association must speak to multiple publics at once: experts, members, partners, citizens, funders and decision-makers.
- Institutional design must organise understanding, not merely capture attention.
- The brand must enable adaptation without fragmentation, across reports, campaigns, events, consultations, member tools and social media.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Design for layered reading.**

A publication should work for a quick reader, a policy expert, a member, a journalist and a decision-maker.

- **Use subtitles and summaries as navigation tools.**

They should help different audiences find their way through complex content.

- **Avoid one-size-fits-all messaging.**

The same brand can speak with different levels of technicality depending on the context.

- **Make stakeholder roles visible.**

When members, partners, funders or citizens are involved, the communication should clarify their place in the story.

# From Target Audiences to Legitimising Stakeholders











Corporate brands often build equity by creating preference among target audiences.

Institutional brands build legitimacy through stakeholders who recognise their role, mandate, accountability and public responsibility.

The brand's role is to make this legitimacy visible, understandable and trustworthy.

## CORPORATE BRAND

## INSTITUTIONAL BRAND

 <p><b>Built on market success</b> Strength comes from performance and reputation in the market.</p>	← SOURCE →	 <p><b>Built on mandate and role</b> Strength comes from a mandate, a legal or collective framework and public responsibility.</p>
 <p><b>Seeks preference</b> Aims to be chosen over competitors.</p>	← PURPOSE →	 <p><b>Seeks recognition and trust</b> Aims to be understood, trusted and accepted.</p>
 <p><b>Serves shareholders and customers</b> Focus on private value creation.</p>	← ACCOUNTABILITY →	 <p><b>Serves citizens, members and stakeholders</b> Focus on public value and collective interest.</p>
 <p><b>Communicates advantage</b> Highlights products, benefits and differentiation.</p>	← COMMUNICATION FOCUS →	 <p><b>Communicates mission and role</b> Explains mandate, actions and impact.</p>
 <p><b>Measured by market metrics</b> Sales, share, price, awareness, preference.</p>	← MEASUREMENT →	 <p><b>Measured by legitimacy metrics</b> Trust, understanding, impact, compliance, accountability.</p>



### THE BRAND'S ROLE

- To make legitimacy visible.
- To make the organisation's role understandable.
- To support trust through clarity, consistency and responsibility.

# 5. Strong Branding Is Not Necessarily More Expressive Branding

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Here is one of the most persistent misunderstandings: many leaders believe that a stronger brand is necessarily a more expressive brand.

- More colour.
- More slogans.
- More emotion.
- More character.
- More impact.
- More presence.

In the corporate world, that intuition can make sense. A company must emerge in a saturated market. It must be recognised, preferred and remembered. Expressiveness can become a competitive asset.

Research on brand orientation also associates brand orientation with dimensions such as brand importance, consistency, differentiation and brand intelligence.<sup>[1]</sup>

But when applied directly to the institutional world, this intuition becomes risky.

A European institution or association cannot simply seek to “stand out”. It must also avoid appearing too self-centred, too promotional, too partisan, too emotional, too reductive or too seductive to remain credible.

A strong institutional brand can be restrained, calm, rigorous, almost silent in certain contexts.

Its power does not necessarily come from the volume of its expression. It comes from its ability to be recognised, understood, respected and correctly interpreted over time.

We therefore need to distinguish between three notions:

Visibility makes the organisation appear.

Expressiveness gives it character.

Authority makes it credible.

These three dimensions can reinforce each other, but they can also come into tension.

An institution can become more visible while losing authority.

An association can become more expressive while blurring its representative role.

A campaign can generate more engagement while weakening the perception of the organisation's seriousness.

In institutional branding, the right question is therefore not: how can we be more visible?

It is: which signs genuinely strengthen our legitimacy?

European rules on visual identities demonstrate this priority clearly.

The European Parliament's technical guidelines state that the logo is a fundamental element of visual recognition, that it must be visible and legible in communications to citizens, and that it is governed by precise rules on proportions, colours, typography, clear space, language versions and co-branding.

The Commission also regulates the use of its logo by third parties in order to avoid confusion, uses that are incompatible with its objectives or the suggestion of unintended endorsement.<sup>[3]</sup>

These rules are not merely graphic precautions.

They remind us that an institutional sign carries authority.

An institutional logo is not only a shape. It is a marker of responsibility.

Institutional design must therefore work through appropriateness.

It should not fill every space. It should not confuse energy with agitation. It should not replace clarity with effect. It must understand that the grid, hierarchy, white space, typography, repetition, stability of signatures and average quality of execution can create more strength than an accumulation of expressive signs.

This is where modernisation is often misunderstood.

Modernising an institutional brand does not mean making it louder.

It means making it clearer, more coherent, more accessible, better adapted to contemporary uses, easier to deploy and more robust in real situations.

A brand can become more modern by becoming more legible on mobile, more stable in its publications, clearer in its levels of discourse, more accessible, more disciplined in its templates, more fluid in co-branding and more coherent in its campaigns.

That may not look spectacular in a presentation committee. But it is far more transformative.

The danger is confusing modernisation with excessive simplification.

Successful simplification clarifies complexity. Failed simplification erases the nuances from which the organisation draws its legitimacy.

For a European association, this risk is particularly strong. If its brand becomes too expressive, it may seem to speak more about itself than about the collective it represents. If it becomes too smooth, it loses substance.

Good design must therefore find a demanding balance: distinctive enough to create presence, restrained enough to remain at the service of a collective voice.

A strong institutional brand is not the one with the most visible personality.

It is the one whose personality is most appropriately governed.

It knows when to speak with intensity and when to step back. It knows when to use emotion and when to privilege evidence. It knows when to sign strongly and when to leave room for a partner, member or cause.

Institutional creativity is not diminished creativity.

It is more mature creativity.

It does not seek effect for effect's sake. It seeks the right form.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- A stronger institutional brand is not necessarily a more expressive brand.
- Visibility, expressiveness and authority are different things. They can support each other, but they can also come into tension.
- Institutional design must know when to speak strongly and when to step back.
- Modernisation does not mean making the brand louder. It means making it clearer, more coherent, more accessible and easier to use in real situations.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Define an expression scale.**

Some materials can be campaign-led and vivid; others should remain calm, formal and evidence-led.

- **Use visual intensity deliberately.**

Colour, image, illustration and motion should serve the situation, not become default decoration.

- **Protect the master brand from visual inflation.**















Do not create a new graphic universe every time a topic needs attention.

- **Judge design by appropriateness.**

The right question is not “does it stand out?”, but “does this level of expression fit the role, audience and subject?”

# Design Must Serve Clarity Before Expression

In corporate branding, design often creates distinctiveness. In institutional branding, design creates understanding. The priority is not to impress. The priority is to make the organisation easier to read, trust and recognise.

CORPORATE BRAND		INSTITUTIONAL BRAND
 <b>Seeks distinctiveness</b> Stand out.	← <b>PRIORITY</b> →	 <b>Seeks clarity</b> Be understood.
 <b>Creates desire</b> Make people want.	← <b>OBJECTIVE</b> →	 <b>Creates trust</b> Make people confident.
 <b>Drives attention</b> Be seen.	← <b>EFFECT</b> →	 <b>Builds recognition</b> Be recognised.
 <b>Highlights uniqueness</b> Differentiate.	← <b>LOGIC</b> →	 <b>Reinforces legitimacy</b> Be appropriate.
 <b>Uses expression</b> Make an impact.	← <b>DESIGN APPROACH</b> →	 <b>Uses restraint</b> Stay proportionate.
 <b>Emotion-led</b> Engage and inspire.	← <b>TONALITY</b> →	 <b>Evidence-led</b> Inform and reassure.
 <b>Built for impact</b> Short-term spikes.	← <b>TIME HORIZON</b> →	 <b>Built for endurance</b> Long-term consistency.



## DESIGN IMPLICATION

**Institutional design must organise information, hierarchy and meaning. It brings stability, coherence and legibility to complex environments. It makes the role of the organisation visible through appropriate signs.**

# 6. In Institutional Branding, Operational Constraints Are Part of the Strategy

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The sixth difference is the one often discovered too late: a brand does not live in a platform.

It lives in use.

It lives in reports, web pages, newsletters, invitations, speeches, policy papers, PowerPoint templates, videos, LinkedIn posts, press releases, events, campaigns, co-funded projects, co-signatures, translations, legal validations and materials produced under pressure by teams that are not always made up of designers.

In the institutional world, branding that cannot be deployed is badly designed branding.

The classic separation between strategy and execution therefore becomes dangerous.

A brilliant brand platform that cannot be translated into several languages, applied in constrained formats, used by non-specialist teams, maintained in co-branding or brought to life in politically sensitive contexts is not a good strategy.

It is an intention that has not yet met the real conditions of its existence.

The European Commission's Europa Web Guide shows this clearly: the institutional web presence is governed by an official rulebook covering editorial, legal, technical, visual and contractual aspects.

The Europa Component Library, in turn, provides a comprehensive guide to the design elements and visual standards that make up Europa websites and applications.<sup>[6]</sup>

This means that institutional design is not only a style.

It is a production infrastructure.

Multilingualism is a good example.

In a European environment, it is not a detail of adaptation. It affects typography, grids, headline lengths, buttons, components, layouts, covers, infographics and signatures.

An identity that works in English but collapses as soon as it moves into French, German, Polish or Greek is not ready for a European organisation.

Accessibility follows the same logic.

The EU Web Accessibility Directive requires public sector bodies in the European Union to make their websites and mobile applications accessible.

The technical requirements refer in particular to the harmonised standard EN 301 549, which incorporates WCAG 2.1 Level AA requirements for web content.<sup>[7]</sup>

In institutional branding, accessibility is therefore not merely compliance.

It is a dimension of the brand.

An institution that communicates in an inaccessible way weakens its implicit promise of service, openness and responsibility.

Co-branding is another major operational test.

In European projects, communication and visibility obligations are not decorative. The Commission recalls that beneficiaries of EU funding must acknowledge the origin of the funds received and ensure the visibility of the European Union.

The rules on the use of the European Union emblem specify, in particular, that the emblem is the main visual sign allowing the origin of EU funding to be recognised.<sup>[8]</sup>

For design, this changes everything.

An institutional or association brand must anticipate situations in which it will not stand alone: member logos, partners, institutions, funders, coalitions, projects and events.

It must organise visual hierarchies before each project improvises them.

It must define who leads, who supports, who funds, who represents and who guarantees.

A graphic charter that does not deal with these cases leaves the most sensitive decisions until the last minute, often at the worst possible moment.

Operational constraints also concern formats.

A European institution or association rarely produces only one type of material. It publishes long documents, summaries, reports, position papers, educational content, invitations, press releases, social posts, videos, slides, newsletters, stands, web pages and calls for input.

Each format imposes a different logic.

A report requires structure.

A post requires a hook.

A consultation requires precision.

A video requires rhythm.

An event requires a spatial experience.

Branding must therefore be transmedia without becoming scattered.

That is why editorial design is as important as visual identity. In the institutional world, the brand lives in the organisation of content.

How do we introduce a complex subject?

How do we prioritise a main message, evidence, data and recommendations?

How do we make a report more readable without turning it into a promotional brochure?

How do we move from an expert voice to an educational voice without changing identity?

These are branding questions.

Distributed production makes the issue even more critical.

Many European associations operate with small teams, constrained budgets, multiple suppliers, active members, working groups and partners. Without a clear system, every material becomes an exception. Every event invents its own universe. Every project creates its own mini-brand. Every team interprets the guidelines in its own way.

The result is familiar: a brand that appears richer in the short term, but becomes illegible in the medium term.

Design must therefore become a technology of coherence.

It must provide simple rules, robust templates, reusable components, clear examples, levels of autonomy, co-branding rules, principles of editorial hierarchy and practical safeguards that people can actually use.

In the institutional world, operational constraints are not the enemies of strategy.

They are its raw material.

A brand that does not hold up across languages, formats, partnerships, rules, production capacities and everyday uses is not a strong brand.

It is a theoretical brand.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- An institutional brand does not live in a brand platform. It lives in everyday use.
- Multilingualism, accessibility, co-branding, production constraints and approval processes are not operational details. They are strategic realities.
- Branding that cannot be deployed consistently across formats, languages, partners and teams is badly designed branding.
- Design must become a technology of coherence, giving teams practical rules, robust templates and reusable components they can actually use.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Test the system in real formats before approving it.**

Try it on a report cover, social post, PowerPoint slide, event banner, newsletter and co-branded page.

- **Check multilingual resilience.**

Headlines, grids, buttons, diagrams and templates must survive translation into longer languages.

- **Build accessibility into the design system.**

Contrast, typography, alt text, chart readability and document structure should be treated as brand standards.

- **Prepare co-branding scenarios in advance.**

Include examples for EU funding, partner logos, member logos, project signatures and institutional endorsements.

# Operational Constraints Are Strategic Realities



















In institutional branding, constraints are not secondary details.

They shape the brand system, its design, its governance and its deployment.

A brand that ignores constraints may look good at launch, but it will not hold in real use.

## THE CONSTRAINT

## THE STRATEGIC IMPACT

	<b>Multilingualism</b> Multiple languages and equal status.		Affects typography, layouts, lengths, hierarchy and templates.	
	<b>Accessibility</b> Inclusive communication by design.		Shapes colour, contrast, structures, documents and digital experiences.	
	<b>Co-branding</b> Partners, members, funders, institutions.		Requires clear hierarchy rules and proportionate visual representation.	
	<b>Approval processes</b> Multiple validation layers and stakeholders.		Influences timelines, flexibility, templates and content workflows.	
	<b>Templates and systems</b> Distributed production across teams.		Must be practical, robust and easy to apply by non-designers.	
	<b>Distributed stakeholders</b> Members, partners, experts, publics and internal teams.		Demands clarity of role, consistent voice and shared understanding.	



### DESIGN IMPLICATION

**The brand system must be designed with real operational conditions in mind. Constraints are not obstacles to creativity – they are the material of strategic design. A brand that is built for real use is a brand that can hold.**

# 7. The Success of an Institutional Brand Is Measured by Its Ability to Hold

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The final difference concerns how success is evaluated.

In the corporate world, a successful brand is often measured through visibility, preference, desirability, differentiation, reputational value or contribution to performance.

Recent work on brand orientation does indeed associate brand orientation with brand performance and overall organisational performance.<sup>[1]</sup>

But a European institution or association cannot be assessed only through that lens.

An institutional brand may become more visible and yet less solid. It may attract more attention and yet lose credibility. It may appear more modern and yet become less governable. It may produce a strong campaign while leaving behind a confused system.

In the institutional world, success is therefore not measured only by what the brand triggers at launch.

It is measured by what it allows the organisation to sustain over time.

To hold means remaining recognisable despite the diversity of formats.

It means remaining credible when subjects become sensitive. Remaining coherent when several teams produce. Remaining legible when several languages are involved. Remaining clear when partners multiply. Remaining accessible when content becomes complex. Remaining governable as the organisation evolves.

An institutional brand does not succeed because it creates a moment.

It succeeds because it creates continuity.

This continuity can be seen in ordinary uses.

A brand launch is often the most controlled moment: the materials are beautiful, the messages are calibrated, the art direction is intact.

But the brand truly begins to be tested the next day.

When a team must produce a presentation in a hurry.

When a partner asks to add its logo.

When a 120-page report must remain readable.

When an event wants its own style.

When a member adapts a template.

When a campaign needs to be livelier without leaving the system.

That is when we know whether the brand holds.

An institutional brand that holds produces a discreet but powerful effect: it reduces noise.

It reduces visual noise, because materials stop pulling in every direction.

It reduces strategic noise, because messages connect more clearly to the mission.

It reduces political noise, because roles and signatures are better prioritised.

It reduces organisational noise, because teams know more clearly what to do.

It reduces reputational noise, because the organisation appears more stable, more coherent and more responsible.

That is why classic metrics need to be complemented by other criteria.

The first family of criteria is recognition: is the organisation more identifiable, more memorable, more clearly attributable?

The second is understanding: do audiences better understand its role, mission, voice and levels of action?

The third is governability: do teams, members and partners know how to use the brand with less hesitation, fewer exceptions and less distortion?

The fourth is resilience: does the brand retain its credibility in complex, sensitive, multilingual, partnership-based or technically constrained contexts?

These criteria do not replace visibility or engagement.

They complement them where they are blind.

A campaign can perform well on LinkedIn while weakening brand coherence. A new website can look more beautiful while being less accessible. A video can be widely viewed while establishing a tone that does not match the organisation's role. An identity can please the board while being impossible for teams to apply.

Institutional branding must therefore be judged on its average quality, not only on its best cases.

Many organisations have a few remarkable materials: the flagship report, the major campaign, the launch video, the main website.

But real perception is often built through the accumulation of ordinary materials: invitations, newsletters, slides, posts, notes, web pages, signage, factsheets, covers and event visuals.

In the institutional world, a brand is often judged by its average execution.

This is where design takes on an almost organisational dimension.

It does not merely make things visible. It makes information more accessible, roles more understandable, evidence more readable, relationships between actors clearer, obligations easier to respect and teams more capable of producing well.

Institutional branding reaches its highest level when it becomes obvious.

Not invisible.

Obvious.

When every material seems naturally to belong to the organisation. When the voice is recognisable without being repetitive. When audiences understand more quickly. When partners know how to fit into the system. When leaders no longer need to reinvent the brand every time they speak. When design no longer tries to prove that it exists, but allows the organisation to exist more clearly.

That is the real criterion of success.

A successful institutional brand does not merely look stronger. It makes the organisation genuinely stronger.

#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The success of an institutional brand is not measured only by visibility, engagement or launch impact.
- A strong institutional brand holds over time: across formats, teams, languages, partnerships and sensitive contexts.
- Recognition, understanding, governability and resilience are essential criteria for evaluating institutional branding.
- In the institutional world, the average quality of execution matters more than a few exceptional flagship materials.



## What This Means in Practice

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- **Evaluate ordinary materials, not only flagship ones.**

Slides, invitations, factsheets, LinkedIn posts and newsletters reveal whether the brand really works.

- **Track the number of exceptions.**

If every project needs a special solution, the system is not holding.

- **Review the brand after six months of use.**

Look at what teams actually produced, not only at what the guidelines prescribed.

- **Measure ease of use.**

A strong institutional brand should reduce hesitation, rework, validation loops and inconsistent execution.

# The Ability to Hold Defines Brand Strength

A launch is not the real test.

The real test is whether the brand holds over time, across teams, formats, stakeholders and changing contexts.

**A brand that holds builds trust.**

**A brand that holds builds capacity.**

## DIMENSIONS



**RECOGNITION**  
The brand is identifiable.

## WHAT IT MEANS

Stakeholders can connect materials, formats and channels to the same organisation.



Consistency in presence.  
Stronger visibility with clarity.



**UNDERSTANDING**  
The brand makes the role clear.

Audiences understand the mission, mandate, voice and value of the organisation.



Better comprehension.  
Stronger legitimacy.



**GOVERNABILITY**  
The brand can be used with confidence.

Teams, members and partners can apply the brand easily, with clear rules, tools and examples.



Fewer exceptions.  
More coherence at scale.



**RESILIENCE**  
The brand remains credible under pressure.

The brand holds in sensitive, multilingual, political, partnership-heavy and high-stakes environments.



Sustained trust.  
Long-term relevance.



## DESIGN IMPLICATION

**Design is not only about expression.**

**It is about building a system that can hold.**

**A brand that holds makes the organisation stronger.**

# Final Synthesis – A More Mature, More Governed, More Ambitious Creativity

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Institutional branding is not corporate branding with better manners.

It is not a slower, softer or less creative version of corporate branding.

It is another discipline.

Corporate branding can seek to create preference in a market. Institutional branding must build legitimacy in a pluralistic space.

Corporate branding can concentrate desire. Institutional branding must organise trust.

Corporate branding can sometimes win through intensity. Institutional branding wins through appropriateness.

Corporate branding can turn the brand into a competitive advantage. Institutional branding must turn the brand into a collective capacity.

That is what many leaders still misunderstand.

They want a stronger brand, but define strength with the wrong words: more visible, more expressive, more modern, more attractive, more differentiated.

In the institutional world, strength is defined differently: more accurate, more legible, more accessible, more coherent, more governable, more durable.

This does not mean institutional creativity should be less ambitious.

On the contrary.

It should be more mature.

More mature, because it understands that effect is not enough.  
More governed, because it knows the brand will be handled by many actors.

More rigorous, because it must hold across languages, formats, uses and constraints.

More respectful, because it speaks to stakeholders, not merely to targets.

More strategic, because it does not seek only to embellish the organisation, but to make it more capable.

Institutional creativity is creativity strengthened by responsibility.

It does not merely seek a beautiful expression. It seeks a form that is accurate, applicable, shared and durable.

It understands that design is not only what makes an organisation visible.

It is what makes it credible.

A strong institutional brand does not necessarily impress more. It clarifies better.

It promises less, but proves more.

It speaks less loudly, but holds for longer.

It does not try to look like a major corporate brand.

It accepts a more difficult ambition: to become an infrastructure of trust.

And in the institutional world, holding is already a higher form of strength.








#### ◆ KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Institutional branding is not corporate branding made more cautious. It is a distinct discipline shaped by legitimacy, responsibility, governance and trust.
- A strong institutional brand does not primarily seek to seduce or differentiate. It helps an organisation become clearer, more credible, more coherent and more capable.
- The purpose of institutional design is not simply to create visual impact. It must organise understanding, support authority and make complexity easier to navigate.
- Governance is central. A brand is only strong if it can be understood, applied and maintained by many actors across teams, formats, languages and partnerships.
- Institutional audiences are stakeholders, not just targets. They must recognise the organisation's role, mandate, voice and responsibilities.
- Modernisation should not make an institutional brand louder. It should make it more legible, accessible, resilient and usable in real conditions.
- The true measure of success is whether the brand holds over time — not only at launch, but in everyday execution.


# A Strong Institutional Brand Builds Trust by Holding

Institutional branding is not corporate branding made quieter. It follows a different logic — one shaped by legitimacy, governance, responsibility and time.

Its role is not simply to increase visibility. Its role is to make the organisation clearer, more coherent, more credible and more capable of carrying its mission.

	<b>LEGITIMACY</b>	Institutional brands build legitimacy, not just preference.
	<b>CLARITY</b>	They make the role, mandate and voice easier to understand.
	<b>GOVERNANCE</b>	They must be usable, governable and coherent across teams.
	<b>STAKEHOLDERS</b>	They speak to complex stakeholders, not simple market targets.
	<b>RESTRAINT</b>	They seek the right form, not expression for its own sake.
	<b>CONSTRAINTS</b>	Operational realities are part of the strategy, not an afterthought.
	<b>RESILIENCE</b>	Their real strength is the ability to hold over time.

↓



**FINAL TAKEAWAY**  
**A strong institutional brand is an infrastructure of trust.**  
**It clarifies before it amplifies.**  
**It supports recognition, understanding, governability and resilience.**  
**It does not merely make the organisation more visible — it makes it stronger.**

# The Institutional Brand Hold Test

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A strong institutional brand is not tested by its best launch materials.

It is tested by what happens next.

When the report is produced under pressure.

When a partner logo must be added.

When a campaign needs more visibility.

When a technical subject must become readable.

When a non-designer has to use the templates.

When the brand has to work across languages, formats, teams and sensitivities.

Use this test before approving a new identity, campaign system, publication template or brand refresh.

## Can Your Brand Hold?

### Recognition

- **Can the brand still be recognised through ordinary materials?**

Not only in flagship campaigns, but in slides, invitations, factsheets, newsletters, event visuals, web pages and everyday social posts.

- **Can different formats clearly belong to the same organisation?**

A report, a campaign, a LinkedIn visual and a member tool should not look identical — but they should feel connected.

### Understanding

- **Does the system make the organisation's role immediately clear?**

Can audiences quickly understand who is speaking, on whose behalf, with what authority and for what purpose?

- **Can it make complex content easier to read?**

Does the brand help structure technical reports, policy papers, evidence, recommendations and data without oversimplifying them?

### Governability

- **Can non-designers use it without weakening it?**

Can internal teams produce coherent materials without depending on constant expert correction?

- **Do teams, members, partners and suppliers know what they may adapt?**

Are fixed elements, flexible elements, exceptions and approval rules clear enough to avoid interpretation?

- **Can the brand reduce approval friction?**

Does it make decisions easier by clarifying hierarchy, signatures, partner visibility, templates and validation responsibilities?

### Resilience

- **Can it hold across several languages?**

Does the system still work when headlines, labels, buttons and layouts expand, contract or change structure through translation?

- **Can it support co-branding without losing hierarchy?**

Can members, partners, funders, EU emblems and institutional logos be integrated without visual confusion?

- **Can it remain credible on sensitive topics?**

Does the brand know when to use restraint, evidence and precision rather than emotion, intensity or visual effect?

### How to Read the Result

#### 8–10 yes answers

The brand system is probably strong enough to hold. It does not only create visibility; it builds recognition, understanding, governability and resilience.

#### 5–7 yes answers

The foundations are there, but parts of the system may still depend too much on expert handling, goodwill or improvisation.

#### 0–4 yes answers

The brand may look convincing in controlled conditions, but it is not yet ready for institutional use.

### Final Check

If the brand only works when everything is perfectly controlled, is it really a strong institutional brand?

A brand that holds is more than a visual identity.

It is a working system of trust.

It helps the organisation speak clearly, act coherently and carry its mission over time.

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# How #inextremis Helps Institutional Brands Hold

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Institutional brands do not hold by accident.

They hold because strategy, design, content and governance have been built to work together in real conditions.

At #inextremis, we help communication leaders turn complex mandates into brand systems that are clear, credible and usable over time.

We support organisations through:

- **Brand strategy and positioning** — clarifying the role, voice and institutional value of the organisation.
- **Visual identity systems** — creating coherent design systems that can work across formats, languages and contexts.
- **Editorial and design governance** — defining the rules, templates and decision principles that help teams produce consistently.
- **Publication and campaign systems** — translating complex issues into clear, recognisable and trustworthy communication materials.
- **Templates, toolkits and rollout support** — helping teams, partners and suppliers apply the brand with confidence.

**The aim is not to take control of the brand.**

**It is to help it hold — with you, and for you.**

## Institutional Branding Is Not Corporate Branding with Better Manners

Some brands are not built to seduce. They are built to clarify, to reassure, to represent and to endure.

This publication examines the specific discipline of institutional branding: the kind of branding required by international institutions, European institutions and agencies, and European associations whose communication must stand up to scrutiny.

In these environments, visibility is never enough. A brand must make a mandate easier to understand, a voice easier to recognise, a collective role easier to trust and a complex organisation easier to govern.

Drawing on more than 30 years of practice in institutional communication, Alain Steinberg challenges the idea that institutional branding is simply a quieter version of corporate branding. It is not. It follows another logic — one shaped by legitimacy, responsibility, governance and time.

This is a publication for communication leaders and institutional decision-makers who know that brand is not decoration. At its best, brand becomes an infrastructure of credibility: the system that helps an organisation speak with clarity, act with coherence and carry its mission with authority.

Because in the institutional world, strength is not always a matter of speaking louder.

Sometimes, it is the ability to hold.

*inextremis*



### ABOUT ALAIN STEINBERG

Alain Steinberg is the Co-Founder and Director of #inextremis, a Brussels-based communication agency working at the intersection of institutional branding, strategic communication and visual storytelling.

For more than 30 years, he has helped international institutions, European institutions and agencies, and European associations give clearer form to complex mandates, collective voices and public responsibilities.

His branding experience includes major institutional references such as the World Customs Organization (WCO), Eurocontrol and the European Securities and Markets Authority (ESMA), as well as assignments for organisations including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the European Environment Agency (EEA) and the European Committee of the Regions (CoR).

He has also worked with leading European associations and representative bodies, including the European Banking Federation (EBF), EuroCommerce, APPLIA – Home Appliance Europe, and the Community of European Railway and Infrastructure Companies (CER), helping organisations strengthen the clarity, coherence and credibility of their communication.

This publication draws on that long practice. It reflects a simple conviction: a strong institutional brand does not merely make an organisation more visible. It helps it become more legible, more trusted and more capable of carrying its mission over time.