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WHITE PAPER

# **From Insight to Impact: Applying the Integrated Knowledge Translation Framework to Brand Strategy**

**A Systematic Approach to Aligning Purpose,  
Engaging Stakeholders, and Building Credible Brands**

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# Introduction

Brand strategy is most effective when it draws from both internal insight and external evidence. Yet many organizations treat branding as a visual exercise disconnected from the knowledge, context, and lived experiences that shape how an organization is perceived.

In a climate where attention is scarce and trust must be earned, organizations need to express their identity with clarity and conviction. Just as important, they must demonstrate authenticity by consistently embodying their mission and upholding their values across every touchpoint. Strategic branding plays a central role in this effort, shaping how people perceive the values, work, and credibility of an organization.

This paper explores how the **Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT)<sup>1</sup> Framework** can be applied to brand strategy to support more meaningful, aligned, and sustainable branding efforts. Originally developed to improve the use of evidence in *public health*, the IKT Framework provides a structured approach to collaborative problem-solving and stakeholder engagement in the development of purpose-driven brands. Applied to brand strategy, the framework's key elements can enable organizations to develop relevant, credible, and lasting brand identities that reflect organizational values, serve user needs, and adapt to changing environments. This helps organizations to ground branding in real-world insight, involve those most affected by the brand, and embed the brand strategy into both systems and behaviors, moving beyond surface-level design toward deeper alignment among their identity, values, and communications.

This paper presents a conceptual model for applying the IKT framework to branding, particularly for mission-driven institutions and organizations such as universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other agencies that rely on stakeholder trust and long-term relevance. The sections that follow outline the background of the framework, map the IKT process onto brand development, and examine the benefits of this integrated model, arguing that a **collaborative, knowledge-based approach** to branding can better reflect institutional values, strengthen internal alignment, and support long-term impact.

## <sup>1</sup> Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT)

A collaborative approach to research that involves ongoing partnerships between researchers and decision-makers (1). It supports evidence-informed decision-making by engaging knowledge users as partners throughout the research process (2), from identifying the problem to implementing solutions. IKT is grounded in co-production, where researchers work with those who have the authority to act on the findings (3).

# 1. Background: Branding, Knowledge Translation, and the Case for Integration

## 1.1 Understanding Brand Strategy

Brand strategy is the intentional, systematic process of defining and expressing who an organization is, what it stands for, and how it is perceived. This includes research into audience needs and behaviors; analysis of competitors; articulation of the brand's purpose, values, and goals; positioning; messaging; and development of the visual tools and systems needed to express the overall brand identity.

Moreover, branding goes beyond logos, taglines, or marketing materials to encompass narrative, tone, and internal culture. A clear brand strategy helps align internal stakeholders with how the organization is perceived externally, supporting consistent communication across touchpoints.

Despite its strategic function, branding is often misunderstood as a design-led activity. This misunderstanding often leads to credibility gaps, fragmented messaging, and erosion of trust among audiences and partners. Also, branding is often developed in silos or based on assumptions. Designers may work in isolation from strategists, leadership may define identity without consulting frontline staff, and communication teams may craft messaging that feels disconnected from stakeholder needs.

This gap between intention and implementation can result in brands that are attractive but ineffective, or inconsistent across departments and initiatives.

***Brands with consistent recognition and engagement can yield revenue boosts of around 23%, while 71% of companies recognize that misalignment between internal and external presentations leads to customer confusion (4).***

***Additionally, 81% of consumers cite trust as a deciding factor in their purchase decisions (5).***

The challenge is especially acute for institutions that must speak to multiple audiences while reflecting both purpose and operational complexity. These organizations need a branding process that is informed by research, stakeholder insight, and reflection.

## 1.2 The Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT) Framework

Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT) is an approach rooted in health research that promotes collaboration between those who produce knowledge (researchers) and those positioned to use it (e.g., practitioners, decision-makers, policymakers, and institutional leaders). It has been widely

applied in public health, education, and social policy to increase the relevance, uptake, and impact of research. IKT is commonly described as a method that ensures relevance and impact by involving knowledge users *throughout* the process of knowledge generation and application, i.e., in the design, analysis, and interpretation of research and its outputs. It recognizes that knowledge becomes more actionable when **co-produced** with those who understand the context and have the authority (and interest) to act on its implications.

Unlike traditional models that disseminate findings *after* the fact, IKT integrates stakeholders from the onset, seeking to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and real-world decision-making. Studies have shown that IKT leads to more implementable recommendations, stronger policy influence, and increased uptake of evidence in practice (1).

While there is no single universal framework, the literature from several IKT champions (including Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), World Health Organization (WHO), Knowledge to Policy (K2P) Center, and others) highlights six interrelated processes that characterize IKT:

1. Problem identification and definition
2. Context analysis
3. Knowledge synthesis
4. Co-creation of solutions
5. Implementation
6. Evaluation

### 1.3 Parallels Between IKT and Brand Strategy

Branding and IKT share fundamental principles. Both rely on contextual awareness, stakeholder engagement, and iterative development. Both treat knowledge as something co-owned by an organization and its stakeholders, rather than something developed in isolation and handed down.

In brand strategy, this means treating staff, clients/customers, funders, and other audiences as much more than passive recipients of messaging. Their perspectives are essential to understanding how the brand is perceived, where it may be misaligned, and what values it must express to be trusted and effective.

Yet in practice, branding efforts often default to top-down decisions or design-led outputs, overlooking the lived experience of those who work within or engage with the brand day to day. Incorporating IKT's structured process into branding offers a practical solution to common pitfalls such as misaligned messaging and superficial visual rebrands that fail to shift perception.

This paper introduces a conceptual model that maps the six IKT-informed activities onto key stages in brand development. The goal is to show how purpose-driven organizations can develop brand strategies that are not only visually cohesive, but that are also collaborative in process, grounded in evidence, and resilient in practice.

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Applying IKT Principles to Brand Strategy

Strategic brand development and the IKT Framework both emphasize clarity of purpose, contextual awareness, stakeholder collaboration, and ongoing reflection. While IKT was developed within the health research field, its key activities can provide a useful blueprint for more intentional, inclusive, and evidence-informed brand strategy.

This section outlines how each of the six common elements of IKT practice can be directly aligned with key phases of strategic brand development.

### 2.1 Problem Identification and Definition → Brand Purpose and Challenge

The IKT process begins with clearly defining the problem, ideally in collaboration with those who are directly affected. This ensures the work is addressing a meaningful concern that is relevant to stakeholders. In branding, this phase involves clarifying the core challenge, e.g., confusion around the brand; misalignment between internal identity and public perception; or identifying a gap in stakeholder trust or engagement.

Early conversations with leadership, staff, and key stakeholders often reveal overlooked issues and establish a foundation for the work ahead. Shared framing of the challenge sets the

direction for strategy development and ensures that everyone involved is working from common understanding.

### 2.2 Context Analysis → Organizational and Audience Research

IKT encourages a robust understanding of the institutional, social, cultural, and political environment; the broader context in which a problem exists. In brand strategy, this is the discovery phase, which includes:

- Organizational audits (review of internal documents and guidelines, past communications, and historical brand performance; interviews with staff; assessment of brand culture);
- Audience insights (interviews or focus groups with clients; analysis of their needs, behaviors, perceptions); and
- Market and competitor research.

This kind of analysis can expose inconsistencies, missed opportunities, or potential risks to reputation. It also helps build empathy for those the brand must serve, while anchoring decisions in real-world conditions. This step highlights the factors that may affect how the brand is perceived, helping to avoid strategies that may be visually impressive but disconnected from on-the-ground realities.

### **2.3 Knowledge Synthesis → Brand Positioning and Messaging**

IKT recognizes that valuable knowledge can come from various sources, including research, lived experience, community insight, and professional expertise. These inputs must be synthesized to guide action. In brand strategy, synthesis occurs when multiple forms of knowledge are brought together to define the brand's narrative, positioning, and messaging framework, and are distilled into a clear brand strategy.

Like IKT, brand positioning is strongest when it draws from multiple perspectives rather than a single point of view. It requires translating diverse viewpoints into a coherent, shared story that guides all expressions of the brand.

### **2.4 Co-Creation → Stakeholder-Informed Strategy and Design**

The co-creation element of IKT encourages shared ownership over the solutions being developed. In branding, this involves inviting input and collaboration from those within and outside the organization, rather than making design or messaging decisions in isolation. This may include:

- Brand workshops with internal teams;
- Message testing with audience representatives;

- Feedback sessions on visual identity drafts; and
- Cross-functional working groups to shape implementation.

Co-creation improves relevance and credibility, encourages buy-in, and reduces resistance by ensuring that stakeholders see themselves reflected in both the process and outcomes.

### **2.5 Implementation → Brand Rollout and Integration**

In both IKT and brand strategy, success depends on how well plans are implemented. Implementation in the IKT model involves embedding knowledge into behavior, systems, and structures. In branding, this means ensuring the strategy is utilized consistently to integrate the brand across platforms, materials, services, and team culture.

A strong brand strategy must be rolled out with consistency and supported by:

- Training sessions to align staff on brand voice and values;
- Tools and templates for visual and verbal consistency;
- Internal guidelines for applying the brand to programs or services; and
- Leadership support to model brand-aligned decision-making.

This phase reflects the IKT emphasis on translating knowledge into practice, ensuring the brand is part of everyday operations.

## 2.6 Evaluation → Monitoring Brand Performance and Alignment

Finally, IKT highlights the importance of evaluating whether solutions are working in context. In branding, this involves assessing whether the strategy is achieving its goals over time.

Brand evaluation may include:

- Measuring awareness, trust, or audience engagement;
- Assessing internal brand alignment and understanding;
- Reviewing the performance of communication channels; and
- Conducting periodic brand audits or perception studies

Ongoing evaluation supports alignment over time, especially as audiences, contexts, or priorities evolve.

**This conceptual framework positions branding as a knowledge-based / evidence-informed process that benefits from structured stakeholder engagement and reflective practice.**

It provides a roadmap for brand strategists, designers, marketing and communication professionals, and organizational leaders seeking to build brands that are distinctive, grounded in collective insight, and invested in long-term impact.

By applying this framework, the development of a brand becomes an exercise in vision and strategic clarity, organizational learning, and collaborative communication. Each phase reinforces that brand strategy is a reflective and iterative process to arrive at a brand identity that is both authentic and functional.

### Summary Table: Aligning IKT and Brand Strategy Processes

IKT Framework Element	Parallel in Brand Strategy
Problem Identification	Define brand challenge and purpose
Context Analysis	Research internal and external brand context
Knowledge Synthesis	Synthesize insights into brand positioning and messaging
Co-Creation of Solutions	Collaborate on brand strategy and design development
Implementation	Roll out the brand across platforms; Integrate into practice
Evaluation	Monitor brand effectiveness; Adapt based on feedback

### 3. Applying the Framework: The IKT-Informed Brand Strategy Model in Practice

Institutions that serve the public good, such as development agencies, NGOs, universities, and health organizations, often carry complex identities shaped by their history, leadership, community expectations, and even philosophical or spiritual foundations. As these institutions evolve, whether through leadership changes, strategic shifts, or major milestones, their brand can become fragmented or unclear. A new logo or updated messaging alone is rarely enough to resolve this. What is often needed is a more grounded, insight-driven process; one that reconnects the brand to the core values, purpose, and current reality of the organization.

The **IKT-Informed Brand Strategy Model** presented in this paper is especially useful when organizations are navigating transitions, facing perception gaps, or preparing for strategic shifts. Unlike conventional branding exercises that focus on visual identity, this model treats brand development as a participatory process; one that integrates formal knowledge (strategic plans, research data, etc.) with informal, experience-based insight (such as staff culture, client expectations, and perceptions).

This model can be implemented as a short-term intervention, such as a

brand culture workshop series, or integrated into broader strategic planning processes. It follows the six IKT elements outlined earlier, adapted to the specific branding context.

#### Operationalizing the Framework

To apply the model effectively, organizations should begin by **clarifying the brand challenge**: a moment of transition, a widening perception gap, negative audience chatter, or signs of internal disconnect. Structured discovery helps unearth hidden challenges and define the brand problem. Guided conversations with leadership, interviews or surveys with staff and clients, and thematic reviews of internal documents help uncover areas of fragmentation or disconnect. The goal is to identify not just how the institution looks, but how it is experienced.

From there, organizations analyze their **context** and begin gathering **evidence** by mapping audience perceptions, reviewing how the institution is positioned in its sector, and assessing how internal practices support (or undermine) its intended identity. This phase may involve brand audits, stakeholder interviews or focus groups, market research, and reputation benchmarking.

Importantly, this phase helps identify gaps in translating abstract concepts (such as values, mission, and strategic priorities) into actionable service delivery and communication principles.

With this insight, teams **synthesize** both formal and informal knowledge into a foundational brand strategy with a core brand narrative, defined value pillars, refined tone of voice, and key messages that align with the organization's mission and values.

Instead of finalizing this strategy in isolation, brand teams **co-create** the strategy by inviting stakeholders to review and refine early drafts. This can be done through workshops, message testing, and structured feedback sessions, to explore potential brand expressions, review tone and language, and test the resonance and clarity of marketing materials. The goal is not consensus on aesthetics, but shared ownership, clarity of purpose, and an understanding of what the brand must convey.

Next, **implementation** should focus on internal integration as much as external rollout, keeping in mind the organization's structure and capacity. Teams are often already stretched, so rollout may involve simple adjustments such as refreshing templates, updating signage, or revising internal onboarding content, rather than a full relaunch. Leadership plays a critical role in modeling brand-aligned behavior and reviewing systems or policies that may need adjustment.

Additionally, emphasis must be placed on the brand *experience* by ensuring that staff are trained (or refreshed) on the organization's vision, mission, and core values, and how these are to be reflected in everyday interactions and service, both internally and with clients. The goal is to **embed brand culture** throughout the organization and establish systems and processes that consistently reinforce its core identity.

Finally, build in **evaluation** mechanisms from the start. Use brand audits, pulse surveys, and feedback loops to assess changes in engagement, perception, and alignment. Brand development is an ongoing process. Built-in evaluation supports continuous learning and helps the brand evolve alongside institutional priorities and changing environments.

**By anchoring brand strategy in institutional knowledge, stakeholder insight, and structured engagement, this approach supports a brand that is more accurate, unified, and resilient. It positions branding as a leadership function and a strategic tool; a reflection of how the organization sees itself and wishes to be seen.**

## 4. Benefits of the IKT Approach in Brand Strategy

Traditional branding tends to focus on creative execution or marketing performance. These matter—but they often miss the deeper organizational factors that influence whether a brand can be internalized, sustained, and “lived”. The IKT-informed model begins with the understanding that branding is a knowledge process. It integrates insights from those who hold, use, and act on that knowledge within the organization and beyond.

This model offers strategic, financial, and operational advantages, especially for organizations that value credibility, clarity, and long-term impact.

### 4.1 Strategic Alignment

By applying structured analysis and synthesis, organizations can develop brand strategies that reflect their actual strengths, challenges, and goals. Branding becomes an extension of strategic planning, connecting mission, communication, leadership, programs, and customer experience under one clear direction. A clear, co-created strategy also helps unify departments, reduce duplication of efforts, and guide decisions in times of transition.

### 4.2 Financial Efficiency and ROI

Misaligned branding leads to costly inefficiencies: confused messaging, disjointed campaigns, and missed

engagement opportunities. A cohesive strategy reduces wasteful marketing spend and strengthens the foundation for donor, partner, and client trust, which directly affects revenue.

### 4.3 Trust and Relevance

When stakeholders are invited into the branding process, the result goes beyond buy-in. The brand becomes more trustworthy, reflective of lived realities, and easier to implement across teams. They are more likely to understand, support, champion, and protect the brand. This participatory process often uncovers insights that would not emerge through traditional data alone, adding depth to the brand narrative. This makes the brand more relevant and resonant while fostering inclusion, transparency, and integrity.

### 4.4 Long-Term Resilience

Brands developed through this model are more adaptable because they are grounded in real context and designed with long-term change in mind. Internal rollout begins early, embedding the brand into daily operations rather than relying on external campaigns. The IKT model also supports continuous improvement through evaluation, helping institutions to monitor and adjust brand alignment without losing their core identity.

## Limitations and Considerations

Although this approach offers clear advantages, it also comes with practical and cultural challenges that need to be acknowledged upfront, to ensure organizational readiness and support realistic implementation.

### Time and Resource Demands

Compared to conventional branding, this model requires more time and coordination. Involving stakeholders, analyzing context, and synthesizing diverse forms of input can stretch timelines and require skilled facilitation.

**Mitigation:** This approach is most effective when integrated into existing planning processes or positioned as part of a broader institutional development initiative. The use of internal champions and phased implementation can also help reduce resource pressure.

### Organizational Readiness

Not all teams are comfortable with participatory processes. There may be resistance for different reasons such as leadership fatigue, skepticism about stakeholder engagement, or concern about managing conflicting viewpoints.

**Mitigation:** Consistent communication about the purpose and scope of stakeholder involvement, combined with skilled facilitation, can help build trust in the process. Early engagement with leadership and reflection on past branding challenges can also strengthen buy-in.

### Balancing Creative Vision with Stakeholder Input

While collaboration enhances relevance, too much input can dilute strategic focus or delay progress. Designers and strategists may find it challenging to balance creative direction with stakeholder input, particularly in politically complex environments.

**Mitigation:** Establishing decision-making protocols and criteria for feedback, such as alignment with brand vision or audience needs, can help maintain creative clarity while still honoring collaboration.

### Evaluation Challenges

Evaluating the long-term impact of a brand strategy can be difficult. Changes in perception, engagement, or alignment often stem from multiple influences, making them difficult to isolate or measure directly.

**Mitigation:** Evaluation should be built into the process from the start, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Tools like pulse surveys or annual brand audits can provide meaningful insights over time.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the IKT-aligned model. Instead, they highlight the need for thoughtful planning, skilled facilitation, and long-term commitment. With thoughtful planning, it can lead to a more credible, cohesive, and enduring brand.

## Conclusion

This paper outlined a model for applying Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT) principles to brand strategy, particularly within mission-driven organizations and institutions, where clarity, trust, and alignment are critical to success. While this approach requires thoughtful facilitation and sustained investment, it offers a clear path to building more impactful (and profitable) brands.

Branding remains one of the most powerful tools an organization can use to express its purpose, communicate its value, and build credibility with the people it serves. However, in many institutions, branding still unfolds in isolation, disconnected from strategy, research, and lived experience. When this disconnect occurs, the result is often a fragmented identity or a brand that fails to reflect the organization's mission or current reality.

The IKT framework offers a grounded and participatory alternative. Aligning the six core IKT activities—problem identification, context analysis, knowledge synthesis, co-creation, implementation, and evaluation—with the stages of brand development equips organizations to create strategies that are visually coherent but, more importantly, strategically sound, stakeholder-informed, and designed to evolve as the organization grows.

Branding is meant to be strategic, collaborative, and evolving. When approached in this way, it becomes a leadership tool for internal learning and cohesion, external relevance, and lasting impact.

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## About the Author



**Kershelle Barker** is a Brand Strategist, Designer, and Copyeditor with a background in public health and health policy and systems research. Her work combines evidence-informed decision-making with visual communication to help intentional business-owners and mission-driven organizations align their brand identity with their vision and values. She has led branding projects across sectors including health and wellness, education, environmental sustainability, and consumer goods, drawing on frameworks such as Integrated Knowledge Translation (IKT) to guide brand development and implementation.

Kershelle is the founder of KHreative Works Branding Agency which specializes in strategic identity development for businesses and organizations in over a dozen countries.

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