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Y.M.C.A. Is Downsizing to a Single Letter

By **STEPHANIE STROM**

Note to the [Village People](#): The lyrics in your biggest hit need an update. The organization previously known as the [Y.M.C.A.](#) is henceforth to be called “the Y.”

One of the nation’s most iconic nonprofit organizations, founded 166 years ago in England as the Young Men’s Christian Association, is undergoing a major rebranding, adopting as its name the nickname everyone has used for generations.

“It’s a way of being warmer, more genuine, more welcoming, when you call yourself what everyone else calls you,” said Kate Coleman, the organization’s senior vice president and chief marketing officer.

Soon a special dictionary will be necessary to help navigate all the abbreviations being adopted as formal names by companies and charities alike: [KFC](#). [BP](#). [Xe](#). [AARP](#). A few months ago, [National Public Radio](#) sent a note to all its staff members asking everyone to refer to it as NPR.

“In many ways, we are just catching up to our audience,” said Dana David Rehm, NPR’s senior vice president for marketing and communications.

Jonah Disend, chief executive of Redscout, a brand strategy company in New York, said adopting abbreviations in lieu of long names could make sense in an era of [Twitter](#), with its 140-character diktat, and apps for mobile phones.

“There’s a real need to make everything fit into a bite-size space,” Mr. Disend said. (The Y has an app, but nonprofits have not fully embraced them yet, in part over their vexation with Apple, which prohibits the use of [iPhone](#) apps for fund-raising.)

Brand experts say a new name can make sense when a company has outgrown its name or offers services that go way beyond what its name describes. "I'm advising a client right now to do just this," said Larry Checco, president of [Checco Communications](#) and author of "Branding for Success: A Roadmap for Raising the Visibility and Value of Your Nonprofit Organization."

The Y's new name coincides with its efforts to emphasize the impact its programs have on youth, healthy living and communities. Its affiliate in Sioux City, Iowa, for instance, is working to change zoning regulations to promote sidewalks, which it hopes will encourage more people to walk. In Louisville, Ky., the local Y is trying to increase the distribution of fresh fruits and vegetables through bodegas. In low-income housing complexes in Houston, landlords have given the affiliate apartments for an after-school program to reduce vandalism by teenagers.

"We're trying to simplify how we tell the story of what we do, and the name represents that," said Neil Nicoll, president and chief executive of the organization, whose membership peaked in 2007 and has remained flat.

The challenge, Mr. Disend said, is to continue to make consumers and donors aware of the history, tradition and meaning behind the letters. "It's particularly a danger in the nonprofit space, where the story and awareness of the history and mission is critical when trying to raise money," he said.

Perhaps aware of that danger, most organizations that adopt abbreviations as names do so only for marketing and branding purposes. Legally, for example, [NPR](#) remains National Public Radio. [Procter & Gamble](#), too, is still, for legal purposes, Procter & Gamble, though it has used P&G for branding purposes since 1999.

Conversely, [the KFC Corporation](#) is now the legal name of the restaurant chain formerly known as Kentucky Fried Chicken, but the company uses both names in its marketing.

[BP](#), formerly [British Petroleum](#), adopted its initials after acquiring companies including Amoco and ARCO. ARCO itself used to be the Atlantic Richfield Company. The Obama administration's use of the old name in chiding BP after the recent [oil spill](#) in the Gulf of Mexico has annoyed a number of British publications and political leaders.

While the public seems to have no trouble embracing abbreviated names, the news media often

remains stubbornly attached to old names. **AARP** dropped its full name in 1999 and is frustrated that reporters still identify it as “formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons.”

“Some names die hard,” said Michelle Alvarez, a spokeswoman for AARP, which changed its name in an acknowledgment that more than half of its nearly 40 million members are not retired.

Xe Services, the private security firm formerly known as Blackwater Worldwide, continues to be described with both names by most media outlets.

Of course, organizations sometimes enable such bad habits. The Y said in a note to editors that affiliates collectively should be referred to by the new name, but a specific branch should still be referred to as, say, the Y.M.C.A. of Greater Seattle.