

**Branding in an Arlington, Virginia REIT**

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We were tasked this week with choosing a local "brand" and determining if the company behind it has a well-defined and executed brand strategy, and assuming it does, what elements of this strategy enabled it to achieve success. After doing some searching for a local company to investigate in my area, I settled on AvalonBay Communities, Inc., which is an REIT company (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020a) based in Arlington, Virginia, where I live. I did not know what REIT stood for when first visiting AvalonBay's home page, but a bit more searching revealed it stands for real estate investment trust (Wikipedia contributors, 2020, February 11). Since I am interested in the issues of housing justice and gentrification in my community, it appealed to me to investigate one of the local rental real estate companies.

Before looking into AvalonBay's branding strategy, it would be helpful to think about what a brand is. According to our textbook, a brand "is a name, picture, design, or symbol, or combination of those items, used by a seller to identify its offerings and to differentiate them from competitors' offerings" (The University of Minnesota, 2010 p. 179). The concept of brand is thus rooted in the very idea of written language. It is an abstract representation of something existing in the world. In the case of a brand it is a representation of an "offering", a collection of products that a company has available for exchange.

For AvalonBay, the offering is a place to live, available for rent. The company is not marketing a single brand, but three: AVA, Avalon, and eaves (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020d). Each brand is targeted at a different price range. At the low end are eaves, whose website offers "value living" and "all the basic things you're looking for in a great apartment. Plus a little more" (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020e). In Northern Virginia one needs to drive a ways out from Washington,

DC to the suburbs to find an eaves apartment. At the time of writing this there are four eaves complexes in Northern Virginia, with starting prices for a one bedroom apartment at around \$1500 (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020f).

In the middle range are the Avalon apartments, with starting prices for a one bedroom between \$1700 and \$2000 (2020f). These are for people who want to "live modern, live up" (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020c). This line appears to be their flagship brand, with twelve complexes in Northern Virginia, including five in Arlington (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020f). At the top of the line are the AVA apartments, for residents who want to "live awesome" (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020b). There are only two AVA complexes in Northern Virginia, both near the newly renovated Ballston Mall in Arlington, with each offering one bedroom apartments for around \$2000 (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020f).

There can be no doubt that AvalonBay Communities, Inc. has a well-defined and well-executed brand strategy. It is fascinating to consider the titles of its web pages for each of its three-tiered offerings, "Brand Eaves", "Avalon Apartments", and "Brand AVA" respectively (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020e, 2020c, 2020b). This suggests a very conscious decision to use a low end and high end offering to drive customers toward the flagship middle. Eaves are available for those who need to be mindful of costs and look for value, while AVA is for those for whom living awesome is more important than considerations of cost. For the majority who do not want to be extravagant in paying for housing but who will want housing that "rises to the lifestyle you've worked for", and "where life is more effortless to locations specifically chosen to put everything within reach", flagship Avalon is the apartment living of choice (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020c). Each of AvalonBay's brands allow pets, which is part of its branding identity.

AvalonBay Communities, Inc. has had total revenues over two billion dollars for each of the last four years, with net income available to stockholders of between seven hundred and eighty million and a billion dollars (AvalonBay Communities, Inc., Income statement, 2020). Its net assets were over nineteen billion dollars in 2019 (AvalonBay Communities, Inc., Balance sheet, 2020). It is one of the ten largest REITs in the United States, and according to the website Investopedia it "has delivered consistent top-line growth over the past three fiscal years", and "been steady on the bottom line" (Moskowitz, D., 2019).

As a member of a small start up web development company, I would like to think its website has something to do with its marketing success. The three pages for each of its brands are stylish with top notch design and engaging information, with sections for apartment features, pet features, community features, and lifestyle features (AvalonBay, Inc., 2020e, 2020c, 2020b). Enter a search and you are presented with a map on the right side of the page with AvalonBay communities in the viewing area marked, and a well formatted scrolling list of properties within the search area on the left. Click on any of them and you are taken to an equally well designed website for that property, complete with images, apartment diagrams, price listings, and a virtual tour created recently for the COVID-19 pandemic.

With a well-defined, three-tiered branding strategy delivered through a top notch web presence, AvalonBay Communities, Inc. helps maintain its position as one of the ten largest REITs in the business.

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