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### Bringing Brands to Life: Community Branding: From Development through Implementation

*By Don McEachern*

By now, most city leaders have at least heard of the idea of branding. You may have attended a conference session on the topic, read a newspaper article about a peer community's brand roll-out or even initiated a branding project in your own city. This article is designed to take your branding understanding to the next level. A quick review of the branding basics will be followed by some discussion of the role city government should play in the process. Finally, we'll talk about developing a strategic plan for

your brand, with an eye toward making a two-dimensional brand come to life in a three-dimensional community.

Your brand is what people say about you when you're not around. It's that simple AND that complicated. Simple, because you're talking about a mere impression. Complicated, because a lot of different experiences, marketing communications and behaviors have gone into making that impression.

Luckily, no brand is set in stone. Branding is the process a community embarks upon to change, refine or improve what people are saying about you. Branding can't fix a major problem like racial discord, but it can focus people on the positive differentiators in your community. And believe it or not, changing the way people view your community can make inroads into improving other areas.

### Steps to brand success

Successful branding is a unique combination of scientific research, instinct, subjective creative execution and quite frankly, excellent project management and organization. Many roads will lead you to a strong brand, but I advocate a process involving four steps:

- **Understanding:** This is by far the most time consuming and labor intensive part of the project. Here research is conducted to understand you community's physical attributes in relation to the competition, to glean the opinion of the stakeholders, to determine the perceptions of current and prospective consumers and to identify demographic and psychographic information about consumers. In other words, know your audience and what they think of you – two basic laws of persuasive

communication.

If well done, you should be able to use this research not just for the branding initiative, but for a myriad of projects in the years that follow.

- **Insights:** Good research is critical because the balance of the brand rests squarely atop it. However, research is generally flat and somewhat unemotional. In this stage you need to translate all those research facts into the emotional sparks that can bring your brand to life. I call these sparks insights – a series of fact-based emotional truths about your community. Just like a good storyline, these insights build to a conclusion that is your brand strategy. Your strategy must be relevant to your situation while differentiating you in the competitive marketplace.
- **Imagination:** During this phase, creative gurus breathe life and character into the insights and strategy the process has revealed. It is not enough for your creative work to be clever; it also must be on-strategy. The most captivating campaign in the world won't do your community a bit of good unless it is relevant to your situation. If you aren't actually the cutting edge of culture, then don't present yourself as such. Misrepresentation will always backfire. Disgruntled consumers not only don't return; they spend lots of time telling friends about their negative experience.
- **Evaluation:** Finally, take time to make sure your brand is working for you. Put in place measures that track how your community's brand is perceived in the marketplace and

determine whether these changes in perception have worked to achieve the desired objectives of the brand.

### Put your city in the center

Some brands are clearly the jurisdiction of a specific public sector organization. Las Vegas, for example, is very well known for its tourism product. Thus its entire brand was developed for and by its tourism people. Other communities rely as much or more on economic development, residents, the arts and existing business for their health as they do for tourism. In those cities, a community-wide brand is the answer.

In a community-wide initiative, city government should be at the center. Only city government operates in an umbrella fashion. In other words, you have the best interest of all the public sector entities at heart. When a community brand is managed by the local government the brand stands a significantly greater chance of working for the city as a whole. This means it has a greater chance of working, period.

I caution here, that the city should be involved in a management role, not in an "ownership" capacity. Too much control will impact buy-in from the larger group including the private sector. In addition, when elected officials take ownership of a brand, there is a chance it will be abandoned by future leaders looking to make their own mark.

Ideally, ownership of your community brand should be held by a marketing partnership with representation from local government as well as big and small players from the public and private sector.



*Introducing your brand personally to community stakeholders can pay off in unexpected ways. In McKinney, TX, an upscale developer requested permission to fly the McKinney brand flag in a new retail development*

### Strategic planning, not just a strap line

The most common misconception about branding is the idea that a strap line (also called a tagline or a positioning line) is synonymous with a brand. I both understand this and am frustrated by it. I understand it because for most people a strap line may be the only exposure they have to the brand. Strap lines are easy to grasp. People understand their purpose. They are high profile, often clever and catchy.

I am frustrated by it because your community should wear its brand like a second skin. If the only manifestation of your brand is a strap line or a logo, then you don't really have a brand, you have a band-aid. It also asks way too much of a single line. I call this line a strap line (rather than tag or positioning) because in a community-wide initiative it serves to strap ALL the participating entities together using their greatest common point of difference (which is identified in the brand strategy). It is unrealistic to expect this line to do all the heavy lifting from a marketing

perspective in a community; other branding activities must be put in place.

For that reason, a strategic plan of some kind is critical. Without such a plan, I have seen really strong brands flounder, becoming in time only a logo and strap line on cards and letterhead.

Strategic implementation the first two years after brand rollout will be very different from a strategic plan conducted five years after launch. The primary goal of those first two years is to convert the “players” in the community to be brand ambassadors. While numerous brand marketing and communication initiatives can take place concurrently, this incubation period is primarily devoted to strategies that reinforce and demonstrate the value of an integrated community brand.

Essentially, the initial two-year strategic plan will help to:

- Determine the “who, what, when and how” of ongoing brand implementation
- Identifying leadership and individual responsibilities for action
- Build strong partnerships within the community
- Identify funding sources
- Prioritize action and steps/timing to accomplish

Focus the efforts and resources of the community on the most effective initial communication strategies, events, activities and infrastructure changes for launching your brand.

Build local commitment to the brand by involving the organizations and individuals whose support is essential for success.

Such a plan represents a good mix of grassroots team building and solid marketing initiatives. Once everyone is on board the brand wagon, there is no end to the powerful things you can do!

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