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PUTTING COMMUNITIES AT THE CENTER OF BRANDING

by Don McEachern

Imagine for a moment you're not a local government manager. Instead, picture yourself as your locality's brand manager. Don't relax just yet. This is anything but a cushy position.

Since it's your first day on the job, here's a simple task. Collect the marketing and communication materials from all the players on your team, including the convention and visitors bureau, the economic development group, the chamber of commerce, any arts alliances, and, of course, your own local government. Also take a minute to determine what the private sector is conveying about your community when it speaks to the outside world.

Spread out these materials on a table. Do they have a similar look and feel? Are they integrated at some level? Are they relevant? Are they distinct? Do your private sector companies give an appropriate nod to your locality's brand? Do you recognize your brand? Is there even a common theme?

If you answered yes to all these questions, stop reading. You're light years ahead of most places and probably have a good handle on your brand. But if you were surprised by the incongruity of your community's marketing materials, you're not alone. The vast majority of local governments are in the same boat. In the words of a client who was recently given this assignment, "What a mishmash!"

DON'T PANIC

This exercise illustrates why a local government should be at the center of a branding initiative. The various entities that make up your community operate with distinct agendas. They speak in their own unique voices. That's their job. But when a brand is launched, it is advantageous for a community to speak in one voice, and what is spoken needs to be strategic.

Branding efforts of various

groups, although individually well executed, often work against each other with counter messages if they are not coordinated. Only a local government operates in an umbrella fashion, with an eye toward making sure all entities thrive. When a brand is managed by the local government, the brand stands a significantly greater chance of working for the locality as a whole.

This means a brand has a greater chance of working, period. An added bonus: following the branding process, the diverse organizations and entities that worked on the initiative often find themselves appreciating the other groups more and working with them on additional projects.

By now a lot of managers may be panicking - "I'm willing to take this position hypothetically, but I've got too much on my plate to take it literally!"

Some communities may choose to have their managers handle their branding, but many of my clients are successfully elevating the public information officer, the communications manager, or the director of marketing and communications to the role of brand manager.

Forward-thinking Missouri communities may even want to consider being the first on the block to hire a brand manager. As the branding wave continues to grow in acceptance and importance, it's only a matter of time until the significance of branding demands a specialized position.

MANAGE BUT NOT OWN

Notice that when I talk about local government's role in branding I say "manage," not "own." A number of problems are inherent in the idea of a locality wholly owning and controlling its brand. First, that type of control may affect buy-in from the bigger group, including the private sector. And buy-in is mandatory, from the perspectives of both implementation and financing.

In addition, every four years or so a local government may experience a turnover in elected officials. I've had more than one client implement a dynamite brand, only to have it abandoned by newly elected officials looking to make their own marks.

Ideally, ownership of your community's brand platform and brand identity should be held by a sizable and inclusive marketing partnership comprising local government as well as big and small players from the public and private sectors. And, although the amount of resources each group brings to the table can impact each group's influence over the process - big fish will be big fish - all should be invited.

Gainesville, Florida, for example, recently launched a branding initiative backed zealously and financially by an alliance of marketing professionals from 46 organizations in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, including such heavy hitters as the University of Florida and Shands HealthCare. This alliance will "own" the brand, making it invincible to political pressure.

A team approach such as Gainesville's furthers the buy-in and adoption of the resulting work. It keeps in mind the big picture for the community, and it weathers changes in administrations.

FROM INSIGHT TO INSPIRATION

Let's say you accept the premise that branding begins with a local government (which you should). And, for the purposes of this article, you are still your community's brand manager. The next step is to review the process of branding, beginning with a definition of a brand. Contrary to common thinking, a brand isn't a logo, a mission statement, or even a positioning platform. Your brand isn't something you produce or provide to others, like an ad, brochure, or radio spot.

Your brand rests in the minds

and hearts of other people. It is what they say about you when you're not around. It can be influenced and shaped by marketing materials. What has more influence over the things people say about your community - Your logo or someone's experience in your community? Your positioning line or what a prospect hears from a friend?

Although there are several approaches to building a brand (some more complicated than others), the process I advocate involves four steps:

Understanding. Research is conducted to understand your community's physical attributes in relation to the competition, to glean the opinions of the stakeholders, to determine the perceptions of current and prospective consumers, and to identify demographic and psychographic information about consumers.

In other words, knowing your audience and knowing what your audience thinks of you are two basic laws of persuasive communication.

This stage is a lot of hard work, but

it should be a lot of fun too! Researchers should talk to elected officials, residents, visitors, and business owners. They must test your community's attractions, dive into its history, and explore its economic development opportunities. They should visit neighborhoods, schools, museums, and traditional town squares. They should explore and fish (if that's what you offer!) and attend local meetings. They should eat, shop, and check out your hotels.

Insights. The most successful brands establish an emotional - not just an intellectual - connection. In other words, you now need to translate all those fascinating facts gathered during the research phase into emotional sparks that can bring your brand to life. Your brand strategy must be relevant to your situation while it differentiates you in the competitive marketplace.

Imagination. During this phase, you breathe life and character into the understanding and insights that the process has revealed. For most communities, this is the most exciting stage. Here all the data and high-

level strategies are transformed into tangible creative products that embody your brand. The results are consistent communication concepts (positioning lines, logos, ads, public relations, Web sites, outdoor boards, and so forth) and strategic initiatives (civic awards, architectural guidelines for redevelopment, way-finding systems) that support the strategy.

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.

Just as I advocate placing local government at the center of branding, I am adamant about the benefits of integrating research, strategy, and creativity into a single process. Piecemealing the process opens up too many opportunities for disconnection. How many of you, for example, have a thick book of research results sitting on your shelf right now? Ultimately, research is useless without strategic and creative shaping to bring it to life for the consumer.

It is just as problematic to proceed with a clever marketing campaign if research has not been conducted to determine the relevancy of that approach (or, as often happens, if research conducted by one company is being ignored by a creative agency because the creative types didn't conduct it and they don't find it relevant).

Marketing is merely a promise to the consumer of fun, creativity, safety, charm, and none of it means anything if the destination can't deliver.

Finally, energetic, exciting, and relevant outcomes result more often when there is interaction among the people who conduct the research, the people who develop the strategy, and the people who cook up the creativity. Countless times I have seen our research people confer with the creative teams, and even take them to focus groups and interviews, in an effort to further their understanding of a certain quality a community may possess.

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Home to the famous speech that coined the phrase, “man’s best friend,” Warrensburg, Missouri, was searching for a more relevant identity. Visitors, business leaders, and residents alike had difficulty defining Warrensburg except as a small college town. Representatives of 35 organizations including commercial developers, bankers, utility companies, medical personnel, school districts, city leaders, education groups, the chamber of commerce, and Main Street businesses attended the kickoff meeting. Financial stakeholders were identified within the group to fund the project. A marketing task force comprising members from the various stakeholder organizations and including City Manager Jeff Hancock was formed to oversee the project’s progress. All members are considered equal partners. Research found that the transient population of University of Central Missouri (UCM) and Whiteman Air Force Base (Whiteman AFB) creates a churn of people and ideas, especially because the number of people affiliated with these institutions is greater than the population of the town itself. This churn results in an unexpected level of youth, culture, and energy amid the rural charm of a small, Midwestern community. The resulting brand strategy homed in on the small-town comfort and charm of Warrensburg and contrasted that with a replenishing spring of people and ideas that makes you feel welcome, stimulated, and at home. “We have learned so much about Warrensburg from this process,” Long stresses. “For the first time, diverse organizations understand the value of each other. This is a huge step for our community. We also learned that while we have three major players—Warrensburg, Whiteman AFB, and UCM – we do not work independently of each other. Warrensburg is the ‘big picture’ and the two other entities are parts of the whole. The key to our branding success is that no one owns the brand, but we all believe in it because we were all a part of it.”

Missouri River City Makes A Splash With Branding

Cape Girardeau, Missouri, embarked on a community-wide branding campaign to raise its profile with residents, tourists, and businesses. Research revealed that this charming river town was the “tell me” city in the “show me” state. Cape Girardeau boasts a rich and fascinating history centered around the river and featuring big names like Lewis and Clark, General Ulysses S. Grant, and Mark Twain.

The brand strategy positioned Cape Girardeau as a river town flowing with stories and leveraged the fact that the community is full of residents ready to help tell those stories. Specific brand implementation ideas focused on infrastructure changes necessary to reconnect the community with the river. Brand initiatives included:

- The tagline, “Where the river turns a thousand tales” and the logo featuring a riverboat wheel used to help establish a historical connection with the river.
- Intriguing advertising, which used the City’s stories to draw visitors to the tourism Web site. Outdoor boards tempt visitors to spend time where historical greats did.
- The brand featured on all public sector Web sites.
- A 1,100-foot floodwall along the river downtown, that was converted to a mural with 24 historic panels featuring stories from the community. The River Heritage Mural Association raised over \$100,000 in community contributions and \$250,000 in additional funding.
- An extension of the Mississippi Riverwalk Trail allowing residents and visitors to stroll and sit next to the river.
- A joint venture with the Missouri Department of Conservation for a half-million dollar renovation allowing people to bring their boats to the river.
- A new/modern suspension bridge built over the river and a park/pavilion area to view the river.
- The River Campus Trail project including the College of Visual and Performing Arts being constructed on the riverfront and plans for a museum and theater for performances.
- The Red House Interpretive Center (where Lewis and Clark stayed) reconstructed on the river.

During the 2005/2006 fiscal year, hotel collections went up 15.17 percent while restaurant sales went up 7.95 percent. But the most important outcome of the brand was the unifying effect it had on the public and private sector entities in the community.

President/CEO John Mehner, of the Chamber of Commerce, says, “The brand is something all the agencies within the City can rally around and the entire community can be proud of and participate in. Inquiries received during first quarter 2004 surpassed total inquiries from the entire year in 2003.”



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government's brand and bringing that brand to life. Clearly, this will involve marketing, so you will be accountable for the effectiveness and the return on investment of your community's marketing efforts to both residents and the outside world.

But it doesn't stop there. The brand must be represented in your community's architecture, in its events and attractions, in its public art and signage, in the aesthetic overlays to development and redevelopment, in the attitudes of residents and public servants, in the community's approach to entrepreneurs, and in its educational offerings. In other words, your community must do more than advertise its new brand; it must wear it like a second skin.

Columbus, Indiana, for example, has just launched its branding campaign and is currently in the process of inventorying all city property that can serve as a canvas for the brand including: water towers, storefronts, buses, police car doors, and signage. Cape Girardeau, Missouri, converted an

ugly floodwall along the river into a 24-panel historical mural which embodies the brand and vividly conveys all the stories of the community (See related story, p. X.)

I encourage you to take it a step further and leverage relationships with communication providers. In exchange for the lease on cell and radio towers, ask for time on the airwaves to promote your brand. If you provide a cable company access to public institutions like hospitals and prisons, demand a little time on their channel.

Of course, your community will never become a branding canvas without its local leadership. Because most of what we're discussing is local property, your message will never make it to the storefront, the water tank, or the airwaves without government approval.

CHALLENGES OF COMMUNITY MARKETING

The four Ps of marketing are product, place, price, and promotion. The four Ps of community marketing are

politics, politics, politics, and politics. By their very nature, cities and counties are composed of different groups with different interests, agendas, and turfs to protect. How can you manage your community as a cohesive brand?

Further complicating the problem, is the fact that a single community can mean so many different things to so many people. Communicating effectively in today's cluttered marketplace will require you to hone that tangle of feelings and thoughts to a single distinct point.

All of this requires strong government leadership to keep branding from becoming bogged down "in committee." Solicit input from your entire alliance but give actual decision making to only a few. Try to make the ultimate decision makers reflective of your community's makeup. Include, for example, representatives from the public, the private, and the nonprofit sectors.

Stress early and often that branding is not about compromise or even consensus. Branding is about determining the strong singular message that will define your community. It is about creativity and, yes, even risk. When all the subvoices within a community clamor to contribute their two cents regarding the brand message, the result too often is watered-down pabulum.

Finally, have fun with the process. I've heard community branding referred to as a science, and in some ways it is. But despite all its scientific principles, at its core, branding is about eliciting an emotional reaction. All the research, all the strategizing, all the logos, positioning lines, and advertising are working toward one goal: the tiny reaction in someone's head or heart after an encounter with your brand.

When the group charged with branding a community actually enjoys the process, when group members are excited or even challenged by the research findings, when they are willing to take risks creatively and think like consumers rather than politicians, the resulting brand is almost always a winner. □

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