

by Don McEachern

Putting Communities At the Center of Branding

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

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.

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 the governments that I work with 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 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 profes-



Police cars in Warrensburg, Missouri, are among the city equipment that bear the new brand. The new logo also can be found on water towers, an old grain elevator, entry way signage, and hot beverage sleeves.

sionals 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.

According to Bob Woods, Gainesville's communication and marketing manager, the alliance did not happen overnight but has been well worth the wait. He credits City Manager Russ Blackburn with supporting the effort.

"We have literally put together a team of emissaries for the brand," says Woods. "For this to work, we needed buy-in from the major institutions like the university and the city and county governments, as well as the nonprofits, the major industry associations, and groups like the artists' associations that contribute to Gainesville's social fabric. We have recruited members from every social level and demographic strata that make up our city. This is truly a citywide effort."

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 govern-

ment (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 audi-



“For the first time in my career, I gave the okay for tagging to take place on Spartanburg’s city streets,” laughs City Manager Mark Scott, Spartanburg, South Carolina. Here, a manhole cover is tagged with the hub-bub logo.

ence 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 and shop and check out your hotels.

Insight. 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 or creativity or safety or 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 creative. 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.

USE YOUR COMMUNITY AS A CANVAS

As brand manager, you are responsible for identifying your local 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. 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

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Brandstanding: Four Cities Share Their Success

Sporting different personalities, distinct strengths, diverse weaknesses, and a broad array of defining characteristics, communities are as unique as snowflakes. Clearly, no single approach to branding will work for every community.

Following are profiles of four communities. Each tackled the branding challenge from a slightly different angle although each local government was integrally involved with all. The resulting branding campaigns are making waves for these forward-thinking cities.

Creating a Cultural Stir

Thinking it had a tourism problem, the convention and visitors bureau in **Spartanburg, South Carolina**, initiated a branding study to address the issue. But early research showed that Spartanburg's problem went deeper than tourism. The mind-set of the internal audience—residents and students attending the city's five small colleges—was that Spartanburg was dead and that nearby Greenville was the place to go for entertainment. At that point, the branding shifted from a tourism initiative to a city-driven challenge.

"I approached this whole branding project with a lot of cynicism," recalls Spartanburg City Manager Mark Scott. "I figured we would end up with just a tagline and a logo, and I've never felt you should spend a lot of city money on either."

Scott was shocked when, following the research phase, the word came back that Spartanburg was not ready for marketing to the public. The effort would be a waste of money and ultimately it would fail. "We didn't believe in ourselves yet," he says. "So how could we sell ourselves to the public? At that point I became a believer in branding. It was obvious this whole thing was about much more than a logo."

Rather than focusing on external marketing, Spartanburg turned inward to create a virtual entertainment district promoting cool cultural happenings in the city. While the city was the brains behind the brand, the city's cultural leaders and icons became the faces and voices of the brand. Teams of artists, entertainers, educators, and retailers were formed, and each was tasked with creating a cultural stir within the city. The name of the project: hub-bub.com.

"We got the right people involved and got out of the way," laughs Scott, who claims he must not be part of the hub-bub target market because he is never invited to its events. "We've got people all over the Southeast asking 'How did Spartanburg suddenly get cool?' Hub-bub comes

up all the time. In fact, an article came out in the Greenville paper grouping us with Asheville in the cool category and talking about how Greenville needs to do something. We even made it to a Web site listing cool things recently!"

Once it gained momentum, the movement took on a life of its own. Many of the city's young people can't tell you exactly what hub-bub is, but they wear hub-bub shirts, read the Web site, attend hub-bub events, and, if asked, will tell you, "It's cool."

A brand manager position was created to handle this massive initiative, and now the brand manager works closely with the artists' groups that seeded the movement initially. The team charged with keeping hub-bub, well, bubbling is about to move to the second floor of a renovated building in the heart of hub-bub country. Cool restaurants and shops and artists in residence will fill the rest of what is being called the hub-bub club.

"Everyone wants to know how I got our city council on board with this," says Scott. "First, we have a credible mayor who believed it was the right thing to do. Second, we didn't try to sell it as the remedy for all our issues, just as seed money for a program to address a problem. There is no single big-idea solution for anything. Hub-bub is the culmination of a lot of ideas and a lot of energy.

"My advice to managers would be, make sure it's genuine," he concludes. "Your brand will only work if your people buy into it. It must be more than a marketing plan; it must be of the community."

Unique by Nature

McKinney, Texas, has grown up in the huge shadow of Dallas. But, unlike most of the smaller towns on the outskirts of this megametropolis, McKinney is not a cookie-cutter bedroom community. McKinney has a solid dose of Texas swagger and a tendency to do things its own way. From its rolling hills, to its rich history and historic downtown, to its world-class golf course and planned communities, McKinney is a singular place. Without a doubt, that's why McKinney is the fastest-growing city in the United States.

McKinney's problem was that although it was unique, it did not have anyone in charge of marketing (therefore, much of the outside world was ignorant of McKinney's many charms). Luckily, a forward-thinking city council recognized the need for a cohesive marketing plan and hired CoCo Good as director of communications and marketing.

"My first challenge was to bring together the six major groups in McKinney (the chamber of commerce, tourism, economic development, city government, downtown

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development, and community development) to brand our community," recalls Good. "Each group was doing wonderful work

marketing itself, but none of them had a sense of the city. They even used different logos and different positioning lines on their communication materials.

"The city was the best choice to lead this initiative for a couple of reasons," she continues. "First, the city council drives McKinney's 30-year plan. We wanted our brand to capture not only what we are now but what we are committed to being long term. Second, the city is like the hub of the McKinney wheel, and the civic organizations are the spokes. I am the only person who works with all six major groups."

Good and a council comprising the major civic organizations went through the branding process and last year launched the city's new brand, which capitalizes on McKinney's self-sufficient, independent spirit as well as its unique natural setting. Good reports that promising things are happening both internally and externally.

"We're getting a lot of exposure," she notes. "That's great, but that's what we expected. An unexpected benefit has been the internal change in attitudes among our civic groups. The logo that came out of our branding was flexible enough so that each group could customize it somewhat, which helped obtain initial buy-in. By now most of the groups have stopped customizing, using the original 'Texas' version in order to better promote the city.

"And while the logo is the most visible change, underlying attitudes have changed as well. The core branding group continues to meet regularly to discuss our various projects, sharing ideas and resources when possible. For the first time, everyone realizes that working together for the good of McKinney means greater benefits for us all," concludes Good.

Made Fresh Daily

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.

The seed for the branding idea in Warrensburg was initially planted by Tammy Long, executive director of the Greater Warrensburg Area Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Center, after she heard about the branding success

of Cape Girardeau, Missouri. "When I heard their story, I thought, 'This is what we've been looking for, a common thread for our community.'"

Long brought the idea back to the city's board. "Like a good laugh, the idea was contagious," she says. "The chamber was a natural to take the lead although we were not 'in charge,' just 'overseeing.' We believed the more people who got involved, the better it would be for the entire community."

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 Central Missouri State University (CMSU) 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 CMSU—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."

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Real Texas Flavor

The challenge for **Mesquite, Texas**, was that although the word “mesquite” is recognizable to almost everyone, few people associate it with a growing city in the Dallas metropolitan area. Sensing this awareness problem, the city council designated image enhancement as a priority project in the city’s strategic plan.

Image enhancement morphed into an extensive neighborhood revitalization plan, which in time led to the idea of a new brand. Tom Palmer, head of the Mesquite



Economic Development Foundation, was charged with leading the branding and with working in partnership with the city council and City Manager Ted Barron. He took the ball and ran with it.

“Our community works well together so it was natural for the city to take the lead on branding. We included the convention and visitor’s bureau from day one because increasing tourism is one of our top priorities,” explains Palmer. “The process went really smoothly, even accommodating the schedules of council members and representatives from different organizations. I would stress the importance of getting key stakeholders and relevant organizations involved at the very beginning and thoroughly educating everyone involved on what they can expect from the process.”

Research showed that businesses love Mesquite’s location and the “Texas work ethic.” Visitors to Mesquite soon find it delivers a full dose of cowboys, different cultures, and hospitality, making it quintessential Texas. This authentic experience is just as rich and flavorful as the name implies, and it led to a natural brand strategy: “Mesquite is the authentic flavor of Texas today: Real. Texas. Flavor.” As in McKinney, the logo and positioning line adapt to different audiences, allowing multiple public and private sector organizations to put it to work.

“Our brand has been incredibly well received,” Palmer continues. “Right now we are trying to determine how to accommodate businesses in the private sector who want to use the brand for their purposes. It is exciting that so many entities want to jump on board with the brand. That speaks well for the pride they feel for Mesquite, which is ultimately what the council was after with image enhancement!”

—Don McEachern, North Star Brand Strategies
Nashville, Tennessee

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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.

In London, Ontario, Canada, this point was illustrated when the city launched a massive metamorphosis initiative to become a “creative city.” According to Gord Hume, city controller, the city needed a state-of-the-art entertainment complex downtown in order to attract the entertainment and sporting activities that would create a buzz about London. But building the entertainment complex was not without controversy and could not have been accomplished without government leadership.

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 and 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. **PM**

Don McEachern is president of North Star Brand Strategies, Nashville, Tennessee (don@northstarideas.com).



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ICMA Builds Momentum with Brand Update of Its Own

When Nike launched its now famous “Just Do It” tagline, the company was struggling with making its brand more relevant to new audience segments in a changing competitive market. FedEx recently updated its entire

brand portfolio, corralling all its products and services under a better organized brand and subbrand architecture. The company did this to help its customers make better sense of its products and services. You’ll notice now that FedEx Ground, FedEx Express, and FedEx Services are among its subbrands.

These are two examples of private sector brand revitalization initiatives. The community case studies featured in Don McEachern’s article are public sector examples of how revitalizing a brand can attract new audiences and help existing audiences better understand what an organization or community has to offer.

Brand Journey

ICMA has embarked on its own brand revitalization journey. Three years ago, ICMA conducted an intensive research initiative concerning its brand. In-depth interviews were held with key stakeholders ranging from longtime members to recent graduates, federal agencies, corporate partners, ICMA staff, media representatives, and others in the local government field.

As part of the effort, ICMA asked its members to respond to an online questionnaire about ICMA’s brand values, and nearly 1,000 members participated. The online study was followed by a communications audit that provided a view of all the communication materials ICMA produces. The study recommended that ICMA:

- Define and convey its image with more clarity.
- Create clarity and coherence through its communication.
- Update its brand communication to better attract a new generation of members.
- Improve the organization of its service areas to help create consistent expectations of the ICMA brand.

So What’s Next?

In addition to its members, ICMA targets various audience segments as part of its mission, including elected officials, journalists, foundation representatives, academics, and others who are either unaware of the organization or, worse, have inaccurate perceptions about it.

ICMA

Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

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ICMA’s outreach will be significantly more effective when it becomes consistent on how it positions itself. As communities have found, a consistent and positive brand image attracts more positive attention than one that sends out confusing messages.

ICMA has developed a complete strategy to revitalize its brand. The strategy includes reinforcing ICMA’s unique “brand position,” which is to help build momentum for local government professionals through education, a strong network, and technical expertise. The association also has to better articulate its brand’s values, which are ethics; dedication to the management profession; leadership; and connectedness to members, their communities, and the management issues that their jobs entail.

Another important element of ICMA’s brand strategy is the organization of services and activities in a way that makes better sense to its stakeholders. In addition to all the core activities that fall under ICMA’s main brand, ICMA will have four subbrands: ICMA University, ICMA Press, ICMA Results Networks, and ICMA International.

One of the most exciting outward expressions of the new brand strategy is an updated ICMA logo. The current ICMA logo was developed almost 40 years ago. The organization must be relevant to a new generation of professionals in a communications environment that is much more cluttered than it was in the 1960s.

The new logo design, shown here, incorporates an updated typography and color system but retains some elements of the current logo. And a new tag line, “Leaders at the Core of Better Communities,” helps define the spirit of what the “square in the circle” is all about.

ICMA’s complete brand toolkit also includes a new look and feel for ICMA materials that will be incorporated into a graphic standards guide. As the logo was being finalized, two concepts were tested with more than 80 next-generation members, and their comments say it all: “Sleek, contemporary, forward looking . . . and the A in ICMA resembles a delta, a sign of change and innovation.”

ICMA will begin using the new logo and design approach in June, with the “official” launch at the 2006 ICMA Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, September 10–13. The logo will be used in this magazine beginning in August. If you have questions on ICMA’s branding efforts, send an email to Ellen Foreman at eforeman@icma.org.

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