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UNDERSTANDING BRANDING

Do Shrinking Budgets Leave Room For Marketing's Hottest Trend?

by Don McEachern

Florida municipalities large and small are struggling to prioritize program spending in light of shrinking budgets resulting from tax cuts. So when budgets are slashed and there is so much that needs to be done, is branding the best use of limited resources? In other words, when times are tight, is branding a luxury or a necessity?

To answer this question, you must first understand exactly what branding is and what you can reasonably expect it to do for you.

Simply put, your brand is what people say about you when you're not around. That impression is a combination

of emotional and intellectual reactions to all the different experiences, marketing communications and behaviors people have encountered on behalf of your community.

Branding is the process a community embarks upon to change, refine or improve what people are saying about them. But be realistic. Branding is not a panacea for all ills. It cannot eradicate racial discord or turn a culturally desolate city into a cultural mecca. What branding can do is focus people on the positive differentiators in your community. And over time, changing the way people view your community can make inroads into improving other areas.

IN THE SHADOW OF GATOR NATION

The challenge faced by Gainesville in its branding initiative was how to step out of the shadow of the University of Florida and showcase some of the city's other attributes while still leveraging the benefits that come with being a top-notch college town.

Research revealed that while the university is Gainesville's most dominant and positive association, the city is even greater than the gator. Located in inland Florida, Gainesville has a unique and surprising natural beauty that is perfect for all types of outdoor recreation. And in this city that feeds the mind and body, residents describe themselves according to their passions rather than their professions.

The resulting brand strategy positions Gainesville as the home to the University of Florida where a learning-based culture exists amid the surprising beauty of inland Florida, so you are inspired to discover and grow intellectually, emotionally, financially, spiritually and physically.

Using the line "Every Path Begins with Passion," the creative work features the university's mascots, Albert and Alberta, pursuing a variety of passions in Gainesville, from shopping to canoeing to attending the symphony.

Don't Get Derailed

While there are several approaches to building a brand, the one I advocate involves the following steps:

▶ **Understanding:** This is the research phase of the project and, generally speaking, about 80 percent of the total effort will take place here. Efforts should be made 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. You should be able to use this research not just for the branding initiative, but for myriad projects in the years that follow.

▶ **Insights:** In this stage, you need to translate all that data 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.

▶ **Imagination:** Next, your creative team must breathe life and character into the insights and strategy the process has revealed. It is critical that this creative component be more than a logo and "strap line" (also called a tagline or a positioning line). If the only manifestation of your brand is a strap line or logo, then you don't really have a brand, you have a "brand-aid."

To bring a two-dimensional brand to life in a three-dimensional community, make your logo and line just one component in a larger initiative that includes research, the brand strategy and your strategic plan for implementation. The tactics in this strategic plan should range from aesthetic overlays to educational programs and initiatives for turning residents into brand advocates. They should include organization, accountability, communications, signage and events.

Put Your City at the Center

Some brands clearly are 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 professionals. This often is the case for Florida communities that rely on beaches, warm weather and outdoor attractions to bring in tourism dollars. The question then becomes, "Do I actually need a brand?"

There is no cut-and-dried answer, but ask yourself a few questions:

▶ What is your brand relative to the competition? And remember, "beaches" is not distinct enough. Do you have the whitest beaches? Are your beaches surrounded by family-oriented activities? Are you known for partying?

▶ Do your tourism communication materials (including the convention and visitor's bureau Web site) reflect your brand? Are they integrated, with a similar look and feel?

▶ Does signage reflect the brand, especially in public places such as beaches, campgrounds and the visitor's center?

▶ Is tourism revenue steadily increasing, decreasing or remaining stagnant? How does that compare to the competition?

Many small to mid-size communities are surprised to discover that they have no clear brand. And as competition for tourism dollars heats up, this can become problematic. For those cities, branding should be considered an investment rather than a luxury. Organized fundraising in the private sector can help offset branding development and implementation costs.

Other Florida communities rely as much or more on economic development, education, 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 the city operates in an umbrella fashion, with 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.

However, when I say that the city should be at the center of branding, I am talking about a management role, not ownership. Too much control can adversely affect 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 mark.

Gainesville, Fla., handled this by placing ownership of its community brand into the hands of an alliance of marketing professionals comprising almost 50 organizations from the public, private and nonprofit sectors. The group, called the Market Gainesville Partnership, has backed the brand's development and ongoing implementation, both financially and administratively. Its membership includes heavy hitters such as the University of Florida and Shands HealthCare, along with smaller companies and organizations.

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

With strong leadership and a vision for the future, branding really can help move a community from good to great . . . even when budgets are tight.

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