

# Talk from the Trenches

## Top 12 Community Branding Blunders (and How to Avoid Them)

by Don McEachern

In June 2006, I wrote an article for *PM* magazine that outlined the basics of community branding. At that time, momentum for the practice was just starting to build, and a lot of local government managers and leaders had questions about branding's who, what, when, where, how, and why. What a difference a few years make! Branding has taken off, and it is the rare local government leader who has not heard of it, considered it, or tackled it.

But for every strong brand that is produced, there are a slew of branding bumbles. And often the fault is not the brand but the process. A political misstep at a critical juncture can derail a good brand faster than you can say, well, oops.

So, here are 12 branding blunders managers don't want to do during the branding process:

### **I. MAKE YOUR BRAND ABOUT A LOGO AND A TAGLINE.**

A logo and tagline are two-dimensional brand tools. A brand in its entirety should be three-dimensional, just like your community. Many communities, though, present a new logo and tagline as the result of a branding process. This is the number one mistake many communities make.

Because they are so subjective, logos and taglines almost immediately divide people into different camps. And once people start fighting about the image in the logo or the message in the line, it is impossible to turn their attention to anything else you are doing.

Also—and our company has seen this happen countless times—if you unveil your brand just by showing the logo and line, you will hear: “We spent \$X dollars for that logo?!? My uncle Ed could have done that for free.” Actually, when it comes to what your branding dollars bought, a logo and line are only the tip of the iceberg.

You also should have received tons of research, strategy, creative renderings, and action ideas. But all that is harder to understand and communicate, so the press and the people paying attention tend to narrow the focus to the logo and line.

**Solutions:**

- Bring the brand to life in ways other than just logo use before you make a public presentation. (Read more about this in number 12.)
- When you talk to the press about your new brand, talk about the logo and line only in the context of the other great things you are doing and planning for your community. Consider developing a talking-points list with highlights from research, insights, brand platform, and some action ideas. Talk about future plans for bringing the brand to life.
- Spend time gathering grassroots support for the brand, including the logo and line, before you make it public. Having a solid support base of stakeholders goes a long way toward quelling dissent. (Read more about this in number 9.)

**2. LAUNCH A LINE WITHOUT ANY BACKGROUND CHECKS.**

The community tagline landscape is extremely crowded. Not infrequently, a community lands on the perfect line only to find that the same or similar line is being used somewhere else. This is only a problem when communities compete, right?

Wrong! Communities on opposite sides of the nation—even those in different countries—want a line that is unique to them, period.

**Solution:** Go through a trademark search before introducing your brand’s line. This solves several problems. First, you can avoid duplicating anyone else’s line. Second, if your line is close to another community’s (which is often the case) you can make an informed decision about whether to proceed with it, which will help you defend your position later. Finally, if you want to protect your own line, the process allows you to do so.

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**3. DISREGARD A VOCAL CITIZENRY.**

Some citizens are vocal with their discontent with everything, and branding makes a juicy target for them, particularly when a local government hires a vendor outside the community to help with this. Sometimes when a local government has its hands full with a citizen uprising over a logo, the dispute is grounded in the fact that locals weren’t part of the design process.

**Solution:** Why rock the boat if you don’t have to? Although it is critical that an objective (outside) eye be brought to the research and strategy stage, creative development can be accomplished just as well (and sometimes better) by local talent. If you have an outspoken citizenry, select local talent with whom a vendor can partner on the process. Knowing that home talent has created a logo, a line, or any other creative goes a long way toward obtaining its buy-in.

**4. PROCEED WITHOUT RESEARCH.**

Branding without research is like

building a house without a blueprint. It can be done, but the result won’t be square! A solid body of qualitative and quantitative research is the only way to determine what your brand essence actually is. In fact, the research that should be performed at this stage takes up about 70 percent of the total process.

Not only will this research help guarantee a brand that identifies the true essence of the community, it should also give you the background and ammunition to launch future initiatives. Several companies, for example, have used consumer profiling research revealing resident retail habits to pursue new restaurants and hotels.

Others have launched specific brand-based initiatives to deal with the self-esteem problems citizens have regarding their communities. Spartanburg, South Carolina, completely switched from an external tourism campaign to an internal image-building campaign based on the findings of its research.

**Solution:** Do research obviously! Make sure you talk to citizens, stakeholders, outsiders, tourists, business owners, and state and regional professionals in the areas of economic development and tourism. Gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Include a study to determine sociographic and psychographic trends. Track inquiries and visitors. Perform a competitive analysis and a communications analysis.

**5. IGNORE YOUR CULTURE AND HERITAGE; FOCUS SOLELY ON YOUR ASPIRATION.**

Branding combines the culture and commerce of a local government, and the best brands do give a community room and resolve to develop. But if you build your brand entirely upon dreams for the future, it’s the equivalent of false advertising. For example, I was reading a blog by residents who were furious that their brand was going to focus on a fountain that had yet to be approved, much less built.

The frustrating part of this is that what you are—if uniquely presented—is enough. One of my favorite tourism brands is Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which focuses on the city’s hospitality, family entertainment, and value. Not particularly sexy, but the logo campaign was enormously successful. It featured the line “Stay with Friends,” along with a creative that centers on a female person who speaks to tourists with down-home wisdom and warmth. Three years and many awards later, numbers are way up!

**Solution:** Believe in your community. (If you don’t, no one will.) A brand is found in the spirit and heritage of a community, not in its stakeholders’ big ideas for the future.

**6. ENGAGE THE PRESS FOR THE FIRST TIME DURING THE UNVEILING.**

This is a biggie. Local media are considered the watchdogs of community welfare. And, for a lot of your residents they are the single communication liaison with community affairs and activities. I don’t think it is overstating things to say that media support can help make or break your brand at the onset. If your first brand interaction with the media takes place on the day of your rollout, chances for positive coverage go way down.

**Solutions:**

- When you start the branding process, you or your branding vendor should meet with local media to talk about the initiative. At that point, start describing the extensive amount of research and strategic thinking that are the foundation of the brand. Provide talking points. Don’t couch this as a search for a new logo and line!
- Work to obtain buy-in throughout the process by involving the media in various aspects of the research, including focus groups, online surveys, and perception calls. They are smart, intuitive, and creative people with a finger on the pulse

of what’s happening in your community.

- Solicit their help with initiatives like announcing the community survey.
- When it comes time to launch your brand, speak directly with the media to make sure your desired message is conveyed. Prepare another talking-points list that includes key research, action plans for the future, strategic thinking, and so forth, along with the line and logo.

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**Solution:** Limit the size of the group making branding decisions. During our organization’s process, a larger group of stakeholders approves the strategy. But the client is asked to select just three people to be on the creative evaluation team. Sometimes (for political reasons) more people need to be included. In every case

when that happens, the quality of the work goes down while the problems go up.

**8. APPLY STRICT CONTROLS FOR USAGE BY PRIVATE SECTOR AND OTHER PUBLIC AGENCIES.**

A key component of branding your local government is to get businesses and organizations involved in its use. Brand usage cannot be a free-for-all, but if your community is too controlling, few organizations will want to embrace it.

**Solution:** Provide ideas. Provide tools (camera-ready logo, premium items, signage), but leave room for customization so people can feel they really “own” the brand. Dublin, Ohio, provided its local businesses with long lists of fun ways they could incorporate their “Irish is an Attitude” brand into their organization (all ideas left room for original thinking). They also offered assistance in helping businesses get things done. As a result, participation has been extremely high.

**9. REVEAL YOUR BRAND TO THE PUBLIC WITHOUT STAKEHOLDER BUY-IN.**

The more support you have garnered for the brand prior to rolling it out to the public, the more successful it will be. Informed stakeholders become advocates while uninformed stakeholders can become brand adversaries.

**Solution:** Develop a top-notch brand presentation and have members of your branding committee present it one-on-one to stakeholders. Talk about what the brand can do for the community as a whole and for them specifically. Ask for their support. Leave them with brand merchandise such as a lapel pin they can wear around town.

McKinney, Texas, spent months talking to local heavy hitters before making any aspect of the brand public. As a result, they had lots

of support and lots of major brand initiatives on the drawing board by the time it was introduced to the public.

### **10. HAVE YOUR COMMUNITY VOTE AMONG SEVERAL LOGO CHOICES OR MAKE A CONTEST OF CREATING YOUR COMMUNITY'S TAG LINE.**

This is branding by committee taken to the extreme. And no matter what direction you go, citizens whose input was not selected will feel disenfranchised. Bottom line: you almost never see this approach yield a strong logo or line.

**Solution:** Again, if you feel like your citizenry is adamant about having local representation in the creative manifestation of the brand, have your branding provider partner with a local firm for that aspect of the project.

### **11. BRAND YOURSELF.**

Self-branding is a little bit like self-analysis. As part of the community, a manager or a representative for the management staff can be too close to the situation to clearly identify and solve the problems. This is particularly true with certain stages of the branding process, namely research and strategy.

**Solution:** Select a branding partner without a "dog in the hunt" to conduct the research and strategy. You will get much more honest and objective results. In addition, a new perspective can yield some surprising findings.

Lancaster, California's self-esteem was pretty low. But research revealed that its clean, clean air and perpetually sunny skies were both an allegory for the area's clear opportunity and a rare asset in the region (near Los Angeles). When presented with the

brand, "It's Positively Clear," city leaders loved it and were amazed that they hadn't been able to identify their clear air and clear opportunity as assets. They were simply too close to the situation.

### **12. ANNOUNCE THE BRAND WITHOUT SOME HIGH-PROFILE IMPLEMENTATION.**

Unveiling the brand before you have brought it to life in some high-profile ways (signage, bus wraps, Web site, public initiatives, and related activities) is asking for a lukewarm response . . . and often criticism of the local government's inability to follow through. In addition, if you haven't put in place some brand action ideas, all the focus will be on the line and logo.

**Solution:** Your goal is to help laypeople envision the purpose and possibility of the brand. So, the more ways you can highlight it during roll-out the better. Say, for example, that your brand positions your community as the healthiest county in the South. You could launch your brand with a health fair. Other ideas: rewrite Web site copy so that it includes sections on healthy recipes, exercise, and smoking cessation; start planning a countywide fitness program; partner with health clubs, schools, parks and recreation, and health food stores on coordinated brand initiatives. Develop a branded fitness water you can hand out at public meetings. The list can go on and on. **PM**

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