

# City Branding: Beyond a Logo and a Line

By DON McEACHERN

*Would you rather have your bachelor (or bachelorette) party in Las Vegas or Salt Lake City? Would you rather take a beach vacation in Maui or at the Jersey shore? And would you rather chow down on hot dogs and pizza from Chicago or Detroit?*

Even if you've never visited these cities, you probably have a good idea what they are – and are not – known for. Such reputations are the result of strong brands. That reputation is built in large part through word-of-mouth, which is considered one of the most credible sources of information. People will actually choose places to live based wholly on a desirable reputation, worrying about how they will pursue their livelihood once they get there.

Essentially, your city's brand is synonymous with your reputation. In other words, what people say about you when you're not around. ("The vineyards in Sonoma are to die for!") 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.

At its most effective, community branding plays an important role in how many cities will be managed in the future. It should serve as the glue that holds together a broad range of different tools; tools that previously realized just a fraction of their potential because they were operating in a fragmented and inefficient way.

## STEPS TO BRAND SUCCESS

No standard formula for creating a successful community brand exists. It must be a collaborative process that takes into account your current situation, your resources, your strengths and your goals.

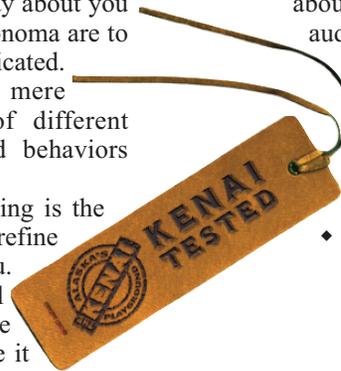
Recognizing that caveat, it is safe to say that successful branding is a unique combination of scientific research, instinct, subjective creative execution and quite frankly, excellent project management and organization. Many roads will lead you to a strong brand, but I advocate a process involving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

- ♦ **Understanding:** This is by far the most time consuming and labor intensive part of the project. Here research is conducted to understand your city'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.

- ♦ **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.

## DIFFERENT SIZES OF BRANDING

Branding is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. For example, if your city is defined by tourism, the destination marketing organization should take the lead. Such was the case with the well-known Las Vegas brand. If enticing business to your city is the primary goal, then the department charged with economic development often leads the effort.

Branding your municipality should go way beyond a logo and a line. Think of unexpected, delightful and memorable ways to bring your brand to life throughout your city. For example:

- Your infrastructure can proudly promote your brand. Strategically lit downtown office lights shine for all to see with a "P" for Providence, Rhode Island, the state's creative capital.
- Unique and relevant promotional items can bear your brand such as the rugged luggage tag from the Kenai.
- Many municipalities use public sector vehicles to carry their brand around town like the bus wrap for Grand Rapids, Michigan, a community where nature and urban living nestle up together so you really can have it all.
- Help businesses think of clever ways to incorporate the brand into their daily operation. A fishing bob supports a tea bag in a Grand Rapids' coffee house.

Other communities rely on a mix of factors including economic development, residents, the arts and existing business for their health. 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.

## BRANDING IN LAYERS

One important point to take away from this article is the "layered" nature of branding. Many communities

believe they have already established a brand. They have a logo and a tagline. Some have produced a website that ties in with that logo. They may even have carried the idea behind that logo to advertising and other communications.

But a logo and tagline are two-dimensional brand tools (brand-aids, if you will!). A brand in its entirety should be three-dimensional . . . just like your city.

Also, a word of caution, here; one of the biggest mistakes cities make in the branding process is presenting a logo and line as the end result of the effort. Logos and lines are often lightning rods for dissent. Because they are so subjective, they 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.



A true "brand," however, goes much deeper. (Layers, like Shrek's proverbial onion!) Ideally, your city should wear its brand like

a second skin and that takes a strategic plan that addresses not only branding communications but also politics, diplomacy, architecture, economic development, arts, education – in other words, every touch point your community has with a consumer. ■

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