

Actions Speak Louder than Words

PUTTING YOUR BRAND TO WORK FROM LAUNCH TO LONGEVITY

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Editor's Note: A few months ago Don McEachern introduced us to the ins and outs of community branding including what it is, which municipalities need it, how to find your identity and pitfalls to avoid. In this second article, Don will discuss taking your one-dimensional "paper" brand and putting it to work in a three-dimensional municipality.

Let's say your municipality has just undergone a year-long branding initiative. During that year you've conducted thorough research, you've culled that research down to your community's essence – the single thing that makes it different and special for those around you. And you've developed tools such as a logo and strapline to support that new identity. In a word, you've got a distinct and relevant brand. Now what?

Strategic implementation is the most critical, and sometimes the most challenging, aspect of community branding. One of the biggest mistakes many communities make when branding is putting all their energies toward the brand identification process, allotting few if any resources to the important process of putting that brand to work. Without a thoughtfully considered plan for implementing a brand, it is often reduced to a logo and tagline. But a logo and a line are not a brand, they are brand aids. And they represent only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what you should expect from your brand.

In fact, community branding is about emotion and experience. Your brand must address politics, diplomacy, architecture, economic development, arts, and education – in other words, every touch point your municipality has with a consumer. True branding requires strategies and tactics aimed at getting your brand off the page, onto the street and into people's hearts and minds.

THE PROCESS

I generally recommend that municipalities create both a short- and long-term plan. Both plans will include a combination of Identity and Action activities. Identity activities include all communication such as business cards, stationery, advertising, the website, etc. Action activities include events, infrastructure, policy, programming, business initiatives, etc.

The short-term plan covers the first 24 months following the brand development. During this period, both support and awareness for the brand are low while skepticism is high (as is the nature of many public initiatives.) The main goal of this time period is two-fold – convert your community and stakeholders into brand ambassadors through education and information sharing and introduce the brand to the outside world. In a word, get everyone speaking in a common voice.

The long-term plan builds on the foundation laid by the short-term plan. This is when the real fun and the real magic starts. It is at this point that your community brand evolves into a vital component of how your municipality is run. It becomes the glue that binds together a range of different tools. During this stage, a critical mass of public and private sector businesses and organizations are developing and promoting new "stuff" – ideas, products, policies, buildings, art, etc. – that support the truth of your common brand voice.

I recommend that the strategies and tactics associated with brand implementation generally fall into five distinct categories: Organization, Infrastructure, Community, Business and Visitors. Clearly the emphasis placed on these categories will vary depending on the goals of your brand (which you should know at this point!). For example, if your municipality relies heavily on tourism then efforts should skew toward bringing the brand to life for visitors. If tourism has little play in your city, then brand tactics to reach visitors are less critical.

Following is a brief review of each of these categories, along with examples of successful community branding initiatives that have taken place.

ORGANIZATION

Anxious to get started with their brand, some municipalities fail to put in place an organizational structure to support their efforts. This is a critical mistake. Brands cannot grow and thrive if no one takes responsibility for them. Successful implementation of a community brand requires accountability, passion, understanding and respect for the branding effort. It also requires cooperation and partnership with other organizations and individuals within the community. In this category, tactics should address the creation and funding of brand support positions as well as the development of public and private entity organizations for marketing the community in the context of the brand.

My most standardized recommendations typically fall into this category. In other words, regardless of what your city's brand identity is, to be successful you must implement some form of these ideas.

- **Assemble a Marketing Partnership . . .** This idea was first introduced to me by Gainesville, Florida. To implement its brand, Gainesville put together a group of public, private and non-profit sector organizations of all

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sizes interested in marketing the city for future growth and success. A team approach (including the private and public sector) to managing the brand 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 political administrations. **And this is key!** This group can solicit funds for brand implementation and activities from its members (typically the bigger the member, the bigger the financial support).

- **Appoint a brand manager** . . . Without a designated employee to handle brand responsibilities; it is easy for the brand message to fall through the cracks. This individual can be designated from within or brought in from the outside. Brand management duties can be all or part of what he or she does.
- **Create a brand presentation** . . . Work with a graphic designer and writer to develop a professional Power Point presentation to tell your brand story. The presentation should summarize research, insights, the brand strategy and how you plan to bring the brand to life in the community.
- **Take your show on the road** . . . The Brand Manager or other passionate ambassadors of the brand should meet one-on-one with community stakeholders to reinforce and answer questions about the brand. (Use the brand PowerPoint presentation.) Such meetings pay off in unexpected ways.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The goal here is to use your infrastructure as a three-dimensional medium for showcasing the brand. This category really represents an opportunity to be creative and think outside the box (or beyond the building!). Infrastructure includes water towers, public vehicles, sidewalks, parks, building facades, signage, lighting, airwaves, and the sky . . . even the backs of your citizens.

Following are examples from Providence, RI and Columbus, IN.

- **Providence, RI** . . . Providence is a vibrant northeastern city where original thinking is expansive and every experience is personal. One of the reasons that this brand translated so well to infrastructure ideas was the nature of the creative approach, which uses the Providence “P” as a framework for an infinite



number of themes designed to reflect the essence of the city.

- ♦ **P under ice:** Here the P forms the basis of the city’s outdoor ice skating rink.
- ♦ **P at a bus stop:** Here bus stop signage offers a light-hearted manifestation of the P encouraging residents simply to “Play.”



- ♦ **P on public transport:** Public transportation is one of the most cost-effective ways to move your brand message around town.

- **Columbus, IN** . . . Loaded with world-class architecture; the strategy for this small community was to position it as an environment of excellence which creates an uncommon atmosphere inspiring you to shape your world. The bright C that comprises their logo and the line “unexpected, unforgettable” were soon shaping the infrastructure with ideas such as:

- ♦ **Airport signage** with the logo and line in different languages.
- ♦ **Bike racks** shaped like the C in brand colors of green and blue.
- ♦ **Public playground** incorporating the C shape and in brand colors.

COMMUNITY

Municipality brands are not created; they are discovered within the spirit of a place – from the history, the attractions, the culture, the geography and the society. Brands uncovered in this manner are endorsed and absorbed by their communities due to their fundamental truth. And citizens and stakeholders who believe in the brand are ultimately the best brand ambassadors with tourists. However, it is not enough for a brand to



just be “of the people,” strategies must be developed for taking the brand into the community with programs and initiatives that have meaning for the citizens. Neighborhood revitalization, health initiatives, green initiatives, photo contests, school-based programs and civic recognition programs are all excellent

examples of community-based brand action. If there is a college in your municipality, efforts might focus on connecting college students to your citizens.

For example, Columbus created an award that recognizes citizens whose actions have brought excellence to Columbus and continue to make the city unexpected and unforgettable. Called the “unexpected, unforgettable” award, this honor has been designated three times.

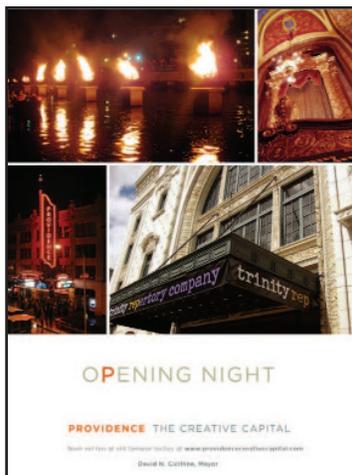


In Grand Rapids, the nature of the community reflects and complements the splendor and strength of the outdoors. The community’s resulting line, “It’s in Minnesota’s Nature,” is an excellent creative springboard for introducing the brand to citizens.

TOURISM

Your municipality’s relationship with its visitors (be they tourists, business people or visiting family) occurs at three distinct points on the time continuum – before, during and after the visit. Places that desire to grow their visitation market using their new brand need a distinct set of strategies and tactics for attracting and educating potential visitors, for impressing and entertaining current visitors and for influencing past visitors (who are spreading their impressions to others). In this area consider tactics that address website strategies, reunion planning, internet marketing, promotions, events, signage, visitor’s centers, transportation, lodging, retail, conventions, meeting planners and more.

This is one area where creativity can really reign.



One unique idea initiated by Columbus is the ability for tourists to get a guide to the city on their cell phone. At the Visitors Center, guests can pick up a deck of colorful cards, each of which describes and depicts one of the city’s 11 downtown architectural masterpieces. Cards include telephone numbers to call for a two-minute audio on each attraction.

Tourism also calls for creative advertising, although the medium – outdoor boards, print ads, radio, and website – will depend on your audience and budget. Ads for Providence invite visitors to come play in her city, enjoy fine dining, attend special events and appreciate the arts.

In addition, if tourism is important to your municipality then a high-quality, professional branded CVB website is a must. The site should reflect the brand in both content and appearance. Include links to vacation packages, services, on-line itinerary builders, blogs, and interactive maps – whatever helps sell your location. For example, Dublin, Ohio’s tourism brand is based on the idea of all things Irish. The CVB website features the city’s tourism line “Irish is an Attitude” and carries an Irish look and feel. Visitors can link to a branded video, Irish itineraries and Irish merchandise. Even the URL reflects the brand. Check it out at www.irishisanattitude.com.

BUSINESS

What municipality couldn’t use more economic development these days? The good news: There is a direct relationship between the success of a municipality’s brand and the businesses that call that place home. Using a distinct and relevant brand can help you pursue economic development growth because it makes a city look more professional, cohesive and resourceful. It can also help businesses recruit professionals and universities recruit students. Typically the types of activities that fall into this category are two-pronged. They reach out to economic development prospects with branded messages, premiums and incentives. Others work to involve existing businesses in the growth of the brand. Specific tactics address communications, events, promotions, merchandise, messaging, policy, public relations and more.

KNOW WHERE YOU’RE GOING

Clearly, there are a million different imaginative ways to bring a brand to life in your municipality. Some are expensive, but others require little more than creativity. Some will require the cooperation of public and private sector organizations and some can be implemented by individuals. The key to success is not to perform these activities in a vacuum. Every piece of communication, every action, should be tied back to the brand platform . . . to that statement that identifies what it is that makes your municipality unique. This can take some time. But the buzz and energy that is created when an entire municipality starts to operate around a singular idea is exciting to be a part of!