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The Challenges

Otto von Bismarck, first Chancellor of the German Empire, once stated, “*politics is the art of the possible, the art of the next best.*” I would suggest that because of the diverse stakeholders, unexpected complexity of places and the many compromises needed to define a place brand, the statement should be adapted to, “*place branding is the art of the possible, the art of the next best.*” I think this neatly sums up the dilemma facing communities on a place branding journey.

Place branding is a team sport, best played with people of all ages and interests, with a healthy amount of compromise, and a big dose of what’s best for the common good - and with an out of town coach in the form of a qualified place branding specialist. There’s no “silver bullet” or one-size-fits-all solution. What may work in revealing and building the brand for one place, may not necessarily work in another.

Insufficient Understanding and Knowledge

A lack of community understanding about branding, particularly among key leaders, can be the Waterloo or graveyard for a place branding initiative. Unless staff and committees can get beyond thinking in terms of logos and taglines, or mistaking a snappy campaign theme, then their efforts to define and deploy a genuine place brand will likely fail. Success takes a strategic mindset.

It’s highly likely that many committee members and stakeholders in small cities and downtowns are encountering place branding for the first time. If they have no previous in-depth experience with place branding or even branding, they may be at a disadvantage and risk wasting public funds. Their levels of knowledge and understanding can even impact them agreeing the original scope of work and judging the merits of the methodology to be adopted and the capability of prospective consultants and firms. To the uninformed, they may all look alike.

Some community branding projects fail to gain initial approval and funding or become mired in controversy because key participants, including Board and committee members, had not understood what the project was about or its

benefits. If possible, brand education should start before the project and budget are approved, and certainly before the recruitment of outside expertise.

We have seen situations where selection committees have been distracted by the attractiveness of past logo designs, the personality of presenters or advertising campaigns presented by bidding firms. They completely overlooked the need for objective measures to evaluate the technical recommendations for research, analysis, project quality control and community development. Again, a focus on strategy may be missing.

From the start, you'll need to manage *expectations* regarding what the project is and isn't – and how to manage the process. Importantly, you must ensure that the project budget isn't just associated with only a new logo and tagline. There is a ton of work to do before designs can be considered.

Place branding knowledge can strengthen the research, outreach, strategy, and deployment at all levels. We have found that a brand coaching program that assists those who will be actively involved in the process creates much better outcomes and more rewarding experiences. It also builds support, confidence in the project and deployment capabilities within the community. Introducing coaching and brand education lifts the city's capacity to the next level. Many take this newly acquired knowledge back to their businesses and organizations to apply it there.

Reflecting on the need for increased information and understanding regarding place branding Florian Kaefer, founder of The Place Brand Observer said, “I started The Place Brand Observer because I saw a need for greater understanding of place branding, and to enable more successful research, strategic analysis, implementation – and results. I recognized that outcomes could be enhanced by sharing the insights of professionals around the world who were dedicating time and energy to making their towns, cities, and regions better for people and business. By sharing knowledge and offering a virtual meeting place, we are helping them succeed.”

The Kingston Whig¹ demonstrated the need for brand education and highlighted challenges of engaging an under-prepared City Council in the development of the place brand for Kingston, Ontario (Canada). Several councilors said they could not understand the need for a branding process, nor

could they figure out exactly what the branding process would yield. “To have more brands is going to confuse the matter,” said Counsellor McLaren, adding that the city’s current motto ‘Where history and innovation thrive’ hits the sweet spot.” Other councilors questioned why staff wanted to engage an out-of-town firm rather than hire a local firm or have the city’s communications department create the logo”.

“How do we take that same approach and apply it to the community as a whole,” Mayor Bryan Paterson said in support of the proposition. He was on the mark, when he added, “If we become successful by building a brand to bring visitors to Kingston, how can we take that brand and use that to be able to bring residents to Kingston to fill our workforce gaps.” These encounters demonstrate that the best outcomes from a city brand happen when participants at all levels understand the project, its benefits - and how to deploy the strategy.

Garnering the endorsement and participation of the key executives, opinion leaders, public officials, and the media requires that they understand what the project is about and what’s needed to attain the best results. A sound understanding of the concepts involved will directly benefit the long-term viability of the brand. Some of these influencers and leaders may not be directly involved in the ongoing brand management, but their initial endorsement and ongoing support may have a profound impact on the credibility of the project.

Places Have Many Faces

Cities have many faces and identities. They are composites ‘owned’ by many competing entities, i.e., private, public and non-profit) and individuals. They are ‘consumed’ by businesses, residents, and visitors, and are ‘sold’ to many audiences, e.g., different types of tourists, investors, relocation prospects and entrepreneurs.

Balancing and maintaining the connection between the diverse needs and the competing priorities of stakeholders can be challenging. For instance, the city may be known as a destination for medical services, art, education or shopping, as well as being an attractive home for young families, each enjoying different levels of political, financial and community support.

The brand manager of consumer goods, when considering brand relationships, is likely to be free to make or eliminate links to other products and organizations. In the case of a city, there may be elements that cannot be “removed” because

they may have developed organically through geography, history, politics, marketing, and the media. However, brand managers can prioritize those relationships and establish the links that will be most advantageous. Even the prospect of changing the name of a place to improve economic performance can prove very difficult.

Balance Politics and Self Interest

Unfortunately, a city's image and reputation often go mostly unrecognized, unappreciated and unmanaged. These elements rarely get measured and never appear on a balance sheet or the job evaluation of a Mayor, City Manager or elected official. With so much riding on a city's image and reputation, it makes sense to have a strategy to nurture, manage, and protect these most valuable of assets.

It helps when leaders understand that this is an initiative to enhance the city's well-being and competitiveness. It goes to the core of everything that makes the place different from others and how to present its best face to the world. When they fully grasp and support this, they are not only able to deflect criticism from naysayers but may become influential brand champions who signal that this project is important to constituents and the future of the city.

Authors Morgan and Pritchard pointed out, "If a city brand is to be developed as a coherent entity, participants in the process must be aware of the potentially destructive role of politics."²² While a corporate brand may need to be approved by a marketing team or board, the city brand may have to be endorsed by the City Council, and other organizations in which political players may never see eye-to-eye. The city brand must be an exception, overcoming enmity, and above politics. Outreach is essential. Unless invited to participate, some may feel offended and may not support the outcomes.

This project must not only be perceived as a partnership between government, business, and non-profits – it must be one! If government officials and their staff dominate the process, it will almost certainly fail to gain traction. City council members often do not have the breadth of experience, perspective, and credibility to critique the technicalities of the brand in detail or to objectively generate the cross-city enthusiasm and partnerships needed for success.

Many city leaders don't understand the most fundamental basics of place branding or its benefits, let alone the concepts involved in place branding (or marketing for that matter!). Some are uncomfortable in using the term "branding" or even "marketing" and the city's name in the same sentence. They sit in judgment of presentations by qualified and unqualified firms and often wouldn't know the difference.

We have found that when city officials think in terms of their city's image or reputation rather than its brand, they are more likely to "get it." While this is certainly not technically an accurate description of a brand or branding, we have found that it does enable many to understand and support the concept - and its benefits.

Find a Cure for Slogan Envy?

I'd love to have a dollar for every time I have heard a line like, "what we need is a slogan like 'I Love NY' or 'Virginia is for Lovers.'" So often this type of comment comes from elected officials or government employees who are making their first foray into place branding and are seeking a magic wand solution. Slogan envy like this can be an alert that the branding effort may be off the rails before it starts and is entering hazardous territory.

Crafting effective taglines (and logos) are always challenging. Their design should never get underway before thorough consumer research, competitor analysis, and outreach to stakeholders has occurred. And even then, the tagline is only one element in the toolkit for building the brand. From the outset, success requires an understanding that branding is strategic and involves much more than designing a new logo, tagline or advertising campaign. A more realistic challenge for communities is to understand that customers should know their brand without ever seeing a logo or tagline. And don't forget, both New York and Virginia had immense marketing and advertising budgets which enabled them to promote their taglines and give them meaning.

Avoid an Image Wrapper

While many committees may have the *intention* of adopting a branded approach, they unintentionally fall short, opting instead for a superficial image "wrapper" in the form of a logo, tagline, or advertising campaign theme. It's what

David Taylor, Brand Gym calls ‘image wrapper branding,’ that changes just the visual appearance of the brand, with no accompanying upgrade of the product or service. I agree 100% when David says, “A shiny new brand identity won’t automatically solve the problems of the business.”⁵

A genuine brand strategy should act as a beacon to guide all aspects of how the city presents itself and inspires stakeholders to speak with one unified voice and consistently present superior experiences. Achieving this is a call for thorough research, extensive stakeholder consultation, a lot of creative thinking and an understanding of the nuances of city marketing, placemaking, and community development.

I recently saw the new brand guidelines for a small Canadian coastal community. Their brand vision statement was, “Our Mission is to be the region’s premier city - the best city to visit, invest in and call home.” However, the brand guidelines only contained information on how to use the visual identity. It contained nothing regarding managing, adopting, or deploying the brand in ways that will achieve the mission. But there was plenty of advice for slapping the logo on everything in town.

Avoid the ‘Best Place to Live, Work and Play’

One of the significant challenges for brand teams is to void falling for boring and bland outcomes to please nervous Nelly’s, naysayers and detractors within the community. It’s so easy (and quicker) to settle on the warm and fuzzy. As soon as they strike a concept that pleases a solid block of stakeholders, they stop because they’re think they’ve hit paydirt. Most common of these is the old standby, “a great place to live, work and play.”

We rarely conduct a workshop or interview when someone doesn’t say, “This is the best place to live, work and play.” Further, some advocate that it should immediately be the tagline.

Google the term, “a great place to live, work and play” and variations thereof. I found over 4 million results. So, if you are considering joining the masses in building a community brand based on being “a great place to live, work and play,” you have only identified an entry-level ticket to play the game – or point of parity. There are tens of thousands of places in the USA and many thousands more

around the world that can match that claim. You must dig deeper to uncover points of difference that reflect the heart and soul of the place and what makes it singular and valued.

How Will It Play Outside?

Another challenge for those involved in the process is to remain objective and non-parochial. Customers don't make choices based on what you say about your city, but on what they think! Committee members may have been born and educated here, and locals sometimes have a bias that limits their view of the city from the perspective of an outsider. Engaging outsiders can lend the impartiality and objectivity that is often difficult to get from residents.

Some of the communities we have worked with had initially attempted to develop a brand strategy themselves. But, after struggling with their internal dynamics, they realized that an outside specialist might be able to succeed where stagnation and disagreement may have otherwise limited progress because of entrenched attitudes and a reluctance to cooperate with long-standing opponents. Hence, there's the need for a systematic and research-based approach to provide objectivity.

Engaging outside specialists also allows you to harness the experience and skills that may not be available locally. A qualified consultant can guide the group through the rigorous analysis, conflicting opinions, and decisions that may be overlooked or glossed over by locals.

Whisper Brand Strategy Consultants presents a sharp critique of warm and fuzzy brand outcomes, saying, "Adulatory claims and *cheerleader messages* gain credibility among those on the inside responsible for the brand – executives, members, and other community leaders. They feel great about these cheerleader messages because they are so darn POSITIVE. But each of these insiders is already convinced, while the outside consumer is not. Consumers are unlikely to invest time or public money when a brand shouts in self-flattery or meaningless fluff which is why they are so numbingly forgettable, and irrelevant."⁴

Sadly, it's not difficult to find dozens of high-priced brand strategies that are so self-congratulatory that I can only surmise they evolved to keep the locals happy. These are a waste of time and public money. Someone was not asking the

simple customer-focused questions, such as “What’s in it for me?” or “Why should I care?” or even, “What does this mean?”, from the customer’s perspective.

Downtowns and Main Streets can also have difficulty in maintaining an objective or customer’s view of their district. Sometimes there is a disconnect between the views of downtown business owners and customers. Business operators may hold a positive image of their downtown while shoppers may feel that downtown is unsafe, boring or too loud. Regardless of whether this is true or not, you must address shoppers’ sources of dissatisfaction or risk loss of their business.⁵

It’s About Change Management

After decades of community branding assignments, I recognize that they are fundamentally an exercise in change management. The first casualty may need to be the old “that’s the way we’ve always done it” attitude. For many people, the prospect of innovation, along with new focus, concepts, priorities, and partnerships will generate resistance.

Success for a place brand may require changes to city ordinances, regulations, policies, systems, budgets, processes, resources, and recruitment. Above all, it may call for a shift in attitudes and relationships. It may take some out of their comfort zone and challenge entrenched positions. These situations highlight the need to expose critical partners and stakeholders to the benefits that can come from the brand so they can gain confidence and trust in the project and its outcomes.

Defining and utilizing the brand may call for the lead organization to engage with different stakeholders, adjust to a new leadership role and be exposed to new concepts. They may even be called on to slaughter a few “sacred cows.” For these reasons genuine place branding can be an exercise in change management because it may rely on new relationships, compromises and a genuine willingness to adapt to new circumstances. Tearing down unhelpful barriers, attitudes, and processes may be essential for the collaboration, networking, and integration that are the signatures of a healthy community brand.

Wendy Hielsberg former CEO at **Oshkosh CVB** agrees there’s a need to carefully manage the transition to a contemporary brand identity, saying, “The one aspect I was not prepared for after the brand launch was some of the negative

comments. We were so focused on the launch and developing the brand applications. A change like this is often meets resistance. We continued to implement the brand successfully, and shortly the negativity went away and was replaced with praise and support. Be sure to get the brand right, prepare for possible negative reactions - but be patient. This is about changing the way we do things!”

End Notes

Where End Note references are not provided, the quotes are sourced from interviews and discussions held personally by the author.

¹ The Kingston Whig Standard, City council hits pause on Kingston branding plan; Jan 23 2019

² “Destination Branding” Morgan & Pritchard, Butterworth Heinemann

³ https://wheresthesausage.typepad.com/my_weblog/

⁴ Whisper Brand Strategy Consultants, “Theory of Adulation”, (January 14, 2006)

⁵ Downtown Market Analysis, University of Wisconsin Extension