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# Is Community Branding a Crock?

Big or small, municipal branding is a growth industry. Is it just a fad or do you need to get on board?

By Glen Loo

Over the last couple of years, branding a community has been one of the hottest fads. You have to ask yourself though – is branding ultimately destined to be like Jimmy Carter’s zero-based budgeting or running social agencies like businesses? Tossed aside like a wet Kleenex when the next “big idea” comes along? Well, the answer to this question depends on your philosophical point of view.

If you believe that the world’s financial and human resources can expand indefinitely, then distinguishing your community from others isn’t really necessary. After all, you’ll eventually get everything you want. Branding is just one more thing you can do without. On the other hand, if you think that it is important that you don’t let the other guy eat your lunch and that ultimately it is a zero-sum game (or if you want a bigger share or want it sooner) then a branding strategy is for you. Branding is less a fad than a necessity. If you are part of the first

group – good night and good luck! The rest of you – keep reading!

## Some Fog Lifting First

What is a branding strategy? You will notice that in this article we talk about a branding strategy rather than a “brand” or “branding.” That is because it is not an isolated, do-it-once-and-forget-it exercise. Rather, it is a sometimes difficult, time intensive, externally focused and possibly costly exercise that if not properly managed can veer off to unproductive introspection. On the other hand, if done right it can be the guiding light that helps put order into your community’s marketing and communications.

So why would you create a brand strategy for your community? Most typically it is needed to help your municipality be more effective in its economic development marketing. So words like “positioning,” “competition,” “unique selling proposition” that marketers use as part of their daily vocabulary becomes part of the lexicon

of city hall. This is especially important for middle and smaller communities where visitors, potential residents, and potential investors have an alternative 45 minutes down the highway (or even worse when the alternative is less than 45 minutes away). Actually, even the biggies need to be conscious of the problems of a fuzzy branding strategy: it is just that their stage is bigger. Maybe not 45 minutes down the road, but 45 minutes further by airplane.

A branding strategy is not just a catchy slogan or simply a logo or wordmark. Rather, these are short-hand for the actual branding strategy. In actuality, a community branding strategy does the following jobs:

- The strategy helps you distinguish your municipality from your competitors;
- Announces your unique selling features in a word picture;
- Tells your audiences the benefits of a relationship with you (not the benefits to you from having a relationship with the audience); and



- Provides consistency to all your community's messages so that every time audiences come into contact with your community whether it is in advertising, your answering machine, their tax bills, at trade shows, or anywhere – they get the same branding messages.

And in the big picture, a branding strategy drives everything from who you hire to expected customer service levels to what policies town council puts in place about taxes. The decisions you make when developing your branding strategy has far reaching and long term implications, which is why it can be a difficult and time consuming exercise to get it right.

Old Cabbagetown in the heart of Toronto is an example of a community in transition which has struggled with its brand for many years. It is a place you can find million dollar homes next to social housing, where some of the city's richest Torontonians live next door to the some of its poorest. With a population of several hundred thousand people and a potential market of a million people (in the trading area as well as people in transit through the neighborhood), Old Cabbagetown is literally surrounded by competition for its retail and service sector. The challenge for the local business improvement area is creating a branding strategy that draws visitors and local residents into its retail stores and services without resorting to that old worn-out bromide of "we're friendlier retailers." The one differentiating characteristic of the area is its extensive stock of built heritage which makes it a unique experience for both tourists and shoppers. And it is on this rock that the BIA has built its marketing program.

Underlying the development of the branding strategy has been the divergent needs and aspirations of its many members. Like many organizations where we are talking about the livelihood of its members there is some degree of conflict over the mar-

keting of the area (both its nature as well as the actual need for it). Facing this, the BIA has taken it slowly over many years so that stakeholders have gotten used to working with the emerging branding and resulting mar-

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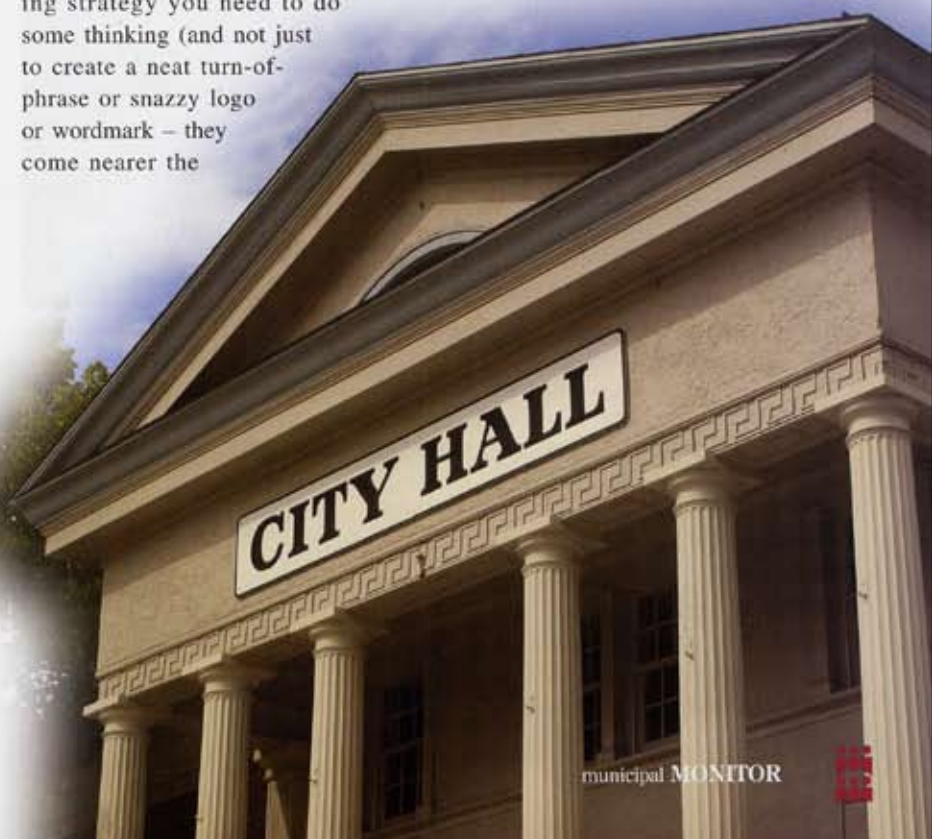
keting (though the hold of the strategy on the often changing membership is still tenuous). It points out the difficulty that a community can have in creating and maintaining a brand strategy and how the process needs to be dynamic and conscious of the changing nature of both the "product" and those that need to work and live with the strategy.

### **Creating a Branding Strategy**

To create your community's branding strategy you need to do some thinking (and not just to create a neat turn-of-phrase or snazzy logo or wordmark – they come nearer the

end of the process). Many communities create working groups to guide the process, sometimes using outside help, sometimes through their economic development or tourism committees, sometimes using an ad hoc committee of community stakeholders and civic staff. An outsider is often useful because they don't typically have the baggage that local residents might have that can colour the discussions and makes it more difficult to think outside the box.

The Town of Shelburne, for instance, is working on a branding strategy led by the town council though its economic development committee and with the help of a marketing and branding consultancy. They are working with community stakeholders to fashion a strategy that differentiates the community in the eyes of tourists and potential investors (who they feel are drawn to the area by the amenities that serve both visitors and investors' employees and their executives). Ultimately, the aim is to have the strategy guide their long-term marketing program so that the message the municipality





sends out is consistent, compelling, and differentiates it (in a positive way) from its competition.

Your community then needs to struggle a bit and start worrying through the following basic issues:

1. Does your community have a mission or vision statement? If you do (assuming it is any "good," which might be a heroic assumption in itself) this is the starting point. After all, your branding strategy

needs to be guided by your overall values and vision. Of course, not all communities have a vision statement. Actually, that isn't usually going to be your problem (not having a community vision). Usually, the vision statement is so inclusive and meaningless that your branding strategy isn't affected by it!

2. What is your primary goal for creating the branding strategy? For example, is it to attract investment, new residents, tourist visits, to retain your businesses? Don't say "everything"! That's a recipe for being fuzzy.
3. Primary target audience: who are they and what do they need and want? – Who are the most important targets for your community? It could be tourists, potential investors, new residents, the convention market, research institutions. Be specific and don't say "everyone"; more fuzz.
4. Competition – You need to know how you compare against the other guy who is fighting you for more taxes, jobs, exports, retail sales, residents. There are three parts to this thinking. First, what are the criteria that your primary target market uses to choose amongst alternative "investment" opportunities for their money, time, energy, commitment? Second, how do you compare against your competitors along these criteria? Third, can you or do you want to, do something about how you compare along these criteria if you don't compare so well. Might be time to look for a different sales pitch.
5. "Unique selling proposition" – What mix of "products" and/or services do you offer that no other community can do as well or in a combination with other products and services? Is it land, heritage, one-stop shopping at town hall, fibre optic throughout the community, proximity to manufacturing centres, a well educated popula-

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tion...the point is, what are the features of your municipality that set you apart from others?

An example of one community that is facing both thorny competition and lip-smacking opportunities is Sault Ste. Marie, which sits on the Canadian-American border. On its doorstep are several million visitors on the American side who travel to Michigan destinations as well as the millions of passers-by on the Canadian side; many who don't fully realize the city's wide range of playtime activities. The Sault has invested extensive resources in developing a sufficiently "weighty" entertainment sector to make an arresting case for their pitch as a northern entertainment destination. For instance, the city has made recent plans for a new edutainment centre, an amusement complex, as well as the sharpening of existing attractions, amenities, and visitor services. The branding strategy is able to evolve over time to reflect the reality. The community doesn't end up over-promising and it has the extra benefit of having new stories to tell so that it keeps the community fresh in the minds of the target audiences.

### The Brand Itself

Up to this point, you have more or less been focusing on the external issues. Now it's time to take a look at the attributes of your brand itself. There's more tough sloggling to come.

- What are your community's core

values that you want your target markets to believe?

- What are the basic beliefs that you want to convey through your brand strategy? That your community is inclusive to all comers, that you are development friendly/unfriendly, that a relaxing lifestyle is paramount...
- What are the promises that underscore the relationship between your community and your audiences? A promise that investors will get preferential treatment, or a promise that new residents will find clean water, air and soil, or a promise that tourists will have an unmatched experience...

Just like each human being has a personality, so do communities, except you get to mould this personality or character for your community. Are you selling sportiness (Whistler), connected with heritage (Perth, Ontario), hip (Old Montreal), or laid back (Tofino, B.C.)? It's like writing a personal ad for Lavalife.

Now that you have completed all this sweat-inducing effort, you can start to worry about slogans and logos/wordmarks, graphic symbols, colour schemes, and anything else you can think of to encapsulate all that thinking. And if you are serious about being a serious player in the market, it is also time to start thinking about the kinds of people you are going to hire, uniforms for civic employees, the media you choose for advertising, tax

policies, revenue models for parks and recreation services, which world cities you are going to twin with, and the millions of everyday and strategic issues you have to consider or reconsider.

So is community branding a crock? Emphatically, no! As long as you take your time to be deliberate and decisive when you make your self-assessment, you will find the whole experience very rewarding. It's not easy, but for you folks who actually tried to use zero-based budgeting...this is going to be a cake-walk. ♦

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## Branding Strategy Checklist

### Know Yourself

- Mission Statement
- Objectives for branding strategy
- Identified target markets
- Know competition
- Identified Unique Selling Proposition

### The Sweaty Part

- Identify core values
- Identify promises
- Identify personality



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