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The Calf Rarely Brands Itself

By Andy Levine

AND OTHER THOUGHTS ON SUCCESSFUL PLACE BRANDING

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"The Calf Rarely Brands Itself" puts forward five specific — and often counter-intuitive — recommendations for communities seeking to maximize their investment in building a powerful brand.

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the calf rarely

BRANDS ITSELF

By Andy Levine

Call it “Jumping on the Brand Wagon.”

Public and private leaders in communities across the world want to stamp an exciting, new brand on their city, region, state or country that will spur action. They want to attract growing companies that will invest in their community. They want travelers to book a vacation. They want to motivate meeting planners to schedule a conference. And they want talented workers to relocate and fill open positions in their region.

On the one hand, it's terrific to see so much attention assigned to the subject of place marketing. On the other hand, I believe the vast majority of place branding campaigns are off-target, poorly executed, and collectively wasting millions of dollars.

Looking to get started on a branding campaign? Or perhaps you want to refocus a current effort that is not delivering desired results? Here are five against-the-grain recommendations to consider and share with the “powers that be” within your community:

1. Be Different – Really Different... It's instructive to take a look at advertising campaigns designed for economic development organizations. Pick up the latest copy of *Site Selection*, *Business Facilities* or *Area Development* magazine. You will find yourself lost in a sea of sameness – with different communities touting near identical assets including their quality of life (an advantage that differs widely in the eye of the beholder), access to key markets (with so many communities located within 500 miles of the bulk of the US population is this really a point of distinction?) and a highly skilled labor force (clearly important but usually difficult to authenticate). In many cases, you can simply “cut and paste” the name of one community

ERASING THE TACOMA AROMA

Long considered an ugly step-child to Seattle, the city of Tacoma, Washington, faced a serious image problem. Paper mills that emitted a pungent odor fostered the phrase “The Tacoma Aroma.” As the former director of economic development put it: “We were the Rodney Dangerfield of Washington.”

The city set out to fix out-dated, negative perceptions with an aggressive branding campaign. After scores of interviews with public and private sector leaders as well as location advisors, a meaningful “value proposition” was identified. Tacoma had dramatically built up its telecommunication's infrastructure in recent years. In fact, the city could document that no other similar-sized community in the country had invested as much.

This insight led to the launch of the “America's #1 Wired City” campaign. Marketing missions to San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and Seattle announced the campaign in meetings with senior executives and location advisors. *The New York Times*, *Business Week*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Seattle Times* wrote favorable stories. The campaign helped spark a renaissance with the city of Tacoma reporting the attraction of more than 100 technology companies over two years.

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If you're going to succeed in branding a community, you need to stand out from the competition.

AND OTHER THOUGHTS ON SUCCESSFUL PLACE BRANDING

“Place branding” has taken the economic development world by storm with communities spending literally millions of dollars to stamp an exciting brand on their city, region or state. But as the author asserts, the vast majority of these campaigns are poorly designed and poorly executed and thus largely unsuccessful in advancing a community's image. “The Calf Rarely Brands Itself” puts forward five specific – and often counter-intuitive – recommendations for communities seeking to maximize their investment in building a powerful brand.

into a different advertisement with little impact.
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What communities have done a good job in being “really different?” Here are two examples that would be at the top of my list:

- *Memphis, Tennessee...* With the combined advantages of a Federal Express superhub and the Mississippi River, Memphis has touted its logistics advantages for the past 25 years with enormous success. “America’s Distribution Center” may not be terribly sexy to the average consumer but it is tremendously meaningful to this target market.
- *Huntsville, Alabama...* Located in a state with a significant image challenge, Huntsville stands out with the highest per capita number of engineers in the country. The community has successfully leveraged its space program legacy to attract scores of defense contractors to a place where “The Sky Is Not the Limit.”

Among tourism campaigns, Austin, Texas (marketing itself as the “Live Music Capital of the World”), and Las Vegas (whose “What Happens Here, Stays Here” campaign has successfully communicated an adult playground theme) have been enormously effective.

Is it easy to identify what makes your community different? Heck no...In the United States alone, there are 50 states, 268 metropolitan statistical areas and nearly 20,000 cities or incorporated areas. But defining what makes your community different – really different – is the first step to success in place branding.

How can you discover this? It starts with interviews – lots of interviews. Schedule detailed sessions with your public sector leaders. Meet with corporate executives who are the captains of industry in your town (as well as those who are new to the community). And be sure to get an outsider’s view via research with location advisors and executives outside of your community. It’s also important to review how your community is portrayed by key rankings such as *Fortune’s* “Best Cities for Business” or *Money* magazine’s “Best Places to Live.”

Properly conducted, this research should lead to the identification of a “value proposition” or “brand promise.” For Tacoma, Washington, the “America’s #1 Wired City” campaign emerged from a research exercise.

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One final commentary on this – you not only have to find your point of differentiation but it also has to be a value proposition that is meaningful to your target audience. Having the largest number of mosquitoes per capita is indeed a point of differentiation, but it is obviously not a marketing advantage.

2. A Logo Is NOT a Strategy...At IEDC’s 2007 Annual Conference in Phoenix, I shared the stage with branding expert Duane Knapp in a mock political debate on the topic of “Place Branding.” I didn’t agree with everything that Duane had to say but I sure agree with his “a logo is not a strategy” observation.

In any major place branding campaign, I’m always struck by how much time and energy goes into the development of a logo and themeline. There is endless debate and mock-ups with advertising agencies racking up enormous fees. In one case, I can point to a state which spent over \$200,000 to develop a logo that featured a two-word themeline. The new logo was rejected after three months of public ridicule – obviously an embarrassing situation.

An effective branding campaign is much more than a logo. In simplest terms, an effective branding campaign is about:

- Discovering your community’s value proposition (or brand promise).
- Identifying your target audience.
- Determining the best and most creative tactics for

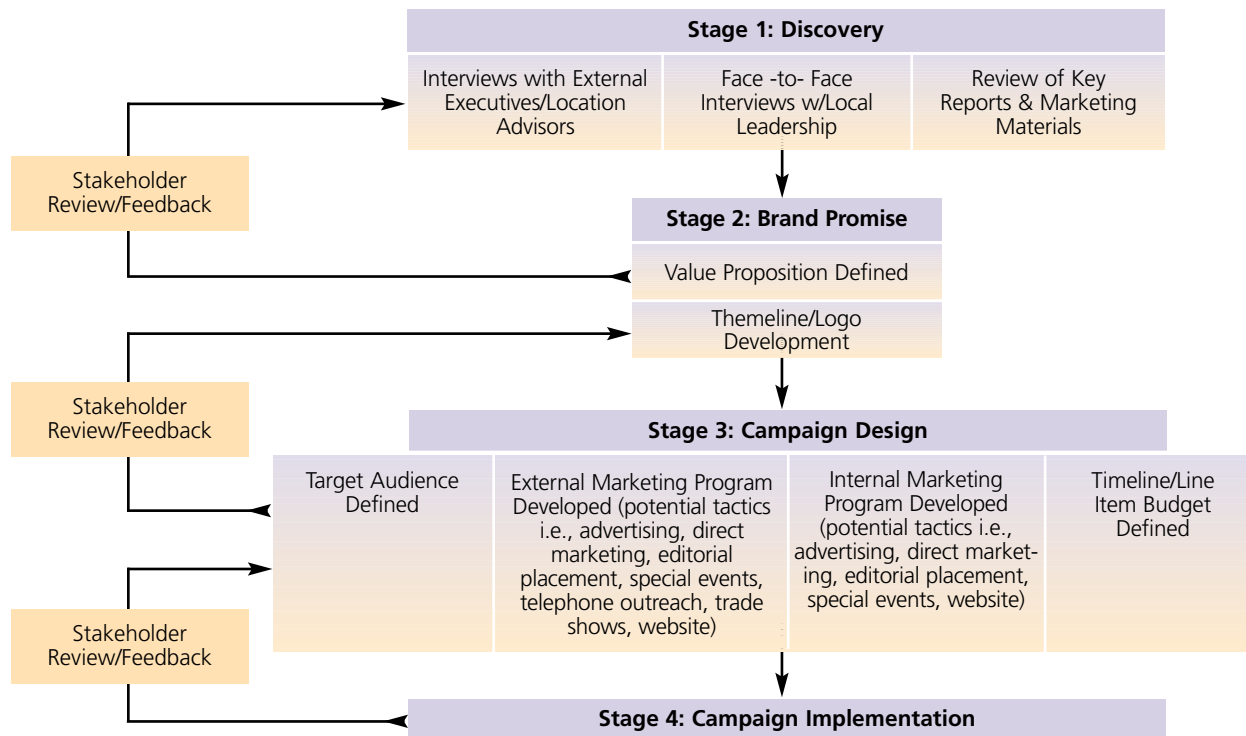
NAME THAT THEMELINE

Here’s a brief challenge for economic development professionals: can you match the themeline with the right state? Below are seven states and their marketing themelines.

State	Themeline
1. Indiana	a. State of Innovation
2. Louisiana	b. State of Perfect Balance
3. North Carolina	c. Accelerate Your Business
4. Ohio	d. Life Elevated
5. Pennsylvania	e. Innovation is in Our Nature
6. Utah	f. The State of Minds
7. Washington	g. A State of Opportunity

Answers: 1-c, 2-g, 3-f, 4-b, 5-a, 6-d, 7-e

Four Stages of the Place Branding Process



delivering that value proposition to your target audience.

- Implementing the campaign.

Yes, you need a professionally developed, graphic identity that reflects favorably on your organization and your community. But it is really only a small piece of the overall puzzle.

- 3. The Calf Rarely Brands Itself...** Marty Neumeir, the author of the popular marketing book “Zag,” has a wonderful definition of a brand:

“What exactly is a brand? Hint: It’s not a company’s logo or advertising. Those things are controlled by the company. Instead a brand is a customer’s gut feeling about a product service or company.”

Economic developers need to influence what industry leaders, influencers, and even your own corporate citizens are saying about your community. *What others say about you – not what you say about yourself – will build your brand.*

In today’s world of highly-competitive marketing, your own advertisements, printed materials, direct mail packages, DVDs, and website are becoming less and less effective. They are part of “the clutter” – an estimated 3,000+ marketing messages that the average consumer is hit with every day. Only a very small number of marketing messages actually get through. And the ones that do make it through are the ones that come from highly credible sources.

PROMOTING TOLEDO’S BRAND VIA MEDIA RELATIONS

Toledo’s Regional Growth Partnership longed to alter its image from a poster child of a rust-belt, manufacturing community to a region thriving in the new economy. At the center of Toledo’s story was the transformation of the region’s “old-style” glass manufacturing industry to the production of photovoltaic solar cells critical to the emerging renewable energy sector.

A backgrounder was developed detailing the new industry’s growth with specific company case histories. Tailored “pitches” were written and e-mailed to a small number of top-tier journalists. Persistent telephone follow-up identified reporter interest from several sources.

A *Newsweek* reporter who had previously written about the city was the first to take the bait. His visit to the region resulted in a two-page story titled “The Power of the Sun,” featuring a number of the region’s emerging solar energy companies, as well as the University of Toledo.

The Wall Street Journal followed suit with the Regional Growth Partnership hosting a seasoned reporter for a two-day visit. “Toledo Finds the Energy to Reinvent Itself” appeared on the front page of the paper’s “marketplace” section on December 18, 2007.

One of the best avenues for influencing corporate executive perceptions of a state, region or community, is to focus on the business media. Effective media relations – placing favorable stories about your community and its business climate – is a powerful tactic. In DCI's continuing survey of senior executives with site selection responsibilities, "articles in newspapers and magazines" consistently ranks as one of the most credible information sources for corporate decision-makers.

Need evidence of this? Look no further than the most successful consumer brands that have been built in recent years. Starbucks, EBay, Google, and Southwest Airlines are just a few examples of powerful brands built via effective media relations and "word of mouth." None relied on massive advertising campaigns to build a powerful brand (although it is true that nearly all have turned to advertising to maintain their brand leadership).

(*Let's give credit where credit is due. "The calf rarely brands itself" is a phrase uttered by Chuck Alvey, president of the Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada, at a marketing session at an IEDC conference in Philadelphia)

4. Find the Right Balance Between the External Customer and the Internal Customer...

In a perfect world, an economic development group's focus would be entirely on the external customer. This might include:

- Corporate executives with site selection responsibilities,
- Location advisors who influence these investment decisions,
- Knowledge and other skilled workers you are seeking to attract to your community,
- The news media who are credible, third-party influencers of all of the above groups.

But we don't live in a perfect world. And there are two key reasons that it is important to effectively communicate your brand locally as well as to the outside world:

- 1) Economic development organizations rely on a combination of public and private sector funding. So clearly it is important that your key stakeholders understand and support your campaign. It's a

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pretty simple formula: no funding...no branding campaign.

- 2) The second reason is a bit less cynical. The local business community – indeed the entire citizenry – comes into frequent contact with the outside world via business colleagues, friends, and relatives. If they have positive views on the hometown and its progress, they will undoubtedly reflect this in their dialogue with the outside world. If their views are negative, the opposite will transpire. And in today's world, there is nothing more powerful and credible than "word of mouth."

The "communicate your brand to the home team" strategy offers a unique opportunity. A number of communities have operated "ambassador" programs that seek to arm local executives with key information and turn them into salespeople for the community. The Philadelphia region – via a now-transitioned, economic development group called Greater Philadelphia First – even went to great lengths to educate area limousine drivers about the region's business advantages. Creating an effective ambassador program is a difficult process to manage but can be extremely successful when it works.

In today's world of the blogs, podcasts and the Internet, there is an opportunity for especially innovative communities to build a similar group of "electronic ambassadors." This is an interesting idea that we will no doubt see executed in the years ahead.

5. **The Case Against a Single Brand....** The vast majority of well-funded "place branding" campaigns focus on marketing a community under one single banner. Political leaders and the private sector quickly embrace the concept of an overarching brand. "We all need to work together" is the mantra and in theory it makes a lot of sense.

But in practice it hasn't worked at all and here's why: *The needs of your different target audiences – potential visitors, corporate executives with site location responsibilities, meeting planners, location advisors, individuals considering moving to your community – are completely different.* Attempts to speak to them with a single, coordinated marketing message consistently fail.

Simply put, the single, over-arching brand, "let's market our community together" approach produces mush. And mush doesn't motivate anyone.

So what can a community do? Adopt a graphic identify that is consistent and complimentary. The economic development themeline and logo should come from the same design playbook as the tourism graphics. Even the logo on a community's police cars should share the same look.

Essentially you need to change your message to fit the needs of your target audience but the look and feel of the materials should be uniform.

Are there opportunities for collaboration and coordination among different entities marketing your community? Absolutely. At the very least, the left hand needs to know what the right hand is doing.

So there you have it – five specific recommendations for place branding, including several that go against the conventional wisdom. It is my hope that the views presented here will generate debate within the economic development community.

Let me leave you with a final thought about place branding which brings me back to the analogy of the calf and a branding iron. When a rancher brands his calf, it is a mark that is with that animal for life. It is

A powerful brand should have staying power – it needs to be with you for many years. Take the time to figure it out and get it done properly. The next generation of economic developers who fill your shoes will thank you.

important to look at any community branding exercise with the same long-term view. A powerful brand should have staying power – it needs to be with you for many years. Take the time to figure it out and get it done properly. The next generation of economic developers who fill your shoes will thank you. 🌐



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