
PLACE BRANDING EXPERT ADVICE

BEST OF 2014/15

To start 2015 off on the right foot, and have a little fun, I asked some of the experts I know to share their thoughts on the most common branding counsel they gave communities in 2014. This is a compilation of their feedback. I think the wisdom is exceptional. I have hot linked each contributor's name to their respective Organization website. I encourage you to click on these links and learn more about some of the people I admire in the field of community branding.



Scott Sanders - CEO and Founder of Park Bench Digital

Short and simple – **be authentic!** At its heart, authenticity is about practicing what you preach; being totally clear about who you are and what you do best.

“Explore the question of whether a branding exercise is what is truly needed.”

Nick Vehr - President of Vehr Communications

It is important to establish up front what branding is and what it is not. We all know that for some it is a tagline or logo or a creative execution, for others it may be something else. There is seldom consensus on what branding is.

It is important to explore the question of whether a branding exercise is what is truly needed, or if better and more strategic, professional and consistent execution will suffice or if having more resources to put against an existing program of work with a well-established brand will get the job done.

And, just as important, in my experience, is trying to gain consensus at the front of the engagement among the client’s group of advisors, or “kitchen cabinet” on precisely what is being addressed. As is often the case with community-based organizations seeking to “brand” or “re-brand,” the marketing/strategic comms. experience and/or sophistication on the ED staff is often limited (or extremely limited), so they not only often hire an outside firm but they enlist local “loaned” business talent to be advisors. This loaned talent may have different levels of experience, whether B2C or B2B, but likely have no experience in how to translate that to a community (region, state, etc.) as a product.

The only thing worse than not having a clue about what you’re doing is having a room full of extremely well-intended, impressive, super smart people who haven’t a clue what they’re talking about.

Mark Barbash - Executive VP at the Finance Fund

In no particular order:

- Think of your audience
- Make it aspirational, but make it true (ie: if it doesn't make sense, branding can hurt)
- Keep it simple and clear. The more you have to explain your brand, the less it will be additive to your efforts.
- Deliver on the brand.

“Remember that you are not the audience.”

Jim Walton - CEO of Brand Acceleration

In no particular order:

- Know your audience
 - Brand: It's critical to understand how your target audiences perceive your community. Our Brand Profiling process explores multiple audiences and discovers the common feelings, thoughts, and emotions shared by all. This allows us to craft messages that we know will be accepted.
 - Tactics: We have also gone to great lengths to understand how audiences respond to tactics such as websites, videos, brochures, words, photos, and others in order to know what they desire.
- Remember that you are not the audience
 - It's dangerous and expensive to assume that audiences think exactly as you do. For example, a sixty-year-old economic developer will likely think differently than a targeted millennial worker. You need to put your own biases aside and get into the head of your audience.
- A new logo or website cannot correct negative community challenges
 - If a community has lingering negative issues and a strong brand position, simply developing a new logo or website will not change the bias. You'll still be the same community, just with a new logo.
 - When you do “rebrand” (a term I am not fond of), it must be believable. Don't try to convey a message that is so different than reality that the audiences won't believe it.

[Anatalio Ubalde](#) - CEO and Co-Founder of [GIS Planning](#) and [Zoom Prospector.com](#)

Much of my advice has focused around helping EDpros overcome the misconceptions of branding and rebranding. I do this because, as you (Ed Burghard) have pointed out to me, "communities don't understand branding or their brand promise so they are willing to invest behind any campaign work that captures their imagination."

So here is what I talked about related to branding in 2014:

A brand is a promise that is delivered. A brand is not what you want your location to be; it's what people believe it is.

A slogan or a logo are not a new brand. The people that sell EDOs on the idea that a new logo/slogan is a re-brand are unscrupulous (or ignorant) consultants only trying to make money. If they tell your community/EDO that they will rebrand you through a new organization name, logo, or tagline, then you know they don't even know what rebranding is, and you shouldn't hire them.

Rebranding sounds attractive (which makes it sellable to boards and elected officials) because the way it is falsely sold is that your community can A) get away from who you actually are and B) make people believe you are who you want to be through marketing/advertising. However, that is not the way it works. EDpros that sell their Board that rebranding will change who the community is will not be able to deliver on what they promised.

With rebranding, your community risks losing any brand value you have already built. (Not my idea, but Ed Burghard's and Ed Roach's idea resonated with me so I often share it). Related to that, if rebranding includes changing the organization's name, there are serious consequences. Because rebranding involves disassociating yourself with your existing brand, you also lose all your "Google Juice" from your online identity and the existing value of search engine optimization. If your organization has been around a long time, that means you will lose a lot. Read more at <http://bit.ly/SLdVuE>

Communities can't hire a consultant to rebrand them. The only way to rebrand a community is to change it, and that requires a lot more time and community work than just a marketing campaign some advertising agency comes up with.

Corporations and communities are using data to tell their brand story. This trend is related to the rise of social media sharing and the content that thrives on social platforms. You are seeing this through the use of succinct infographics, rankings, and video.

Brand uniqueness is not the same as value. I use Dean Barber's quote all the time: "Well, folks, corporate site selection is not Charmin and communities are not Cheerios. It matters little to me or most corporate clients that you believe that you are so unique because of your annual dump truck festival or have the largest stuffed collection of two-headed calves in the world."

"It's not the logo, the slogan, or the pretty picture."

Sandy Harbrecht - President and CEO of Paul Werth Associates

Community Branding ...

It comes from the inside out; understanding what makes you you, and what makes you unique. Build on your intrinsic strengths. Every community has something that makes it special.

It's not the logo, the slogan, or the pretty picture. It's the experience(s) – consistently reinforced – without contradiction – in ALL touch points – from the one-on-ones with community leaders and ambassadors, to web sites and marketing materials. It's also what is said and done when the chips are down.

Continuous research and feedback are essential to building a brand – understanding what those who embody the brand believe, to appreciating what those who are new to the brand experience see and believe. Research much be ongoing and its insights be used to fine-tune messaging.

Different target audiences will often be seeking different experiences from the brand – visitors vs. businesses, for example. This does not mean that messaging for one audience will -- out of necessity -- conflict with messaging for another. Target messaging can and should hold some essential, universal truth about your community brand.

Make it fun! Everyone is bombarded with information. To stand out, brand messaging should communicate in an interesting way. Visual communications and social media offer tremendous advantages to brand marketers today.

“Place matters - don’t undersell or discount quality of life and place.”

Doug Moorman - VP at the Development Strategies Group

I suggest the following thoughts:

- Link your community message to the greater regional or state message – try to complement, not compete.
- Identify your positive differentiator, something authentic that sets your community apart.
- Place matters – don’t undersell or discount quality of life and place. Projects must be financially viable, but prospects must see themselves **living** in your community.
- Use existing businesses as proof points; why did they locate in your community? How have they been successful? This adds authenticity to the message.
- Enlist existing local businesses in building the message – they are the best sales people, so engage them and win their buy-in early in the process.

Bill Baker - President at Total Destination Marketing

I agree with all of the comments raised by the other members of the team.

Unfortunately, way too many places start out with the idea of branding and mistakenly have a narrow view of what branding is and do not fully engage it as a powerful strategic guidance system. Many set out on their brand journey because they think its time for a new look or a snappy tagline or slogan. I think that an even more common pitfall is to consider it as a new campaign. I think that many states and nations are guilty of this.

We often find ourselves trying to realign a prospective clients objectives to more fully what branding can potentially deliver and impact. Many consider that branding is purely a function of marketing communications and they do not take into account the behavioral, organizational and community-wide implications that successful place branding can bring. We often find ourselves trying to realign a prospective client's objectives to more fully embrace what branding can potentially deliver and impact.

Here is an article, **[Change Management is at the Heart of Successful City Branding](#)**, addressing this subject.

“A successful place brand often requires changes to regulations, laws, systems, budgets, processes, resources, and recruitment. Above all, it may call for a change of attitudes and relationships. The first casualty may be the old “that’s the way we’ve always done it” attitude..”

Andy Levine - President and Chief Creative Officer at Development Counsellors International

It's been fun to watch the different responses from so many smart individuals. Two themes come to mind that I haven't seen addressed by others yet:

1. The calf rarely brands itself...One of my all-time favorite phrases. Essentially it recognizes that a community brand is built by what other credible sources (the media, industry experts, top site selection consultants, corporate executives with experience working in your community) say about your region – not what you say about yourself.
2. Aligning individual brands within a community (economic development, tourism, talent attraction and others) works. Creating a single, all-purpose brand for a community doesn't work...I've had this discussion with several of you (Ed Burghard, Bill Baker and others) and I know many of you will likely disagree with me. But here's my perspective...the needs and desires of the different target audiences (potential investors, leisure tourists, corporate meeting planners and individuals seeking to advance their quality of life) are so dramatically different it is next to impossible to find a "one size fits all" solution.

Robert Govers - Managing Research Partner at Good Country

I agree with most of what's been said and particularly liked Anatolia's and Bill Baker's input. I see some people emphasizing the importance of understanding target audiences. I would agree that when marketing a product (investment, tourism, exports, etc.) or running a campaign, understanding the target audience is obviously essential and basic marketing logic, but when cities, regions and countries try to influence brand image (which is not necessarily linked to 'product'), identity, reality and policy (i.e. the supply perspective, as opposed to the demand perspective) are probably more important than what they advertise (agreeing with Bill about the relative insignificance of campaigns; let alone logos and slogans).

Coming from that perspective (at the level of countries) [Simon Anholt](#) and I have created the [Good Country Index](#), which “measures what each country on earth contributes to the common good of humanity, and what it takes away” (relative to its size measured in GDP - For more detailed understanding, see <http://www.goodcountry.org/faq>).

It has been rewarding to find that the Good Country Index (a measure of reality) shows a 70% correlation with the Nation Brands Index (a measure of perception; see: <http://www.gfk.com/news-and-events/press-room/press-releases/pages/germany-knocks-usa-off-best-nation-top-spot.aspx>).

It shows that countries that contribute to humanity and the planet (or are least destructive) are the ones that have strong brand images, which leads to the conclusion that if communities (cities, regions, countries) want to be admired, they need to be admirable. It’s about what communities do, not about what they say about themselves. Most of my work this year has revolved around spreading this message.

We’re also looking at ways of understanding what ‘good cities’ are, although data access and comparability are major obstacles for creating a global index as there are few international agencies that collect comparable, up-to-date, reliable and homogeneous data for cities (most of our country data comes from UN, WorldBank and related agencies and

Finally, from a brand perspective, of course, understanding audiences is important, not for targeting I think, but for appreciating current perceptions and, hence, how places can improve themselves. As many of the experts have emphasized, a major challenge is how we use and explain our terminology and it seems there is still room for achieving consensus, which is fine; a good source for debate and perspective.

“It’s about what communities do, not about what they say about themselves that matters.”

Jim Glover - Founder and President of The Idea Group of Santa Fe

I would add that you have to make sure the community understands the brand and teach them how to deliver on it.

We are doing a lot of branding work right now with the City of Farmington, NM (near Four Corners) and its CVB regarding the development of new brand. Through extensive research and strategic sessions it has been determined that Farmington is a place where outdoor lovers thrive and will energize life journeys for residents, businesses and visitors. This is an overarching unified community brand and not just one related to tourism.

We have now created the Farmington Branding Alliance and presenting overviews to businesses, city/county administrators, organizations, schools, residents about the essence of the brand and how to integrate the brand into all aspects of life in Farmington.

Under the brand line "Jolt Your Journey," through outreach and training the community is starting to work together to identify ways (big and small) to create strong impressions that are unexpected (definition of jolt) for anyone living or visiting the City.

For instance, the public library is creating a Jolt Your Journey summer reading program. A favorite local restaurant is creating a drink and sushi roll that will "Jolt Your Journey." Also, the local CVB is developing customer service training and "Jolt" certification that that will enable the community to create various "Jolt" maps such as "jolt your dining journey" or "jolt your flyfishing journey," etc.

It's great to see a community beginning to rally behind a brand and working together to create one clear identity for its target market: outdoor lovers looking to energize their life journeys.

Della Rucker - Principal of Wise Economy Workshop/Wise Fool Press and Managing Editor of Engaging Cities

Holy crap. Apparently the first learning for 2015 is, don't read a request from Ed, think "oh, that's interesting" and go off and do something else for a few hours. Because when you come back to it, all the smart people got to talk first....

I don't live in the branding/marketing world as much as most of the other commenters do, and a lot of what I've learned about the subject has come from watching what happens. I have scanned through the previous posts but haven't read them all exhaustively, so hopefully this isn't too redundant.

Others have talked a lot about authenticity, truthfulness, the promise nature of a brand, etc. That's gospel truth, now more than ever.

Branding/marketing of all types has become more about human-ness, real-ness, and relationship, and the demand for that from potential consumers intensifies every year. The more "brands" learn to do that, whether they're selling shampoo or cars or downtowns, the more the audience that views and judges brands demands that real-ness. The public's ability to sniff out what's fake or dishonest or just too overly cleaned-up is increasing at a speed that should leave us all reeling if we think about it, and the younger the message recipient, the more intense that ability seems to get. Whatever slight wiggle room we had for spinning the story, for putting lipstick on the pig....it's just about gone. And that puts an enormous, and potentially impossible, burden on the usual approach of trying to capture the "essence" of a brand in a logo and a color scheme and a tag line. There has to be much, much more substance and meaning behind it -- much more than we in this field have usually bothered to develop, and much more than I suspect most communities really want to invest in.

The other piece that is changing is the expectation among "consumers" (not sure that's the right word in the community branding context) of not just a two-way conversation, but a relationship. Look at what's happening with popular music, the way bands and singers and the like not only share more, but interact more, with their audiences. Fans post stuff about their favorites, and more often than not the singer actually responds. Saul Kaplan had a great piece on Medium last month about Taylor Swift and how she has built this incredible fan base through public responses to individual questions/requests- it's as close to a personal relationship with a few million people as you can get.

I think people who are in branding and brand management for both consumer goods and places probably don't really understand how high that bar is rising. The brand management -- the ongoing, organic, situation-specific communication, in lots of little pieces over lots of time, is increasingly what seems to separate the successful brands from those that fall flat. We know and say that people respond to people (or at least personable-ness), and that's both easier, and harder, than designing a logo or a "brand campaign."

I still think one of the most potentially cutting-edge models of community branding that I have ever seen is the **Agenda 360** Story project in Cincinnati. Nick Vehr probably knows the inner workings of that better than I do, but I was so struck by the depth, the meaningfulness, the extendability of that initiative -- which, as far as I can remember, didn't involve a graphic design package at all.

“Whatever slight wiggle room we had for spinning the story, for putting lipstick on the pig....it's just about gone..”

James McGraw, Jr. - President and CEO of KMK Consulting

Robert Gover's thoughts are really impactful, especially when the objective is a realistic comparison of cities and markets. One of the challenges, of course, is brand reality. I recall working in Atlanta in preparation for the 1996 Summer Olympics. I met with many CEOs. The biggest concern on their mind was that the world press would come to Atlanta and see a city that did not meet the standard of a "global city" brand that had been pushed out around the US and the world by city leaders and the Chamber. Their sense of urgency was how to prepare the City of Atlanta in time.

I think it is our duty to help communities be honest in substance (it is not about the logo) and then help them, as Andy Levine points out, align their individual brands within the community – into a shared narrative, internal and external, communicating the truthful qualities of the place these folks call home.

Eric Canada - Partner of Blane, Canada Ltd.

Interesting collection of comments.

Easy to see why our clients get confused – clear we are not in full agreement. I get confused trying to align all the different opinions. You will have your hands full boiling this down to something useful.

I think it is useful to remind our clients that they have 4 brands they are managing concurrently: Community, Organization, Team (staff and volunteer) and finally Personal.

“Easy to see why our clients get confused – it is clear we are not in full agreement.”

The organization's brand is important 1st because if your org does not have the permission of community leadership, your effort on behalf of the community brand will be wasted. In addition to permission, the organization must be the funnel through which resources flow. Therefore, the credibility of the organization's brand is essential and your personal brand is on the line as well. In short, one cannot successfully manage one brand without managing all 4 successfully.

I prefer not to get tied up in the double-talk surrounding branding when working on marketing plans and strategies for clients. As has already been stated, there are too many opinions in the room to come to a conclusion. If the focus is corporate investment, then the only brand that matters is geography: City Name +State. All site selection starts with a map be it general or highly specific. If we walk away from that for a "brand" identity, we lose brand equity positive & negative that has been built up over time.

Now, it is about telling the story. We leverage the positive and work to address the negatives by focusing on what has been changed to correct the negative. Throughout, we are reinforcing the value we offer as 1) community, 2) organization, 3) team, and individual. So, the biggest challenge I see in economic development is not branding, it is message management when there are 4 brands and various channels that must be consistently filled with content appropriate for different audiences.

"Now, it is about telling the story."

Graham Robinson - President and CMO at Beloved Brands

Here are the 20 things I say to clients:

- "Consumer Insight comes to life when it's told in such a captivating way that makes people stop and say "hmm, I thought I was the only one who felt like that"
- "You should be able to explain your brand (or your personal brand) in 7 seconds, 2 minutes and 30 minutes, depending on situation."

“The better the people, the better the work.”

- "Strategic Thinkers see “what if” questions before they see solutions. They map out a range of decision trees that intersect and connect by imagining how events will play out. They reflect and plan before they act. They are thinkers and planners who can see connections. Non Strategic Thinkers see answers before questions. They get to answers quickly, and get frustrated in delays. They believe doing something is better than doing nothing at all. They opt for action over thinking. They are impulsive and doers who see tasks. They get frustrated by strategic thinkers."
- "Balance your thinking by knowing when to go slow and when to go fast. Think slowly with strategy. Think quickly with instincts."
- "The role of BRAND is to create a bond, power and profit, beyond what the product itself could achieve. In fact, we only have brands, if we think we can make more money from the brand than just the product alone. There really is no other reason."
- "The more loved a brand is by consumers, the more, the more powerful and profitable that brand can be".
- "Half way between the exactness of Science and the unknown of Art lies the power of an IDEA that can bring them together"
- "The most beloved brands are either different, better or cheaper. Or else, not around for very long"
- "Consumers don't care what you do until you care what they want. Instead of just yelling what you do, put yourself in the consumers shoes and ask yourself 5 times "so what do i get?" and then ask another 5 times "so how does that make me feel?"
- "The power of 3 helps provide focus. If your brand only has 3 strategies and each strategy only has 3 tactics, then you should be able to do an amazing job on all 9. Much better than 5 strategies times 5 tactics and 25 things. I would bet that my 9 would beat your 25 any day."
- "The better the people, the better the work, the better the business results. So then, are you doing enough to make your people better?"
- "Ask your people at every stage "Do you love it?" and watch their eyes to see if they tell the truth. Because, if you don't love the work, how do you expect your consumer to love your brand?"

“The classic flaw of brand plans is pursuing both penetration and usage/frequency.”

- "A Beloved Brand uses the love consumers have for the brand to replicate the positional power of a Monopoly. And from that power, the Beloved Brand drives stronger growth and higher profits."
- "Smart Media Plans start with understanding where the customer is, not where the media is"
- "Analytical stories get Decision Makers to “what do you think” stage Analysis turns fact into insight and data breaks form the story that sets up strategic choices. "
- "If you knew that being a better client would get you better advertising, do you think you'd be able to show up better?"
- "If you aren't talented enough to come up with an ad in the first place, then why are you now talented enough to do something even harder: change the ad. I'd rather you give the creative team your problem with the ad, and let them figure out it rather than your solution for the ad and let them feel demoralized".
- "Creative Advertising people are problem solvers, not blue sky thinkers. So give them a problem, not a blank page. They are "in the box" thinkers not "out of the" box thinkers. Use your brief to put them in a box and your creative direction to put them in a new box."
- "The Classic Flaw of Brand Plans is pursuing both penetration and Usage frequency. Penetration Strategy gets someone with very little experience with your brand to likely consider dropping their current brand to try you once and see if they like it. Usage Frequency Strategy gets someone who knows your brand to change their behavior in relationship to your brand, either changing their current life routine or substituting your brand into a higher share of the occasions. Trying to do both at the same time will destroy your plan."
- "We control more than we think we do. But just like in sports, the most competitive weapon we have is the creation of time and space. The most competitive brands act quickly, before others do and create a space around themselves that they own, through reputation, and are free from attack."