



Downtown Economics

Issue 154
June 2009

Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts

Branding for Downtown Success

By Dale Erlandson*

In economic times like these, building excitement about downtown and cultivating local loyalty is more important than ever. Branding is an essential part of fostering the sense of community that keeps residents interested in downtown and that makes the community an attractive destination for visitors and potential residents.

Good community branding can have a number of positive impacts: it can increase exposure for existing businesses and be a recruitment tool in building a more complimentary business mix. It can also boost retail traffic and attract residents to the downtown area. Successful branding can aid downtown and community organizations, increasing both volunteerism and giving, by increasing the credibility of revitalization efforts. Poorly executed branding, however, can have just the opposite effect. Therefore it is important to proceed carefully.

What Is Branding?

Branding involves creating a desired image for a product or place. For a downtown, a brand is the set of emotional connections and positive expectations in the minds of residents and visitors. As Jonathan Baltuch writes in *Brand Your City: A recipe for success*, "A successful brand identity establishes a preconceived expectation that is either met or exceeded by the reality." Logos and taglines are evocative of the overall image that is a brand. Through advertising, events and grassroots word of mouth, places can be defined by coordinated branding efforts, allowing businesses and activities to stand out from the continuous onslaught of

Re-Branding Success Story: On Broadway, Inc.

On Broadway, Inc., a Wisconsin Main Street program, has re-branded a once-derelict area of Green Bay, WI as a highly desirable shopping, dining and community destination. Through the efforts of economic restructuring and a community-wide marketing team, On Broadway, Inc. has revitalized and re-branded a now thriving district.

<http://onbroadway.org>

media appeals to consumers. Branding is more than the words and images used along with a place name; those things can change over time. A brand is a long-term, permanent concept of what a place should be and mean. It therefore demands a great deal of forethought to be successfully conceived, implemented and sustained.

Branding a Place

A successful branding process involves four steps: research, design, education and maintenance. Before placing a logo in flyers and event promotions, research is needed to establish a long-term brand concept that fits the goals and realities of a community. Careful design can then ensure that logos, taglines, lettering and colors all complement the brand concept. After defining and designing a brand – a process that can take six months or more – the ongoing project of education begins: merchants, organizations, residents and visitors all must be able to recognize, relate to and promote a consistent brand message. Finally, a branding effort will be only successful if it is maintained. Leaders must keep the design and education efforts up-to-date while sustaining the organizational partnerships that support the community.

Research – There are a variety of strategies for developing a community's brand concept. Focus groups, market analyses and community surveys can all be utilized to match a long-term vision to the goals of the community and the target demographic that the brand will seek to attract. Tripp Muldrow, in *Creating a Brand for Downtown* has this recommendation: "Ask, ask, ask, and then ask some more questions. Everyone in your town knows what the brand is. It is why they live there. It is what they do on the weekend. It is where they take people who visit. It is how they relax, what they miss when they are away, and why they want to raise their kids there." Defining a brand involves bringing together the residents, government, organizations and businesses of the community to set clear objectives. Branding decisions – including who is involved, the scope of the project, and promotional activities – will be affected by whether the goal is to attract residents or retain business; to increase retail traffic or to alter perceptions of an area. Everyone

involved in the branding effort must understand the limitations as well as the potential of the place. As Naletta Burr of On Broadway, Inc. emphasizes, effective branding cannot over-promise or under-sell.

Focus Group and Consumer Survey Models

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Center for Community and Economic Development has a number of sample surveys and tools on their Downtown Market Analysis website. Adapting such samples to your community's specific needs is a good starting point for branding research.

www.uwex.edu/CES/cced/downtowns/dma/index.cfm

Design – When it comes to designing a brand, experts consistently urge communities to seek professional help. Holding tagline or logo design contests, or simply taking whatever volunteer help is available, will not result in a successful, sustainable brand. Professional marketers can define consistent graphic standards that will work across all media and for a wide range of promotions. Logos must be designed to work well in both color and back-and-white, as well as to be easily shared with other organizations and used in conjunction with other advertising. Details like the number of fonts (too many will make advertising hard to read), color (and the psychological impacts it can have) and paper (must be high quality to look credible but affordable enough to maintain) all complicate the design process of branding.

In addition, it is important to remember that design goes far beyond graphics. Creating a brand for a downtown area can involve matching a streetscape – lighting, façades, signage – to the brand image. It may involve working with local businesses to relocate or recruit merchants to create a business mix that fits the brand. Ultimately, the logo specifically and the brand in general should be ubiquitous. Shopping and dining guides, event promotions and advertising can utilize the design elements of the brand. While taglines, images and vocabulary will change, design should always reinforce, rather than recreate, the brand concept.

Education – Once a brand is identified and the design established, the key step in realizing the goals of branding is education. An individual must lead this effort, coordinating the various ventures that utilize the community brand and acting as brand watchdog to ensure that all events, promotions and advertising project a message consistent with the defined brand. The brand and its goals should drive all activities, whether initiated by businesses, organizations or volunteers. Events can bring people into an area to experience the new brand – and can also disseminate a logo and tagline to a targeted audience. Carolyn

Dellutri of Evmark notes, however, that it is always easiest to reach visitors and newer residents. Convincing established residents to associate a new brand with an old place will take additional time and effort.

Maintenance – While a successful event or positive feedback may indicate some success in branding, Burr warns that a thriving downtown cannot rest on its laurels. Consistent businesses and community surveys can guide merchant, event and promotion turnover to continue attracting residents and visitors. While the number of events can increase as the brand and organization grow stronger, events are best limited to a manageable number and scheduled during community down-time, when they will not conflict with other organizations' activities.

Organizational conflicts are almost inevitable. Brand strategists may run into conflict with other community organizations, such as chambers of commerce, who must be included on an ongoing basis to share the responsibility of promoting the community and its merchants. Especially in the current economy, maintaining good organizational relations is key to building grassroots support for the brand and making efficient use of the limited dollars available for downtown revitalization. Finally, brand success should not be its own downfall. As businesses and organizations become self-sufficient, there is nothing wrong with their spinning off into their own ventures. Successful branding does not demand tight-fisted control of a community, merely a consistently appealing concept and message.

Getting the word out

Helping the public become familiar with your brand can be a challenge. Here are just a few ways to showcase the image and values of your brand:

- Press Releases
- Individual Meetings
- Cross-Retail Promotions
- Holiday Events
- Co-op Advertising
- Coordinate and advertise a new, more convenient business hours promotion
- Festivals, including reward cards or other retail incentives

Sources:

"Brand Your City: A recipe for success" March 25, 2004, Jonathan Baltuch, brandchannel.com

Carolyn Dellutri and Naletta Burr, presentation in the *Revitalizing Wisconsin's Downtowns* webinar series, April 16, 2009

CEOs for Cities, "Branding Your City"

Creating a Brand for Downtown" Tripp Muldrow, Virginia Main Street Monitor, Summer 2006

Contact: Bill Ryan, Center For Community & Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension
610 Langdon Street, Madison, WI 53703-1104

PH: (608)265-8136; FAX: (608)263-4999; TTY: (800)947-3529; HTTP://WWW.UWEX.EDU/CES/CCED

An EEO/Affirmative Action Employer, UW-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming, including Title IX and ADA requirements.