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Regional Branding - Representing Multiple Communities

Tough economic times tend to spur two kinds of activities that are important to economic development – innovation and collaboration. In today's hyper-competitive environment, communities must deal with severely constrained investment opportunities as well as low ED budgets, and so they are joining forces in innovative, collaborative regional initiatives. We call this "regionomic marketing" and it is generally carried out by regional organizations formed to achieve specific goals or address specific economic development issues.

Collaboration is not easy. Without it, though, communities in a region can be disadvantaged by a disjointed public image. This is especially damaging on the web, where a hodgepodge of messages and positioning by different communities can send a signal to site selectors that the region is not favorable to the growth of modern creative-industry clusters.

The Need for Regional Branding

When communities embark on regionomic marketing the first challenge is what to name the region and how to brand the region. Branding is a basic necessity as marketing strategies, tactics and campaigns cannot be executed without it.

If a region doesn't already have a name, choosing one that will please everybody is difficult. Which of the many assets or geographic aspects or pre-existing community names should be used to represent the entire area? Or should a new and unique name be developed?

The answer is that all options have pros and cons. And all options have been used. From a branding and marketing perspective the least functional of these options is a hyphenation of the current names of communities. This results in long, unwieldy, unpronounceable and non-intuitive place names.

Challenges and Arguments

The interconnectedness of communities within regions is sometimes misunderstood by local decision makers. Heated arguments about which area is most important may occur during branding and naming discussions.

It may appear that a larger community is the main area of interest whereas in reality it acts as a hub for travel among other communities. These types of misconceptions can lead to extensive discussions on how to represent the broader region and are often best led or managed by an external party with a more objective perspective.

Place branding has inherent challenges. Places already have brand perceptions, whether or not branding has been done in the past. The marketer has to determine if the perception is good or bad and whether the community should build on the existing perceptions or gradually try to change them.

Regional branding is no exception. In fact a regional brand will probably co-exist with other brands including those of its own communities. The region can also be affected by sector-based branding, sometimes inadvertently, such as "innovation triangle" or "rust belt" – the latter being a good example of negative perception.

For a positive perception, regionomic marketing organizations often build their brand on some form of geographic theme. The region needn't have spectacular scenery or famous landmarks in order to accomplish this – just characteristics that people in the region identify with when they think of home. In other words, the brand is built on genuine, home-grown values. A few outstanding examples of regions that have used this approach include:

- Elgin County in Ontario, Canada (www.progressivebynature.com)
- The Roanoke Region of Virginia (www.roanoke.org)
- The Central Alberta Economic Partnership (www.centralalberta.ab.ca)
- Greater New Orleans Inc. (www.gnoinc.org)

Process and Methodology

Considering the many complexities, stakeholders, individual communities, risks, opportunities and diverse goals inherent in a regional economic branding project, it becomes apparent that a proven process and methodology must drive it.

The establishment of a branding committee empowered with decision making ability is critical. The committee should be made of representatives of each community.

To create the name and brand, visioning combined with geographic and historical research should be conducted. The committee members should come together in mutual respect for brainstorming. A variety of names and brands can then be developed, discussed, selected and adjusted. Through a process of elimination one or two will emerge as the strongest. At this point market testing may be conducted or the final brand can be presented to the governing body for final approvals.

A well managed process can result in pride, excitement and positive community spirit. A poorly managed process can result in frustration, disagreement and disappointment. One of the common pitfalls is the inability of the committee to take a strong position, often due to fear of change. The resulting mishmash of direction dilutes a potentially strong brand concept and design. Unfortunately this tends to produce a weak brand that is less effective through its entire lifespan and likely to need replacing sooner. Engagement of a professional and experienced place branding design firm increases the likelihood of a successful branding initiative.

An effective branding methodology provides a regionomic marketing organization with a clear purpose and direction that is complementary to local initiatives. It is the optimal practice for creating a brand that is stronger than the sum of its parts.