

Stand Out: Marketing Your Community for the Future

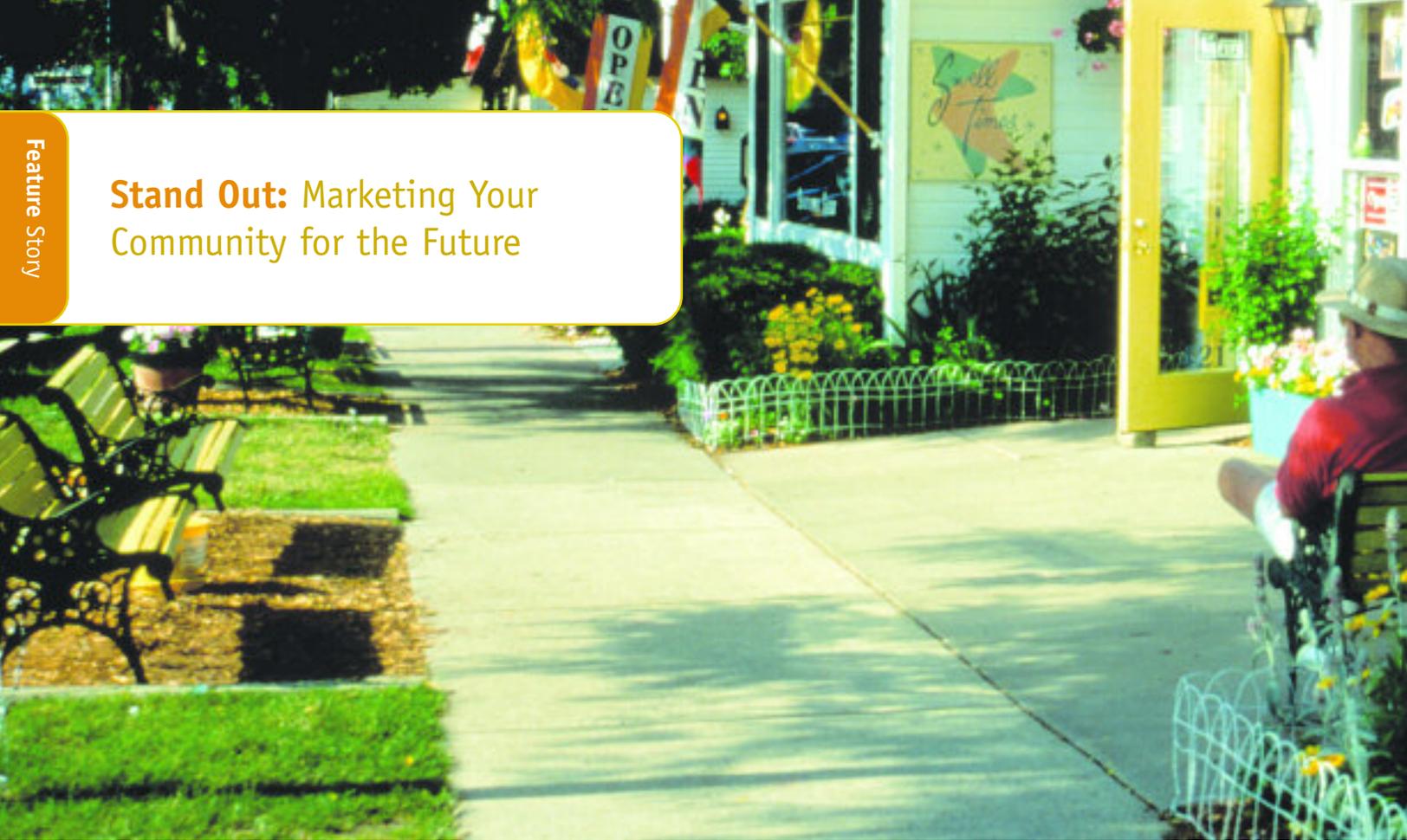


Photo courtesy of Charles Cook

You see them everywhere. On any given trip through Michigan you're bound to drive through communities that have dubbed themselves the capital of one thing or another. One minute you're cruising through the Mint Capital of Michigan and the next you're enjoying the home of Michigan's Cherry Festival.

But what is it that drives communities to identify themselves with one event, theme or product? Why is it important to create an image for your community to sell to the outside world?

The answer is simple: competition. Today's consumers, residents and businesses are being courted by municipalities all over the nation, all looking for lucrative tourism and tax dollars. The most successful communities are selling a unique identity that draws new residents, visitors and business alike. If your township wants a piece of the pie, you'd better be ready to embrace the world of marketing. Without it, you'll be lost in the shuffle.

By now you may be thinking, "My community doesn't *want* to attract new residents, business or tourists. We're fine just the way we are." Unfortunately, that's the perfect way to ensure your township will never evolve with the changing economic times. Stagnation is the enemy of prosperity, no matter what the market. Not every township needs to compete to be Michigan's number-one tourist destination or fastest-growing community, but refusal to evolve may lead to real problems later.

And don't forget, branding can also be an extremely powerful tool for creating community pride. Community leaders can use the new identity to create a sense of a certain lifestyle unique to your township, something that ties residents and businesses together under a common theme.

THE INS AND OUTS OF BRANDING

Branding refers to creating a brand or image for your township to make it memorable for the consumer. In their book, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, authors Al and Laura Ries compare branding in the marketplace to branding on a ranch: Just like a good cattle brand helps a rancher identify his herd, a good brand should differentiate your township from all of the others in Michigan. The object, according to the authors, is to create the perception that there is no other place in the world like your township.

Think of it this way: The world's most successful companies can attribute at least part of their success to a great brand concept. Would Coca Cola be the same without the curved bottle? Would Nike be Nike if they didn't "Just Do It?" The truth is, those brands are instantly recognizable because they created a brand identity that transcended others' in their fields. Sure, Pepsi is the choice of a new generation, and Adidas is a fine athletic apparel company, but their brands are not nearly as ingrained as those mentioned before. Don't believe it? Try to remember Adidas' current advertising slogan without looking it up.

Are you still unconvinced of the power of branding? The last time you did a Web search, did you “Google®” it? Google® is the brand name of a Web site that has been so successful that it has become synonymous with the Web search itself.

BRANDING A PLACE?

So how do you brand a community? There’s no one-size-fits-all way to do it, but there are certainly a few good places to start.

The most obvious way is to look around your community. What makes it unique? Are you near a lake or large river? Is your community a seasonal tourist destination? What are some interesting aspects of your community’s history? Was your township a center for logging? How about commercial boating or fishing? Officials should also survey community members to find out what they like most about living in the area. If strong themes are discovered, those themes should certainly be incorporated into your brand.

It’s also important to look at the competition. What are other communities in your area doing to attract new people and businesses? How successful have they been? Learn from their mistakes and their successes, and build your new knowledge into your marketing plan.

Communities with close ties to those around them can also work together to build a more regional marketing campaign. Townships may be able to piggy-back their brand with that of a nearby city or village. Regional chambers of commerce can be very helpful in this regard.

It’s important to remember, however, that you have to deliver what you promise. Branding is useless if visitors, businesses and prospective residents don’t find real value in what you’re offering. If you’ve over-promised and under-delivered, they will move on.

Also, branding takes buy-in from the whole community. Business leaders, residents and officials must embrace the concept and help promote it. Of course, not every resident or business owner is going to be enthusiastic, but most will applaud your efforts to plan for the future.

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How to Talk to a Reporter

One of the most important parts of promoting your community is learning to work with the media. That’s right: *with* the media. The most effective promotion comes by using the press to your advantage.

However, effective press relations are more of an art than a science. The most important thing to remember is that most reporters are people just like you. They are trying to do the best job they can. And that means they’re looking for good stories. It’s your job to make sure the reporter believes you have an interesting story to tell and to follow a few simple ground rules.

- Always tell the truth. To cultivate a good relationship with the reporters who cover your township, you must resolve to be honest, no matter what.
- Never say “no comment.” Reporters are going to ask difficult questions. It’s their job. But when the heat is on, refusing to answer only makes you look like you have something to hide. Instead of “no comment,” try to answer the question as best you can, remembering to stick to the message you originally intended to convey. When you don’t know the answer, simply tell the report you don’t know but would be happy to find out and get back to him or her as soon as possible. And, when you say you’ll get back to them, do it!
- Don’t wait to hear from them. If you have a story to tell, initiate phone calls and/or generate media invitations.
- A reporter is not your friend. Don’t ever say anything to a reporter that you don’t want to see in print. Never assume anything is “off the record.” If you don’t want your constituents to hear it on the evening news, don’t say it at all.
- A reporter is not your enemy. Always treat a reporter with respect.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

The most difficult part of creating a new identity is changing the often long-held perceptions of what your community used to be. If your once-shabby downtown has been rebuilt and reborn, it may still be hard to convince tourists or prospective residents to give you a second look. As with everything else, publicity and a good plan are the most important ways to generate new interest.

When officials and business leaders in Richmond, VA decided to create a new brand identity for their area, they discovered that a major change in perception was in order. Common wisdom among residents and visitors was, "Richmond is not a place you go, it's a place you go through." However extensive research, including surveying more than 500 area residents and business owners from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, found many common themes, including an overall feeling that Richmond *was* a great place to raise a family and be successful.



Photo courtesy of Ann Arbor Street Art Fair

Working with a public relations firm experienced in brand creation, the city unveiled its new brand concept, "The Historic Richmond Area is Easy to Love." In the months following the unveiling, the city received more than three times as many inquiries for information about the region. The Richmond Area Convention & Visitors Bureau Web site also saw its site visits triple!

Some communities simply invent their new identity, often with tremendous success. When Milton-Freewater, OR began searching for a way to increase waning tourist dollars, they quickly realized they had to get creative. Though the region is famous for apples, becoming one of a number of already-established "apple capitals" seemed futile.

Instead, the city decided to create its new identity around a popular summer festival, the Muddy Frogwater Festival, which features frog jumping contests, and country music. Now, billing itself as "Muddy Frogwater Country" and a "Toadly Awesome Place to Live," the city features frog murals and other decorations. Local businesses are encouraged to feature the frog theme as well. The change has resulted in a marked upswing in the previously stagnated tourist trade.

PUBLICITY, NOT ADVERTISING

One of the most confusing issues in branding/marketing a community is the issue of marketing vs. advertising. What's the difference? Does it matter? Absolutely!

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Advertising is simply one component of marketing, and one that is, quite frankly, losing some of its effectiveness. The real impact of marketing is in publicity, and you can get an incredible amount of publicity by going to the media. Consumers are surrounded by advertising, and as such, they've often learned to tune it out. From TV to billboards to newspapers and magazines to radio, the barrage of advertising never stops. Think of your morning commute. How many of the billboards do you remember? Certainly one or two of the more interesting ones may stick in your memory, but for the most part, you don't even notice.

But think of the newspaper you read each day or the newscast you watch in the evening. Many of the featured stories are simply the result of good marketing. Journalists are always looking for good

stories with interesting angles. The key is to align your brand or marketing campaign with a certain trend.

Consider Starbucks and The Body Shop, a mall-based cosmetic and skin care store. In their book, the Rieses note that neither company spends much on traditional advertising. Both of those incredibly successful companies built their brand on word-of-mouth publicity and well-timed news reports. Both are now the undisputed leaders in their industries.

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But how do you attach your marketing efforts to a current trend? By paying attention to what's already making news. Are taxes particularly low in your community? You might be able to attract new residents by offering a story to a reporter on the rising property taxes in Michigan cities and then show how prospective residents or businesses could benefit from the lower rates offered in your area. Is recreational boating rising or declining? If your township decides to position itself as a maritime destination, could you tie your marketing campaign into a larger campaign to increase interest in boating? It's likely a boating association would be happy to have you come aboard, so to speak.

The real key is embracing the press. While proactive media engagement may seem like a foreign concept to many township officials, there is no way to successfully integrate a branding campaign without some good news coverage. Once your community has decided on a marketing campaign, invite local press to an unveiling ceremony. A word of caution: This is not a "press conference." Press conferences are tricky at best and often unsuccessful at attracting the press. An unveiling ceremony is a community event and as such, residents and business owners should be invited to attend. This approach lends a better angle to the story which, in turn, does a better job of attracting the media's attention.

Remember to provide reporters with a "press kit" for the event. A



If your township decides to position itself as a maritime destination, you could tie your marketing campaign into a larger campaign to increase interest in boating.

Photo courtesy of Carl Ter Haar

good press kit will contain a detailed overview of the concept and strategies you plan to use to position your township in the marketplace, as well as information on who to contact for more information. Be available for quotes and follow-up interviews, or better yet, call reporters with whom you have an established relationship and ask if they need more information. Make sure prominent community members are on board and available as sources, as well. Remember, community buy-in is incredibly important and will lend legitimacy to your campaign.

Also remember that honesty and transparency are both key to developing a trusting relationship with a reporter. Contrary to popular opinion, journalists are not "out to get you," nor are they only looking for "juicy" stories. Reporters are, however, always on the lookout for good stories with an interesting angle.

In his book, *Full Frontal PR*, public relations professional Richard Laermer notes that journalists are rarely out digging through people's garbage looking for the big scoop. Instead, they're sitting at their desks, waiting for the phone to ring with a really good idea.

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They key to publicizing your new brand is to provide that good idea.

Successful media engagement requires an understanding that journalists have a difficult job. The pressure of meeting deadlines, and handling editors and sources, is high. Treat reporters fairly and openly, and you will become a trusted source, who can be a big help when something *does* go wrong and the reporter comes knocking. A trusted source is one who gets the benefit of the doubt when questions arise.

THE POWER OF THE PRESS

But why is publicity often more effective than advertising? Publicity is better for one very important reason: Press coverage lends legitimacy to what you're selling. People typically believe what they see in the news. With advertising, consumers are forced to consider the source, but with news reports, there is often an inherent trust-factor that validates your claims.

The importance of honesty cannot be stressed enough. Never, ever lie to a reporter. Making wild claims but then being unable to deliver is not the way to build a successful brand. In fact, the quality delivery of goods or services is one of the biggest aspects of brand success. Without it, you're simply marketing a dud.

WORD OF MOUTH

Without a doubt, the easiest way to get publicity is through simple word-of-mouth. A tourist in your township will be sure to tell their friends and relatives about all the fun they had while they were there. Similarly, old and new residents alike will tell others about the virtues of raising their families in your community. Business leaders are constantly looking for somewhere to locate their next facility. Companies who have successfully moved into your community can be wonderful ambassadors to the next wave of business.

On the flip side, bad word-of-mouth can be equally as powerful. A tourist who returns from his vacation unsatisfied with the trip will undoubtedly tell everyone he knows about the poor time he had. Companies that have found your township difficult to work with will tell businesses looking to relocate to your community to look elsewhere. Again, it all comes down to delivering what you promise.

THE ONLINE CONNECTION

It is nearly impossible to think about marketing a community without imagining how to do it online. A community without a Web site is a community without a future. Just as businesses today cannot exist as effectively without a Web presence, communities wishing to compete in the global marketplace must also make themselves available online. Think of it as a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week marketing piece just waiting for someone



If your township has branded itself as a popular camping destination, it may be helpful to provide links to various area campgrounds and camping supply stores.

Photo courtesy of Terry W. Phipps

to come along and discover it. In addition, it's a wonderful way to allow reporters, residents and other interested parties to find valuable information.

Just as businesses today cannot exist as effectively without a Web presence, communities wishing to compete in the global marketplace must also make themselves available online.

Every day, people all over the world research everything from hotel reservations to movie times on the Internet. When tourists are researching vacation destinations, they increasingly turn to the Internet to help guide them. Families looking for a place to relocate are researching prospective communities on the Web long before they take a drive through the downtown. How can your community compete if it doesn't even have a seat at the table?

In terms of branding, your site should reflect the identity that your community has agreed upon. Your slogan should be featured

prominently on the home page, as well as throughout the rest of your site. Think of how to represent your brand graphically. Links on the site should direct users to useful information. If your township has branded itself as a popular camping destination, it may be helpful to provide links to various area campgrounds and camping supply stores.

But why stop there? It might also make sense to provide information on local noise, liquor and littering ordinances. If your brand concept involves art or theater, it may be smarter to provide links to local artists' Web sites, as well as information on local galleries, art festivals, theaters, etc.

SIN CITY BORN AGAIN?

One of the most dangerous pitfalls of branding is not clearly thinking through the consequences of your campaign. If your community is known as a great place for shopping and you suddenly decide to promote yourself as a camping destination, you're likely to lose some of those tourists who came for the great buys. Similarly, an area known for great hunting or snowmobiling might alienate its usual tourists by suddenly fancying itself a center for art and culture.

Consider the case of Las Vegas. Long considered a popular adult vacation destination, Las Vegas was facing a severe drop in tourist dollars in the mid-'90s. City and business leaders came together and decided the remedy lay in creating a more family-friendly atmosphere.

New hotels were built with an eye toward family fun, and the city's marketing plan embraced the idea of Las Vegas as a family destination. Sin City began to look and sound more like Disney World.

The ploy worked at first. Families flocked to Las Vegas in search of good clean fun. But then an unforeseen consequence became apparent: When the families came, the gamblers moved on. Casinos began to lose money as parents who would have come without their children in the past now spent time with their families rather than at the poker tables. Las Vegas forgot that the real money was in gambling, not just filling hotel rooms. They wrongly assumed that parents would still make their way down to the gambling floor.

Of course, now we're familiar with the newest Las Vegas campaign: "What happens here, stays here." Sin City is once again trying to recapture that naughtier-than-thou attitude. And, of course, the new marketing campaign is working well. The gamblers are returning, while parents are leaving the kids at home. Vegas still offers family-friendly fare, but they've made it their secondary focus, choosing instead to market their real bread and butter: entertainment for the over-21 crowd.



Why the Web is Important

Some 15 years ago, very few people would have imagined the power of the Internet. Consumer e-mail was in its infancy, and the World Wide Web had just been born. Since then, however, the Internet has become the most powerful communication tool in history.

Today, 75 percent of American homes have Internet access. Of those, 51 percent are broadband. More and more Americans are turning to the Web for information.

The bottom line is this: Your township needs a Web site. Not only does it provide your residents, businesses and visitors a valuable informational and communication resource, it also acts as a non-stop marketing piece. Best of all, establishing a Web presence for your township is relatively inexpensive and extraordinarily easy.

Perhaps most important is the Web's ability to allow you to craft your message and change it whenever needed. Unlike printed brochures, the Web is dynamic. It can change. Imagine an online tourist map that can be changed each time a new business locates in your township. Imagine being able to provide links directly to local hotels, campgrounds and attractions.

For businesses, you could provide downloadable information packets on working with your township. For new residents, you could provide a wealth of information in a welcome packet. To keep tourists coming back, you can create e-newsletters to tell them about the upcoming season and all it has to offer. Local businesses will appreciate the attention dedicated to pulling those valuable dollars back into the area.

The truth is simple: You can't effectively market your township without a Web site. Both current and potential residents, businesses and tourists expect to find the information they want online. MTA offers many resources to help your township easily create and maintain your own Web site. Visit www.michigantownships.org to find out more.

MTA IS BRANDING, TOO

By now you've noticed that this issue of the *Michigan Township News (MTN)* looks quite a bit different (see related article on page 7). MTA is going through an extensive process to ensure all of our publications are more consistent and recognizable. Starting with last July's redesign of the MTA Web site, we've been examining all of our communication vehicles to see what we've been doing right, and what we can improve upon.

It's all part of an endeavor to better determine our identity, which will help members and nonmembers better recognize MTA as the foremost source for information on all aspects of township government.

And we're not just stopping with the *MTN*. In the next few months, look for similar changes in all of your favorite MTA publications, including *Capitol Currents*, *E-News* and the *County Chapter Update*. We'll also be working harder to promote township government to Michigan's citizens to help them better understand the importance of townships in the future viability of our state.

By focusing on honing our brand, MTA will be able to deliver our messages in a more consistent, effective and efficient manner.

JUST THE BEGINNING

Numerous books and articles have been written about branding and its importance in marketing for the future. This article is not intended to be a roadmap to branding success. Instead, it highlights the need for good marketing as a tool to ensure your township enjoys prosperity well into the 21st century.

Township officials are encouraged to contact a reputable public relations firm with experience in branding to assist them in their campaign. Public relations professionals can be invaluable in helping a community discover its new identity and successfully market it.

Most important, however, is that townships begin to embrace the concept of marketing. As revenue sharing and other traditional funding sources continue to dry up, marketing your township to new residents, visitors and businesses is a sure way to attract new revenue and a strong sense of community pride.

Ryan E. Knott

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