

## The power of collaborative intent

By Pete McGinty

Branding a community is one of the most challenging and misunderstood issues facing civic leadership today. And yet, there are few things more important pertaining to the goal of building economic prosperity and long-term community viability and health.

First, why is this so critical? Most, if not all communities (regardless of size) recognize the economic value of tourism, workforce development and the benefits of building pride among residents. And as a result, they are investing heavily in these efforts expecting a viable return on their investment. At every turn, we see and hear campaigns, logos and slogans luring us to visit, move our business or move our families across the state, across the country or even the world. These are viable efforts in and of themselves, and are designed to serve the best interests of each entity whose future depends on the respective dollars generated.

The problem that results from these independent efforts leads at best to a lack of consistent community brand expression, and at worst to a fragmented representation of what the community stands for. The failure is in the missed opportunity to speak with one voice in an aligned fashion to maximize the synergy of all marketing efforts towards a collective good.

The community itself is the brand. A tourism campaign is just that – a campaign, not a brand. The same for an economic development campaign. Of course, there are different audiences and a different message strategy is needed to appeal to the respective agendas, needs and wants of each audience. But, the common denominator is the brand itself. Independent efforts work fine for the short term, but they are self-serving. And, worse yet, these investments are marginalized and fail to work towards a long-term vision of building towards the holistic economic health of the community. Plus, very few campaigns have the resolve and effectiveness of an “I Love New York” or “Virginia is for Lovers”. These are anomalies. If I had a nickel for every time someone said, “We want an ‘I Love New York’”, I’d be a rich man.

The problem isn’t that leaders argue against the merits of an aligned strategy. The challenge is that it’s not easy and they don’t know how to do it. A community is the antithesis of a corporation. In a corporation, the CEO says “jump” and everyone jumps. Conversely, a community has multiple CEOs whose only vested interest is in achieving their respective goals. It’s not the visitors bureau CEO’s job to lure companies to relocate. Nor is it the job of the Chief Economic Development Officer to attract visitor spending. And the pressures on these leaders to achieve are mighty – they must maintain a laser focus on their organization’s mission. Not even the Mayor can dictate how these organizations are run.

Cities who recognize the need to work together and collaborate towards the common goal of building a community brand will raise their economic tide and therefore raise all ships along with it. Collaboration isn’t merely convening and talking a good game, or developing strategic plans that end up collecting dust on shelves. True collaboration requires a shared platform of

vision, mission, strategies, objectives and execution. It requires a shared foundation of leadership, ownership and engagement. One entity by themselves cannot build something with the intent of forcing adoption by others: “That’s not my idea, I don’t like it, I don’t have to do it”, will be sure to be the response. People support what the help create, therefore, building a shared model is imperative.

This is a process whereby there are no shortcuts. The work must be done and it must be followed through.

A step by step map:

- 1) Identify who needs to be at the table. Participants must include the leadership of the following: The Mayor’s office (including the Mayor of course), The County (County Commissioners), Visitors Bureau, Economic Development Organization, Corporate Partnership Organization, Community Foundation, Arts Council, Historical Society, Civic Leaders, and others – be as inclusive as possible
- 2) Identify a skilled facilitator to lead this effort – someone impartial with no dog in the hunt
- 3) Clearly state the end game – properly define the scope
- 4) Hold community workshops to build engagement and shared ownership
- 5) Define the collective brand DNA
- 6) Socialize – broaden the net of engagement and shared ownership
- 7) Actualize and execute the brand
- 8) Stick to it

If you think it’s hard, you would be right. And steps #5 and #7 are a process in and of themselves that you likely can’t do on your own. You will need to work with an experienced firm to help you. But, it can be done and it must be done to build long-term economic viability.

One more benefit – experience proves that once a community begins to collaborate on efforts such as this, new muscle memory is established that changes the way other collaborative projects are approached. Consider this an invaluable manifestation and reward.