

Pete McGinty  
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## Branding a city in a democracy – the role of the people

It is commonly understood that branding a city is a difficult task, and one that isn't for the meek of heart. But, as the landscape becomes increasingly competitive for economic development, visitor spending and population growth, cities are finally beginning to realize that defining a clear brand proposition and marketing it effectively to relevant audiences is simply the cost of admission.

The primary challenge cities face when embarking on a branding initiative is that of ownership. Ideally, a shared ownership platform is built whereby all represented parties (the city, economic development and tourism organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, the corporate community, others) feel like they have a stake in the direction and therefore a responsibility to align themselves under an umbrella strategy. This is not always realistic, however, and often one group, often driven by who's funding the initiative, will need to take the lead while working to build engagement and consensus behind their direction.

Regardless, an often-overlooked audience are the residents who live, work and play in the city. After all, it is really their collective soul that is a major component of a city's brand DNA. Residents and employees represent the face of the city as brand ambassadors and significantly contribute to the visitor experience. Think about any city you've recently visited. Now think about the experience you had in that city. Was it not largely formed by the way you were treated? Were people helpful? Were they friendly? Were they rude and obnoxious? Were they young? Were they seasoned? What was the culture; the vibe; the aura?

Cities often try to lean in to a brand that they aspire to, rather than truly define who they are today. That's okay in many cases, as long as that aspiration has some genuine, authentic girding. A city brand becomes a stake in the ground that can help guide strategic planning and development. Columbus, Ohio's brand essence is "Smart and Open." It's genuine and authentic, for sure. And it also guides decisions. For example, a smart city goes after the Smart Cities Challenge, and prevails over 77 other cities. And open city is guided by an accessible government and a community that seeks participation and collaboration on city initiatives. The residents and population growth of Columbus is fueled by students, innovators, young entrepreneurs and a welcoming culture. You get the idea.

The point is, residents deserve a voice and a seat at the table during a branding initiative. They will contribute and appreciate it, and by giving them a sense of ownership, their ambassadorship will be strengthened. In doing some research for this post, I came across a research paper (Eshuis and Edwards [Branding the City: The Democratic Legitimacy of a New Mode of Governance](https://goo.gl/3xjmd5), <https://goo.gl/3xjmd5>) that studied two neighborhood

branding initiatives, both in Rotterdam. Katendrecht involved their residents in all phases of the branding, from start to finish. New Crooswijk did not, and instead employed a private partnership that merely “delivered” the branding to the community.

The results are as common sense would suspect. The engagement that Katendrecht built across all segments of their neighborhood paid great dividends in terms of strengthening their sense of community, stewardship and ambassadorship. And the brand has been sustained over several years. New Crooswijk, on the other hand, never engaged key segments of their community, let alone residents, and their branding was a project that was here one day, and gone the next. An excerpt from the study: *“We conclude that branding can theoretically enhance the functioning of urban democracy if it is embedded in a participatory process through which citizens’ emotions, feelings, and stylistic preferences are included in both the brand and concrete urban policies, and if citizens are seen as co-owners of the brand.”*

So, the cautionary tale is for leadership to recognize the role residents play in defining, shaping and delivering their city’s brand essence. Otherwise, their job will not be complete and they’ll face challenges they didn’t expect and wish didn’t exist.

Pete McGinty is Chief Alignment Officer and Principle of Align2Market.