

How Columbus broke through the challenges of city branding

By Pete McGinty

Branding a city 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 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—independently developed within a city—luring us to visit, move our businesses 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 city brand expression, and at worst to a fragmented representation of what the city 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 toward a collective good.

To be truly effective, civic and business leaders need to come together as a cohesive, focused marketing team if their goal is to create a lasting, motivating impression. But it's not easy and few communities have cracked this code. This paper is dedicated to telling the story of how one city has done just that.

Columbus is on the move. Need proof?

Something is up in Columbus, Ohio. Maybe it's because people are moving there by the carloads. Maybe it's because its added more than 150,000 net new jobs since 2010 and \$8 billion in capital investment in the same time period; or, because corporations like Amazon, Facebook, zulily, BrewDog and hundreds more are moving or expanding there; or, because Columbus has become a thriving tourism destination, and meeting and convention bookings are at an all-time high (economic impact from visitor spending is nearly \$10 billion per year); or, because Columbus just beat out 77 other cities (including Austin, Portland, Denver and San Francisco) to win the Smart Cities Challenge grant and, as a result, has become a beacon for smart mobility. Maybe it's because Columbus was recently designated as the Intelligent Community of the Year; or, because it is one of the most LGBTQ friendly communities in the country and boasts one of the largest Pride Festivals in the country; or, because it has one of the highest populations of college students per

capita in the country and are perennially ranked as a top-5 city for college graduates and young professionals. Maybe it's because of the philanthropic nature – home to one of the country's strongest philanthropic foundations (The Columbus Foundation) and, among many other events, Pelotonia, a three-day cycling experience that has raised more than \$150 million for cancer research since 2008. Maybe it's because this list is endless.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Or maybe it's because something else happened about ten years ago. That is when the city embarked on an initiative that many said was impossible; an undertaking that few other cities have succeeded in accomplishing; a community paradigm shift that required building new muscle memory that has forever changed city leadership dynamics.

For nearly one hundred years, Columbus had struggled to define itself and, as a result, had failed to establish a perception of who it was in the minds of others. Not a good perception or a bad perception – maybe worse, no perception. Interestingly, one hundred years ago, this was not the case. Tell someone you were going to, “the city of brotherly love,” and they knew you were off to Philadelphia. Tell someone you were going to the “twin cities,” and they knew you were going to Minneapolis and St. Paul. Tell someone you were going to the “arch city,” and they knew you were venturing to Columbus. The city was full of arches. Beautiful, glorious arches. From Union Square to the main thoroughfare, High Street, and everywhere in between. The arches took root at the end of the Civil War when 90,000 union soldiers marched past the Statehouse up High Street. Anticipating hundreds of thousands of visitors, the city erected wooden arches lit by gas lamps over High Street to provide lighting and safety. The people came, and the arches remained.

Like a lot of physical things, the arches slowly disappeared, most of them anyway (though they are making a comeback). So did the city's moniker, “the arch city.” Too bad, right? Columbus could have been known for something all along.

But, what would that even mean? St. Louis now has THE arch and they are known around the globe for it. And, while St. Louis is a fantastic city, and they've got THE arch, what does that mean for their brand? What would a city full of arches have meant for the Columbus brand?

A brand isn't an arch or a statue or a river or a river walk. Those are things. A brand isn't a thing. A brand is DNA. It's what's inside. It's the core. It's the people. It's the essence. It's the sense of place. It's what endures after a statue is removed or an arch is torn down. A brand isn't physical. It's mystical. Many cities confuse things for brands. They confuse place *making* with place *branding*. I pledge to you, St. Louis would be the same city tomorrow as it is today if somehow their arch was stolen at midnight tonight. Things become part of the story, but they are not THE story.

A brand isn't a slogan, logo or a marketing campaign either. Until ten years ago, like nearly every other city, Columbus kept developing slogans and campaigns. 1953: *Come to Columbus, discover America*; 1983: *Columbus, we're making it great*; 1993: *Columbus, more than you dreamed*; 1999: *Surprise, it's Columbus*, just to name a few. Do you see a *brand* in any of those slogans? Of course not, because there isn't one. That's the point – they are not designed to be brands.

Don't interpret this as an argument that logos, slogans and campaigns are bad, or unnecessary – that's certainly not the case. They each serve a critical role as an expression of the brand and are critical to driving desired behavior. The point is, they are not a branding solution. But, most cities for decades have done this work in the guise of "branding." Why? Because branding a city is a complex proposition that requires a paradigm shift within city leadership. It requires shared ownership – in essence, it takes a village to brand a city.

A concise articulation: Communities must build collaborative leadership within the democracy, leaders must serve a role beyond their own agenda, begin working together towards a common good, break from the project mentality mindset and understand the need for a cohesive brand strategy.

Keep reading and you'll understand.

Community dynamics – why is it so hard for communities to change their paradigm:

One of the biggest challenges that can arise in a city branding initiative is due to confusion among stakeholders over who "owns" the brand. In larger cities, the destination marketing organization (DMO), typically often assumes ownership. In smaller municipalities, the city or the Chamber often assumes this role. Regardless, this can lead to situations whereby other key stakeholders are not involved and feel out of the loop and uncertain as to their role. In other cases, various stakeholders take it upon themselves to define its particular brand for the place, in which case the city ends up with various and unaligned (sectoral) brands: a tourism brand, an economic development brand, an arts brand, a cultural brand and so on.

City branding is different from traditional destination marketing and economic development marketing in that it creates a halo effect, and drives and inspires consistent and on-brand behavior by all its stakeholders, rather than just those organizations responsible for their individual marketing. Engaging and connecting key stakeholders in the development and implementation of a city brand strategy strengthens the brand beyond what the stakeholders could achieve individually.

Five key barriers to city branding

There are many practical, logical reasons why breaking through this bubble is difficult for any city. The path to developing a halo brand for a city requires a different methodology than is typical for branding corporate products and services. Among many challenges is the makeup and complex nature of communities that are a compilation of many independent and competing businesses, sectors, products, and experiences, all of which are owned and managed by many different organizations with no single management team or custodian. The nature of this independent leadership/ownership dynamic is a paradigm that needs to shift significantly. Further, it requires the agreement, participation and cooperation of all key stakeholders just to have the first conversation.

- 1) Democratic nature of a community** – The very definition of community hints at its biggest challenge: *A social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and often have a common culture and historical heritage.* The problem is the void of “leadership.” Shared governance, while critical in any democracy is, of course, the opposite of forced governance, making it difficult, if not impossible, for any single individual leader of organization to make the rules and expect everyone else to follow along. In fact, typically when this is attempted, there will be resistance merely for the sake of resentment – “you can’t tell me what to do.” It’s the very opposite of the practice of a corporation, whereby a CEO or owner can dictate how things are done and, if someone doesn’t want to do it that way, they will find themselves somewhere else. A community has multiple CEOs and owners, representing many sectors. Getting them all to adhere to a common agenda requires building a shared ownership model of engagement and, without this foundation, changing the paradigm will prove impossible.

Communities must build collaborative leadership within the democracy.

- 2) Individual leader/organization agendas** – The traditional concept of leadership is that of authority – they have a vision, they assert it, they persuade us and they accomplish their agenda. Collaborative leadership shifts the paradigm simply by saying that if we bring good people together in constructive ways, we will be able to make conscious, inclusive decisions. All leaders by necessity have their own agendas – that being to serve their specific constituents, audiences, members, etc. Whether that be the mayor, the leadership of the DMO or economic development organization (EDO), councilmembers, commissioners, private sector leaders, etc., their job is to accomplish what’s best for them and theirs. It’s no one’s stated job to mine the image of the city. It’s not the mayor’s. He or she will be much more focused on snow removal, reducing neighborhood blight, wiping out drugs and crime and lowering taxes. It’s not the tourism bureau’s CEO. He or she will be focused on marketing the destination strictly to attract visitors, meetings and conventions, not caretaking the halo image of the city. It’s not the economic development director’s job. He or she is attracting site

selectors, CEOs and workforce – very different audiences than tourism. And, so on. They are all critical members of the community but not the leader of it. They all serve their specific job first. To build shared ownership requires them to care about serving a broader *role*, that being to *share ownership* to serve the broader good.

Communities must build collaborative leadership within the democracy and leaders must serve a role beyond their own agendas.

- 3) Darwinian nature of communities** – Social Darwinism is defined as the “survival of the fittest.” The strongest survive; the weakest perish. This is particularly true as it relates to the funding models for the civic, arts and non-profit sectors of communities. In most cases, there is a finite amount of money available to support these organizations. As a result, as they each fight for what’s best for themselves. They all are fighting over the same funding budgets, with little or no respect to one another. They are merely doing their job – they are in it to win it. For example, as the tourism bureau makes their case for more discretionary funding from the city budget, they may be doing so at the expense of the arts council or vice versa. Assuming there is a finite budget to pull from, one organization will grow and one will shrink. And this happens across numerous organizations and sectors. Until organizations are willing to work together strategically, with a common goal of growing the whole (working towards a common good), the prosperity of the city will never be maximized.

Communities must build collaborative leadership within the democracy, leaders must serve a role beyond their own agenda and begin working together towards a common good.

- 4) Project mentality versus strategic vision** – Most communities are project driven because they aren’t rallied around a long-term strategic vision. They are beholden to a great degree by developers, by what’s built and who builds it. Developers are driven by following the money. Communities need buildings, facilities, attractions, condos and the like, so this isn’t a condemnation on those who build them. But remember, developers are doing what’s best for themselves, first and foremost, not thinking about a long-term community strategy. Developing a halo city brand requires a long-term strategy that necessitates a shared ownership model involving vast community leadership.

Communities must build collaborative leadership within the democracy, leaders must serve a role beyond their own agenda, begin working together towards a common good and break from the project mentality mindset.

- 5) Confusing marketing for branding** – Marketing campaigns are projects; branding requires strategy. Communities rarely understand this and, as a

result, are beholden to their DMO's and EDO's marketing campaigns. Consequently, there is the absence of brand strategy. Because of this void, disparate marketing campaigns emerge. The problem that results from these independent efforts leads, at best, to a lack of consistent city brand expression and, at worst, to a fragmented representation of what the city stands for. The failure is the missed opportunity to speak with one voice in an aligned fashion to maximize the synergy of all marketing efforts toward a collective good.

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How Columbus broke through – the paradigm shift

For decades, Columbus was stuck in the muck of all of these dynamics. It was universally recognized that the city lacked a distinctive image. It was often written about, discussed among leadership, relayed by the outside world and, in general, led to the city developing a significant inferiority complex. There were numerous attempts to “fix” it. Image initiatives began, workshops were conducted and plans were written. But the initiatives faded, workshops waned and plans were put on shelves.

It's often said that significant change doesn't happen until there is a burning platform to drive it. The lack of a defined image for Columbus had not yet become the burning platform, though it should have been. It was more of a nagging issue, almost accepted as a condition that the city just had to live with. And, for the most part, nothing was broken. The economy was healthy, the city was growing and there was strong corporate and civic leadership.

What emerged first was the awareness, then the urgency to realize a much greater potential that was at the city's fingertips. Though no burning platform, there were three smoldering fires (opportunities) that together provided the impetus. First, an approaching Bicentennial celebration; second, acceptance of a competitive-deficient economic development program; and third, this nagging image issue.

Realizing the barriers that stalled previous efforts, key stakeholders began to do things differently. As a result, a new model of working developed that not only proved successful for undertaking the city's branding but also led to a collaborative dynamic that has shaped many other community initiatives.

Following are the fundamental steps that proved successful:

Collaborative leadership agenda – Leadership began to think differently. This wasn't going to be solved by the traditional mindset of just doing things “better.”

Leaders from every sector aligned and developed a sense of trust around a new agenda – a common sense of purpose and a shared vision of defining and developing a city brand. This didn't occur in one big meeting. Rather, dozens and dozens of smaller conversations occurred over time, momentum was built and the influence base was broadened. What transpired was an engaged stakeholder group who, as individuals, left their egos and personal agendas at the door and realized that they had the responsibility and role of community servant – contributing to the greater good. Don't mistake this for altruism. Make no mistake about the fact that there was broad recognition that the end game was greater economic prosperity for the city and, therefore, for all. This was about rising the tide – and raising all ships. It was about making the pie bigger – therefore, more for everybody. Collaborative leadership naturally leads to a shared ownership model. There is no single “owner,” but an understanding of trust that all voices are heard, valued and share in the responsibility.

Community engagement – From the beginning, there was an understanding that engaging citizens was a vital step for this initiative. Community engagement increases community cohesion and allows for the community to have ownership over the outcomes. People support what they help create. As community engagement increased, citizens moved from being passive consumers of information to taking active leadership roles. As the sphere of influence expanded, engagement and inclusivity grew, as did support. No community sector was left out: residents; faith-based organizations; small and large business; civic and non-profit organizations; government; education; public service, young professionals and retirees, etc. While there was great thought to making sure influencers and advocates were at the table, it also was understood that it was critical to engage the skeptics, cynics and possible disrupters. Broadening inclusion expanded support. While not everyone needed to agree, everyone's voice had to be heard.

Shared vision and consensus of purpose – Building a shared vision and consensus of purpose required a pure democratic process. There was no single or even group authoritarian. Meetings and gatherings were workshop-based, participatory, engaging and open-minded. They weren't intended to “tell” participants what to think, rather, their intent was to listen, learn, and capture all voices. Think of the beginning of the process as the wide opening of a funnel. As work continued, more input was gathered; trends and themes began to emerge – the process moved towards the narrow end of the funnel. A common, shared vision and consensus around purpose became clear.

A stake in the ground – Armed now with input and consensus from the entire community, it became the job of key stakeholders to synthesize all that was learned. It's important to note that the community and stakeholder input included a wealth of outside research compiled from multiple partners. This outside perspective (the voice of external audiences) was, of course, an invaluable layer of data, in addition to the community input. By itself, as valuable as community input is, it tends to be inward focused and can be too aspirational – people like to see themselves as they

want to be, rather than who they are. At its core, a brand promise needs to be authentic and genuine, and represent the community for who it is (albeit with a hint of aspiration!). Through skilled facilitation, the brand pyramid began to take shape, and the Columbus brand promise, *Smart and Open*, emerged. Stakeholders found themselves in an exciting and adventurous point in the process. Were they ready to drive a stake in the ground and claim this? For sure, debate transpired. Some conservative leaders were not quite ready. Other, more aggressive leaders felt that it was time. One finally remarked, "I'd rather be a little bit wrong than continue to do nothing at all." And with that, after many months of building consensus, broadening engagement, seeking input from the entire community, the Columbus *Smart and Open* brand promise was engraved.

Brand narrative

Columbus is a city with an *open-minded* approach to life and business. It's a smart city with a progressive attitude, where people are free to go out on a limb. Where diversity isn't just a state of being but a state of mind. It's made by real people, businesses and neighborhoods – everyday. Because we share the philosophy that Columbus is *open to all*, we are always taking risks, always thinking big and always *open to new ideas*.

Committing the resources – Maybe the most critical decision yet was what was next. Would this become another failed strategic effort and end up as a binder on a shelf? Or, would the commitment continue to the executional stage? Now was the time stakeholders needed to develop a funding model for execution and invest real dollars. Doubt crept in with some; skepticism with others; optimists remained. And, more debate ensued. But, remember the smoldering fires? The Bicentennial was only a year away. A new EDO had been formed (Columbus 2020). And, the DMO (Experience Columbus) was beyond eager to strengthen their efforts. Inactivity simple wasn't an option. So, the decision was made to move forward and choose a marketing firm to bring the *Smart and Open* brand to life.

The Columbus Brand was born

Execution – A partner was chosen and the work began to develop the halo, *Smart and Open* brand promise that would work across all segments of the community. At the same time, it was agreed that it was fundamentally necessary to establish a strong, horizontal, umbrella framework that still would allow individual organizations the freedom to shape messaging to resonate with their respective audiences. This resulted in a blended house of brands, whereby the DMO, EDO and projects, such as the Bicentennial celebration, and others could pull from the credibility and foundation of the halo brand. This structure became the critical lynchpin, as it broke through the project directed mentality of traditional silo marketing, and established a strategic framework that clearly demonstrated how the entire community could share and benefit from partnering within this strategy.

It was only then that creative development began. Strategic and creative briefs were developed. Logos, copy, tone of voice, design elements and graphics were created. And finally, websites, collateral pieces, print and digital ads, videos and other elements ensued. After many months of shifting the paradigm from a project orientation to a strategic orientation, building collaborative leadership and a shared ownership model, engaging all segments of the community and, lastly, driving that stake in the ground, finally tangible work was revealed.

Alignment – With Experience Columbus, Columbus 2020 and the Bicentennial Commission clearly on board and beginning to execute their respective campaigns, presentations were made throughout the city to share the strategy and creative executions. The intent was to capitalize on momentum by sharing the work with engaged partners and by introducing the work to new constituents. It was easy for other groups to visualize how they could integrate this work into their own marketing efforts to extend the halo brand voice. This activity commenced in an organic fashion that was exciting to see. People clearly understood the holistic and individual value of leveraging this partnership. The fact that ownership and buy-in had been developed along the way gave others the sense that they were a part of creating the work. Again, people support what they help create. All the creative elements were open-source and available through www.BrandColumbus.com, where users could find creative elements, copy and messaging, photos, videos and other assets that might prove valuable to their individual efforts.

Sticking to it – Everyone gets tired of their own work first, but herein lies a critical distinction between branding and marketing. Columbus has not wavered from its *Smart and Open* brand promise. In fact, quite the opposite. Organizations have stuck vehemently to promoting this platform, and others have joined. And, interestingly, campaigns have come and gone, which was expected. One of the tenets of a brand is that it remains strong regardless of campaign. Under the blended house of brands model, stakeholders recognized the need for flexibility to allow organizations to have the freedom to shift their marketing as appropriate, as long as the brand essence is still adhered to.

On-brand decision making and investments – This becomes one of the most powerful elements of living the brand. It's not enough to *declare* your brand – you must *be* the brand. As authentic as the *Smart and Open* brand platform is, Columbus continues to live the brand in how the city is developing its infrastructure, economic development strategy, civic initiatives and pursuit of other initiatives, such as the Smart City Challenge. It's testament to the fact that collaborators established a brand promise that is true to what the city is, and proof of commitment to a long-term strategic orientation. You can be sure Columbus will continue to make smart and open decisions going forward.

Collaborative muscle memory – an unintended result

People in Columbus often site their “secret sauce” as a community whereby collaboration comes naturally. But, in truth, this wasn’t always the case. Leadership wasn’t always as democratic as it has become. The city used to be known as one ruled by a handful of what were referred to as “city titans.” This is not meant as disparaging in any way. While it’s true they had a stranglehold of sorts on many key decisions, they also were extremely altruistic and many, if not all, decisions were in the best interest of the city. In fact, much of the city’s critical infrastructure was built during that era. It’s unlikely that the collaborative, shared ownership model required for a branding initiative would have resulted from the old form of titan leadership. But, as time went on, new leadership emerged, the collaborative model surfaced and has forged itself into new muscle memory that is the normal course of business for this thriving city.

Intended results – economic prosperity and community pride

Branding done right is commendable, and has many merits. If there weren’t an economic gain from the effort, one could argue the value. But, trend lines prove that the Columbus Region is experiencing the strongest decade of growth in Central Ohio’s history. Nearly all economic metrics point positive and their trend upward has accelerated since the branding began to take root.

Key metrics from Columbus 2020

Note: 2020 goal metrics were established 2010

	<u>May 2017 (from 2010)</u>	<u>2020 goal</u>	<u>On pace (by 2020)</u>
Job creation (new growth)	144,879	150,000	199,833
Capital investment	\$7.75B	\$8B	\$10.2B
Personal per capita income	+21.5%	+30%	+47%

Key metrics from Experience Columbus

	<u>2012</u>	<u>2016</u>	<u>Change</u>
Visitor spending	\$4.7B	\$6.4B	+36%
Economic impact	\$7.8B	\$9.7B	+24%
Tax revenue	\$898M	\$1.13M	+26%
Room nights	408,494	492,775	+21%

Beyond economics, this city, that historically suffered from, at best, a Midwest modesty and, at worse, a self-defeating inferiority complex, now believes in itself. Especially as new generations of young professionals and millennials have discovered the Columbus of today, an unprecedented energy and pride has risen and is contagious.

To learn more about the Columbus brand and the organizations behind it, go to:

BrandColumbus.com
ExperienceColumbus.com
ColumbusRegion.com
Columbus.gov
ColumbusPartnership.com
ColumbusFoundation.org

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