Cornhusker Economics

Place Branding – More than Just a Logo

Since the early 1990s, communities worldwide have focused, in part, on place branding as an economic development tool to attract industry, employees, and tourists. Often, the practical process of place branding involves creating logos, slogans, and eye-catching banners that declare an image to the world. Some may recall one of the earlier and most successful logos: "I♥NY."

Recently, researchers started examining the viability of logo and identity creation efforts. Do results show that place branding is a successful attraction strategy? Can large city efforts equate to small communities and locales? Are there successful practices that better serve the communities and their members? The answer is yes to all these questions, but with some caveats.

As an urban economic development strategy, place branding has been utilized to instill perceptions about places and drive the attraction of resources for local development (E. Cleave, 2015, p. 1134). This can be to attract workforce, tourists, and other industry sectors. Simultaneously, place branding can create a strong sense of place throughout the community and marshal resources and community assets to reflect this brand or image. Hildreth (2011, page 156) states that a brand is "merely a summation of the number, type, quality, and positivity of associations people have of the place." In other words, it's about shaping the public's perceptions of a place through emotions and psychological connections (Collins, 2024, p. 650).

According to Govers (2011, p. 231), place branding should "inform place marketing and function as a strategic compass" for economic development activities. The brand should reflect the community's values. It is an amalgamation of impressions and beliefs about who and what the community is, a message ultimately used to drive targeted customers to buy the product, which is the community.

This strategy is not without critics. Arguments include limited research evidence that place branding achieves the community's development goals. They cite "inefficient, misguided, and a potential waste of resources" when emphasizing logos and slogans over effective policies of attraction (E. Cleave, p. 1140). Challenges of place branding include the inherent complexity of communities, lack of message control, conflicting interests between stakeholders, and ineffective measurements (Kavaratzis, p. 1370). There is no standard practice for how brands are created and for what purpose. Is it to change the spatial distribution of community resources, such as developing industrial parks for an "open for business" strategy? Is it to support existing business entities in attracting a workforce through soft quality-of-life messaging? Or is it to impose an image on a community that projects a vision of a contrived ideal?

Place branding can distinguish one community from another. In a landscape of locations that provide the same amenities, environments, and opportunities, branding can help a community "stand out." However, what is usually missing is a place brand developed in association with the community's history, values, social connections, and organization associations

that have evolved. Even though two communities may be similar, these differences give each specificity and distinctiveness. It's the small parts that, when considered as a whole, give the community its character -- and unique characters.

A brand represents the inhabitants who give it meaning. To best capture the community's essence, participatory place branding practices should be employed to extract knowledge and pay tribute to the community's uniqueness (E. Cleave, 2015, p. 1379). Insightful community dialogues can help identify more substantive economic development policies that support the visions portrayed in the brand, one that blends people, associations, history, and culture.

To help communities with participatory place branding, the Rural Prosperity Nebraska People and Place team has programs to help communities.

- First Impressions Online is a tailor-made evaluation of how a community presents itself to tourists and travelers, from its online presence to the brand and physical assets of a community.

- Red Carpet Service provides front-line customer service training to individuals who directly interact with customers and establish a community's first impressions.

- First Impressions Peer to Peer is a comparative analysis of a community to a similar-sized community located within 120 miles of each other. A self-selected board works with a facilitator to maximize tourism assets, discover how visitors view your community and receive feedback.

- First Impressions Professional secures experts in marketing, food and beverage, tourism, event planning, and community development to identify your community's strengths, opportunities for improvement, and possible future initiatives regarding tourism in your short-, mid-, and long-term strategic plans.

- Marketing Hometown America is a community-wide facilitated activity that engages newcomers and long-standing residents in identifying the unique assets, values, and associations that can be used to create a more welcoming experience for visitors and new residents and to assist with resident retention.

- Learn how Rural Prosperity placemaking programs can assist your community, visit https://ruralprosperityne.unl.edu/people-attraction-placemaking/

Sources:

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