

Knowledge Synthesis

Community Branding

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INTRODUCTION

This knowledge synthesis is part of The Monieson Centre's Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) Project, a three-year endeavour to connect academic knowledge with economic development needs in Eastern Ontario. The synthesis is an accessible presentation of the latest research on issues affecting rural Eastern Ontario. The knowledge synthesis topics were determined through information gathered at 15 community workshops run in partnership with the Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation network. The KIS Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information, visit www.easternontarioknowledge.ca.

There are two key dimensions to brand knowledge:

- **Brand Awareness:** the ease with which a brand comes to mind when triggered by a specific need and the ability to recognize a particular brand.
- **Brand Image:** the meaning(s) associated with the brand.

For example, Niagara-on-the-Lake is associated with wine tours. Individuals may also associate the area with the Shaw Festival, a "quaint" downtown, or as a popular location for weddings. Prince Edward County (Picton and the surrounding area) is emerging as a wine region competitor to Niagara-on-the-Lake; however, it serves a different populace (i.e. Eastern Ontario) seeking a similar experience.

While logos and slogans are symbols of a brand, the total brand represents much more. A brand is a story, a means of standing out and demonstrating something unique about your community which sets it apart from others. Individuals in your community all have a role in the story, each with something unique to contribute towards the whole of the brand image. In addition, developing a brand may have unforeseen benefits like bringing your community closer together, providing a common, shared experience.

CONSIDERATIONS WHEN DEVELOPING A BRAND

A Cohesive Image

In branding a community, planners should determine what sort of image they wish to convey. The selected path will depend on the ultimate goals. Possible objectives might be:

- **Tourism:** If the goal is to develop the area as a 'get-away', you may need specific services and infrastructure (e.g., restaurants, lodging, and entertainment). In this case, the government may

be a good source of information and potential partnerships¹. A possible avenue to explore for generating tourism might be the hosting of an annual event, such as the Havelock Country Jamboree.² Another potential approach might be promoting your community as a location to purchase or rent a vacation home.

- **Economic Growth:** If the community seeks to develop a brand for attracting industries, what elements (e.g., services, skilled labour, and infrastructure) make the community attractive? A consideration for this goal is that the community may become dependent on a single industry and suffer greatly should that employer leave, as has happened in many manufacturing-based communities in Ontario, most recently with the Hershey factory closing in Smiths Falls.³ On the other hand, you can also look at the existing trades in your community to see how you can exploit or expand these resources. For example, Wellington North Township (an area north of Guelph) recognized an abundance of local bakeries and began marketing the area as The Butter Tart Trail.⁴
- **Increasing Permanent Residents:** Some communities have sought to take advantage of the projected increase in retirees as a result of the aging baby boomers by creating Adult Lifestyle Communities, as exemplified by the Wilmot Creek development east of Toronto.⁵ Elliot Lake, located about halfway between North Bay and Sault Ste. Marie, has successfully marketed the community as a destination for retirees and as a result, vacancy rates have dropped and the community has seen an increase in new services and amenities.⁶

This type of plan has both benefits and pitfalls. An aging population will have infrastructure needs which may not be currently available in the region (e.g., hospitals). However, the current members of the population who are considering retirement are still quite healthy and leading active lifestyles. This offers many opportunities for the development of local industries, resulting in new jobs for the community.

Community Buy-In

Perhaps one of the most important elements to developing a brand for your community is to ensure that as many people from the community as possible support the image you choose. While in a business situation the brand image can come from the business owner or the CEO, a community is more democratic and individual members can choose to ignore an image if it doesn't suit them. As a result, it is important to get people involved as early as possible. Who knows your community better than those

¹ "Media Relations." Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership.

<http://www.tourismpartners.com/TcisCtrl?site=partners&key1=mediaRel&language=EN&linkType=I> (Accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

² For more information, visit www.havelockjamboree.com.

³ Nicole Baute. "The Death and Life of Small Ontario Towns." *The Toronto Star*. Dec. 13, 2008.

<http://www.thestar.com/article/552445> (Accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

⁴ Tracey Tyler. "Butter Tarts Lure Tourists to Travel Tasty Trail." *The Toronto Star*. Dec. 3, 2008.

<http://www.thestar.com/article/547275> (Accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

⁵ As detailed in www.anewbeginning.ca.

⁶ "Success Stories." Elliot Lake. <http://www.cityofelliottlake.com/en/invest/successstories.asp> (Accessed Jan. 29, 2009.)

who have lived there? Talk to the local people and get their feedback about what makes your community special and distinct.

Partnerships and Differentiation

When you think about how to define a “community”, many levels come to mind. A church or social group is a community, just as a town or a township is a community as well. In trying to decide how to brand your community, a good starting place is defining the boundaries of what you consider to be ‘your community’. In some cases, a group of individual towns will share a collective identity and you may want to create a brand for the region. Although coordinating across multiple towns may have some inherent difficulties with regards to making decisions and getting complete buy-in, there are many advantages to this approach. For example, the development and communication costs can be shared between more people, reducing the individual costs. As well, if your goal is tourism, different attractions in various areas may be packaged together.

Once you have determined these boundaries, you can start to identify and examine your “competition”. Your community and its goals may be similar to others from different regions, but this does not necessarily put you in direct competition if you are serving different customer bases. After you start to get an idea of your competition, you can begin brainstorming about how your offerings differ from theirs. For example, are you in closer proximity to your customer base? Do you have facilities that others lack? These differences begin to form the starting point for establishing a target market, and will help you decide how to communicate your brand message.

Selecting a Target Market

The target market you choose to reach will be dependent on the overall goal behind creating a community brand. For example, the type of person or group you want to reach will likely be different if you are seeking to increase tourism versus permanent residence. Determining the characteristics of your target market early on in the brand development process allows you to plan your brand communications so that they appeal to your targets, and it also allows you to optimize your resources by using a more directed communication approach. As you start to consider the groups of people you wish to reach, try to find a balance between being so broad that you include too many people to provide a clear focus and being so narrow in your search that you are limited to a few small groups.

Traditionally, people have categorized target markets by demographic factors (e.g., age, income, and geographical location) and interests (e.g., active or passive lifestyle, recreational interests, and social memberships). The age group which you are trying to reach may be a factor in goals of both tourism (e.g., the services and attractions you offer may appeal to a limited age group) and attracting permanent residents (e.g., establishing yourself as a retirement community). The geographic location of your target market is an important consideration from a competition perspective (i.e., who else is trying to reach this group) and also from a brand message perspective (i.e., are you promoting your community as a place to visit in a single day, or as a place to stay for an extended period).

Another consideration when determining your target market is matching the strengths of your community to the interests of those you are trying to reach. Hiking trails and outdoor activities are better suited to those people who are looking for an active lifestyle or vacation destination, while

cultural attractions like museums may be more appealing to a different market segment. You may also want to consider the current cultural trends when defining your target market. For example, Haliburton has taken advantage of their natural resources by offering an attraction geared towards people seeking an eco-friendly destination.⁷ This type of attraction allows them to seek out target segments which include tourists with an interest in the environment, school field trips, and people looking for an adventurous outing.

Communication Is Key

Once you have established a clear brand identity, you can start thinking about how to communicate this image to others. With an unlimited budget, you could use broad sweeping forms of communication like television advertisements and radio spots, but a more realistic scenario might involve considering a targeted approach. At this point, knowing your target market becomes vital. Once you've established your target markets, you can brainstorm ideas of how to reach them. This is a good opportunity to let yourselves get creative, thinking of alternative means that may provide another way of differentiating your community. Also, you should consider what resources are available – both public (e.g., federal and provincial government programs) and private (e.g., local companies that have resources for generating communications) that might help achieve your goals.

A website is often a good place to start, and provides an accessible forum towards which to direct interested parties. However, this is a starting point, not an end in itself. When you develop your communication plan, you should try to balance passive communications with active ones. For example, a website is generally regarded as a passive medium, that is, you are relying on people to seek out your community. Being proactive is much more difficult, but can also be more effective in achieving your goals. If you are trying to attract new industries to your region, start looking into organizations which are involved with that industry. Organizational websites and news sources can give you an indication as to which companies are growing or shrinking, and which ones might have a need which your community can serve. You may want to seek out volunteers to contact these organizations and establish a relationship with them, to sell your community as a possible location for future growth.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Brands require maintenance and adjustments. As part of your marketing plan, you need to include contingency plans for how you will monitor and evaluate the success of your community branding, as well as options for expanding your communication reach.

Specifically, from the outset you may want to consider setting milestones and criteria for evaluating the success of your plan. These points for evaluation should be realistic, but also reflect achievements which are directly related to the effects of your branding efforts. For example, if your objective is to increase tourism, you may want to track the number of *new* visitors to the area (as opposed to those who have visited previously), or repeat visitors over a period of time and compare these results to past experience. Whether your objectives relate to tourism, permanent residents, or new industries, one of the best sources of information are the people themselves. Take the opportunity to talk with them whenever

⁷ "Canopy Tour." Haliburton Forest and Wild Life Reserve Ltd. <http://www.haliburtonforest.com/canopy.html> (Accessed Jan. 29, 2009).

possible to try to find out why they came to your community, what they think of your community, and what makes your community unique or special. When your own community members travel, have them ask the people in the area they visit about your community to find out the level of awareness regarding your brand (e.g., “What do you think of when you think about ‘community x’?”). Not only will this give you information about the awareness of your community brand, but it will also give you an idea of how your message is interpreted. In all cases of branding, the vital part is not necessarily the image you put out, but how people actually interpret that image.

APPENDIX A – ONLINE RESOURCES

1) **City of Gastonia Branding Process:**

http://www.cityofgastonia.com/latest_news/branding.cfm,
http://www.cityofgastonia.com/latest_news/newlogo.cfm

These web pages provide an overview of both the organizational steps taken and the initial outcomes regarding one community's attempts to create and develop a cohesive brand. Gastonia, North Carolina is a community of nearly 70,000, located near the larger cities of Charlotte and Winston-Salem. Because of its proximity to larger cities, Gastonia must compete with them in attracting tourism and businesses (just as communities in Eastern Ontario compete with cities like Ottawa and Toronto). A key take-away from this particular case is that the local community leaders sought buy-in from the members of the community from the start, helping them gain effective contributions from all parties interested in shaping the brand image.

2) **Establishing a Community Brand:**

http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/marketing/marketing_article.jsp?articleId=1489

This article provides some basic steps for establishing a brand for your community, from deciding what brand you want to put forward through to monitoring the effectiveness after you have initiated your plan. The steps have been generalized, but can provide a good checklist or starting point to guide you through the process of establishing a community brand. There are some other good articles with tips and suggestions which can be found here: http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/marketing/marketing_article.jsp?articleId=1415

3) **Developing an Interpretive Guide for Your Community:**

<http://web1.msue.msu.edu/imp/modtd/33710094.html>

This web page provides a detailed step-by-step guide to creating an effective guide for communicating your community's benefits to visitors and tourists. In addition to recommendations for specific language (i.e., the article recommends interpretive language and the use of detailed descriptions and explanations), the article also talks about determining objectives and promoting natural resource attractions.

4) **The Ontario Tourism Brand:**

http://www.tourismpartners.com/publications/Marketing/mrktng_OTMPCBrandStory.pdf

A quick read, this document provides an accessible short-story description of branding Ontario as a tourism destination. It outlines some of the goals driving the development of a cohesive brand, and offers some useful tips and things to think about when communicating what your location has to offer. For example, the authors highlight the difference between how we imagine or remember our vacations in terms of happy feelings and whimsy, but many travel communications are focused on the specifics and practical aspects of the destination.

5) **Ontario Tourism Brand Toolkit:**

http://www.tourismpartners.com/publications/Marketing/mrktng_OTMPCBrandToolkit.pdf

In conjunction with the brand story document (#4 above), this document provides a wealth of information about how to make your marketing attempts attractive to your audience and a breakdown of the different market segments who might want to travel to your community. As well, the document provides specific and practical advice about creating your brand communications such as recommendations about graphics, typeface and layout. Overall, this is a great document to read through when it comes time to spreading the word about your community.

6) **Working with the Canadian Travel Trade:**

<http://www.tourismpartners.com/publications/IndustryResources/CanadianTravelTrade.pdf>

This 53-page document created by the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership Corporation (OTMPC) covers numerous topics related to establishing your community as a tourist destination, including information about how the tourism industry works, who to contact and how to design and price tourism practices. Although the guide is directed towards Northern Ontario destinations, this area shares many commonalities with areas in Eastern Ontario such as an abundance of natural resources. The appendices at the end of the OTMPC document contain numerous websites for various organizations including governmental organizations geared towards travel and tourism as well as a list of travel agencies, tourism operators and suppliers which could potentially act as partners for promoting a community. Listed below are some of the websites provided in the OTMPC document.

Canadian Websites

<i>Canadian Tourism Commission</i>	www.travelcanada.ca
<i>Canadian Tourism Industry Exchange</i>	www.canadatourism.com
<i>Statistics Canada</i>	www.statscan.ca
<i>Tourism Industry Association of Canada</i>	www.tiac-aitc.ca

Ontario Websites

<i>Ministry of Consumer and Business Services</i>	www.cbs.gov.on.ca
<i>Ontario Ministry of Tourism & Recreation</i>	www.tourism.gov.on.ca
<i>Ontario Motor Coach Association</i>	www.omca.com
<i>Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership</i>	www.tourismpartners.com
<i>Ontario Travel Information Service</i>	www.ontariotravel.net

- Note: There is a subsection of this site dedicated to Eastern Ontario, but its current focus is on Ottawa, Kingston and Prince Edward County

<i>Ontario Tourism Education Corporation</i>	www.otec.org
<i>Service Ontario</i>	www.serviceontario.ca

Information for Travelers

<i>Travel Industry Council of Ontario</i>	www.tico.on.ca
<i>Travel & Tourism Research Association</i>	www.ttra.com