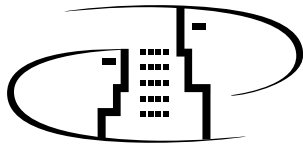


Has Branding Become a Dirty Word?

Current issues for
economic development professionals



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Earlier this quarter, blogs and media outlets alike proclaimed that the state of New York had squandered millions of dollars on a squirrel. Yes, you read that correctly: Outrage over a squirrel.

Here's a little bit of background:

New York State's department of tourism commissioned Saatchi & Saatchi to re-engineer the ubiquitous I♥NY brand to better reflect the state as a whole, rather than just New York City.

The idea was to promote the best that New York state has to offer, like its 150 vineyards or 400 golf courses – attractions often overshadowed by the “Big Apple” proper.

The logo, originally designed by Milton Glaser over 30 years ago, is one of the most iconic and successful place branding examples in history, and the task of revisiting it would surely be a daunting one for any agency. The results of the latest initiative are shown below:



wine & food



adventure



cultural history



fine art



culture



family



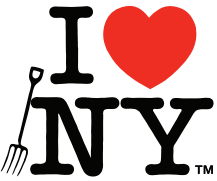
shopping



scenic drives



history



heritage



military history



water



spas & retreats



sports

Whether you like what Saatchi & Saatchi did or not, the coverage of this project and resulting public incredulity is a good example of how branding can (and has) become a dirty word. Here are a few quotes from some of the articles covering the story:

*“Saatchi & Saatchi has charged New York State \$17 million for a clip art squirrel...”*¹

*“The campaign, which has lined the pockets of Saatchi & Saatchi...”*²

*“Enjoy the BS ... this is what the state of New York has paid Saatchi & Saatchi for. Your tax dollars at work.”*³

This white paper does not intend to analyze the quality of the Saatchi & Saatchi's efforts, but rather our intent is to discuss the misperceptions surrounding this high-profile initiative in particular, and all branding initiatives in general. It is these misperceptions that have led to skepticism and resistance when it comes to branding, making the job of economic development marketers much more difficult.

Let's start in New York

There are two things wrong with the article quotes above and almost every related article and blog post you will find about this story:

1. Most of the money spent on “branding” does not go towards logo development but rather execution and rollout.

Branding is a nebulous term. Even those in the marketing and communications industry cannot always agree on its meaning and scope. As such, the tendency to lock onto something concrete and tangible – like a

logo – is no surprise. The disconnect occurs when the cost of a branding initiative is wholly attributed to the development of a logo. This is rarely the case. Done properly, logo and tagline development are simply a step in the process, and the majority of dollars are allocated to getting the new identity and messaging out into the market.

The \$17 million dollar figure quoted in the case of the I♥NY is actually the cost of the entire campaign. That means the creation of electronic and print collateral, the production of television ads and the cost of global media buys, to name a few. Saatchi & Saatchi are surely making a healthy profit from this project, but the \$17 million figure is oversimplified and completely erroneous. It just makes for a great story.

2. Saatchi & Saatchi did not earn \$17 million to put some snow and a squirrel on the existing I♥NY logo.

The public, the media, and even most key stakeholders are often only privy to the final product with regard to the development of a visual identity. Think of McDonald's golden arches or the Nike swoosh. These icons are incredibly simple. Something that could have been sketched on a cocktail napkin. But chances are, they weren't.

The process of developing a visual identity is involved, plodding and comprehensive. Unlike a one-time advertisement or event, your logo is the element of your marketing and communications that you will have to live with for a very long time. It must make an impression in an instant. It must embody the essence of everything you stand for. It's a tall order indeed.

In the case of New York, Saatchi & Saatchi had to consider how to achieve the objective of promoting the entire state

(as opposed to just the city) in the context of a long-standing and iconic visual identity. They used their expertise to determine that the loss of brand equity would be too great with a new logo, so they extended the existing logo with images they felt represented the best of New York State as a whole. They also added a bridgeline to help emphasize that there are more reasons to love New York than just the city itself:



Again, the intent of this paper is not to discuss whether their efforts were a success or not, but rather to point out that the branding process is not as simple as the final product may lead you to believe. There is a significant amount of research and planning involved. Competitive and SWOT analyses. Dozens of concepts developed and tossed out that are never seen because the agency feels that they are just not strong enough. The final product is deceptively simple. Especially if it's effective.

A common reaction to a new city logo is: "My kid could have done that." Perhaps. But what you are really paying for is the expertise and training that comes with hiring a professional firm. Let's look at a more concrete example:

Most people wouldn't blink twice at receiving a bill for hundreds of dollars from a dentist for an hour or two of work. The reality is that with the right set of pliers you can get a tooth pulled for much less than that. The end result is the same – your tooth is out – but you get what you pay for.

It is the dentist's training, expertise and skill that makes the service provided worth more. The same holds true for branding professionals. It is true for logo development and it is true for the subsequent execution and rollout of the brand strategy.

Bad rap branding traps and how to avoid them

Marketing is an integral part of any economic development plan. It is the means to showcase what your municipality is doing in other areas of your economic development strategy. If you are making great strides in creating a business-friendly climate but nobody knows about it, then the opportunity is missed entirely. Branding and marketing are foundational, not an afterthought. But because they are so intangible and imprecise, the challenge is convincing everyone else of this necessity.

Most economic development professionals recognize the competitive advantage associated with a strong municipal brand, but many are reluctant to use the term "branding" when communicating with their stakeholders, because of its negative connotations.

Like it or not, your city already has a reputation in the market. Smart economic developers know that they must invest in comprehensive branding efforts to influence and shape that reputation. Getting support is not always easy. Branding has been getting a bad rap for too long, but there are a few steps you can take to secure greater endorsement for these initiatives. They are discussed in the next section.

1. Foster understanding: A logo is not your brand

Branding initiatives are misrepresented as a public launch of a flashy new logo and clever tagline. In this context, the dollars spent do seem exorbitant, especially during difficult economic times. It is your job as an economic development marketer to educate others about the real scope of a branding initiative.

Whether it is a media release or a presentation to council, avoid the temptation to shine the spotlight on the visual identity only. Ensure that you discuss the process that sits behind what they are seeing in front of them, as well as the brand strategy and plan for execution.

2. Avoid post-launch complacency

The unveiling of a new brand via a public launch is a common practice. Drawing on the point above, use the launch as an opportunity to educate about how the money is really being spent and the value created by engaging in a professional branding initiative.

Further, ensure that a plan is in place to allow you to hit the ground running following the launch. Quickly executing your strategy and getting your brand message to market will sustain momentum and provide you with concrete examples of the value being created by the branding process. Measures such as increased website traffic, response to email campaigns, and meeting business expansion and recruitment targets are all indicators of your brand's penetration in the market. It is critical to monitor, measure and report on success, as well as tweaking your strategy accordingly when something is not working as you had hoped it would.

3. Be true to your brand

This point was discussed in the September 2008 EDAC White Paper, "Place Branding in Practice", but it is worth mentioning again here. Done correctly, your branding and marketing efforts should build on the very best your municipality has to offer. They should reflect your true strengths and take a stand about the unique value proposition that sets you apart from other regions.

To realize the returns on your brand investment, every interaction point with your municipality must align with your overall brand. If your message is one of a city that is easy to do business with, then ensuring that this is the case at every step must be a top priority. If you are promoting green principles then visitors to your community should see these efforts all around them. If the experience doesn't match the promise, then the brand becomes hollow and it really is nothing more than a logo.

In closing

Economic Developers can learn from the experience in New York. Education and demonstrating results are far more important than the launch of a logo. Branding will cease to be a dirty word if we foster understanding about the scope, the purpose and the intended results of these initiatives.

About the Author

On Three Communication Design Inc. is a creative agency specializing in promoting places not products. For more information and insight, visit them at www.onthree.ca or read the blog at <http://blog.onthree.ca>.

Endnotes

1. Edwards, Jim. "NY Spends \$17 Million on Saatchi 'Clip Art' Logo" bnet, November 14, 2008. Accessed November 15, 2008
2. McGrath, Ginny. "New York's new logo and why squirrels don't work for me ", Times Online, November 13, 2008. Accessed November 15, 2008
3. "Introducing the Saatchi & Saatchi 'I Love New York' logo guide." Tribble Ad Agency, November 14, 2008. Accessed November 15, 2008

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EDAC is pleased to announce a new service for our members to support your communications activities.

Over the next year, EDAC will release a series of six white papers that explore current issues in marketing and communication as they relate to economic development.

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