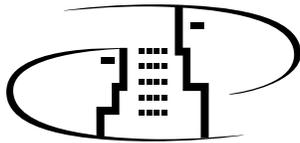


# Buy-In Begins at Home: The Importance of Stakeholder Support

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Current issues for  
economic development professionals



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## Introduction

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As we've discussed in our previous white papers, the activity of place branding – that is, marketing your community and its distinct advantages – is a critical function for economic development professionals. Without a strong marketing and communications strategy, it is difficult to attract new business, make current businesses aware of the services of your EDO, or draw tourists and new residents to your community. In short, if people don't know why your city is great and what it has to offer, then your other goals become very difficult to achieve.

This white paper will look at a one of the trickier aspects of successful place branding: Buy-in.

Although it is a well-known predictor of success, garnering buy-in from key stakeholders, like your Mayor, Council, business leaders, Chambers and BIAs, is rarely included in a marketing strategy. It is seldom tied to a specific deliverable nor does it have a budget line item allocated to it. But without it, your place branding efforts will suffer and possibly even fail.

This white paper looks at why buy-in is so critical and what steps economic development professionals can take to ensure that it is part of their marketing strategy.

## Let's begin with a story

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Years ago, our marketing firm was hired by a small town to do some brand consulting. Before our first meeting, we made every effort to get to know the town before our arrival. Of course, our first stop was the internet.

I googled the town's name and began to click. "Ok, so it looks like they're using this bird as an icon, and they've got tourism as a high priority..."

I relayed this information to my colleague, who was doing an internet search of his own.

"No, no," he countered. "They're using this building here, and all they can talk about is being a technology centre of excellence."

Huh?

As we continued to search we found seven – count 'em, seven! – "official" looking sites with a mishmash of looks, messages and priorities. We couldn't make heads or tails of it, and we had spent a significant part of our afternoon trying to. We came away from the exercise more confused about what this town was all about than when we had begun.

When we arrived for our first meeting, the problem became apparent. Each stakeholder and player in town was promoting the community in a silo. Various groups had spent lots of time and money on a myriad of campaigns. Although their intentions were good, the appearance to those trying to glean information about the town became one of a place that simply didn't have its act together.

The task ahead of us was clear: In order for this town to compete in the market, we needed to rally all the stakeholders around a single vision and strategy for promotion. We had to transform the "mish-mash" we had stumbled upon into a collective of complementary projects and messages. This town needed buy-in, and it needed it bad.

# Why buy-in is so critical

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## **Silos are the “default setting” with place branding**

Managing the brand for a municipality or region is a complicated task. Traditional branding has a structure in place – e.g. a marketing department – to manage how the image of the company or product is communicated to the public. With most municipalities, no formal structure exists. Various departments, community partners and local organizations must come together and create an ad hoc structure, built on consensus and passion for the place they are promoting.

If this collaboration is not initiated, most organizations will carry on managing their specific piece – be in tourism or downtown investment – in isolation. Each will develop its own messages, materials and campaigns to achieve its objectives. Not only is this confusing to the market, it creates redundancies and wastes resources that could be pooled to maximize their effectiveness.

## **People go to the web first**

The silo problem is further exacerbated by our reliance on the internet. We know that most travel planning and business expansion investigation is done online. In fact, if someone is unimpressed by what they see on the web, it is unlikely that you will ever get a chance to influence them in person, as they will have moved on to a community that has its online act together. Only then will they delve deeper and make contact with the Office of Economic Development or other contact within the municipality.

As an exercise, try googling the name of your municipality or region. Since most of us spend so much time maintaining our economic development web properties, we often overlook what the web experience is like overall for outside users. Put yourself in the shoes of a site selector and make a note of the impression your community is making on the internet. Is it clear where you should go for information on business in your community? Do the sites of various organizations within your community complement each other or confuse and compete? What image would you be left with after a few minutes of googling?

Don't underestimate the importance of the web. It is often the only chance you get to make an impression.

## **A brand is more than a logo and a clever tagline**

This has been discussed at length in past white papers such as [“Place Branding in Practice”](#) and [“Has Branding Become a Dirty Word?”](#), so we won't belabor it here. Suffice it to say that a true brand is reinforced by every interaction and touchpoint with your community, from your website, to using your city's services, to the people on the streets and in the coffeeshops. Everyone must live the brand, and this is easiest to do when the brand is authentic and creates a sense of pride in each individual. If people don't buy in, then they will not provide that critical reinforcement necessary to truly build a brand for your municipality.

## **The “public” faces of your community need to believe in the brand the most**

Politicians. City leaders. Company presidents. Community organizations. These are people who put a face to your community. Be it a public speaking engagement, an interview with the Globe and Mail, or a trade mission to another

country, these people must walk the talk of your brand and represent your community consistently and with conviction.

Your public leaders must be able to recognize your brand strategy as an honest reflection of your community. The brand position must resonate and it is better able to do this when it balances your community's current state with its ambitions for the future.

Further, your community leaders must be able to speak to what makes your municipality truly unique. Give them the tools to articulate your competitive advantage, or you will miss opportunities every time they espouse that your city is "a great place to live, work and play". Well guess what? So is everywhere else. Use their voices to make an impression and stand out from your competition.

A final note about your leaders:

In our experience, when a community undertakes a branding initiative, there is a surefire litmus test for whether it will endure. People will look to the leadership in your community to see if this is yet another overpriced logo redesign or if it is a true reflection of the direction for the community and a vision for the future. Long after the launch ceremony and media conference, is the Mayor still communicating the core messages? Is Council making decisions that are consistent with the brand direction? Are organizations working together to pool resources and attract new investment as a committed collective?

Your leaders will determine the success or failure of your marketing strategy. Getting them onside can be difficult and frustrating, but we have seen many good brands die because they lacked the backing of the community's leadership.

## So how do you get buy-in?

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Unfortunately, there is no magic answer. Getting buy-in is a time-consuming process that can be very unpredictable. It can throw a wrench (or one hundred) into the execution of your strategy. Although that's likely not the answer you wanted to hear, we can at least offer some Do's and Don'ts to get you thinking about buy-in among your stakeholders:

**DO** recognize that buy-in is rooted in relationship management. LOTS of relationship management. Stakeholders want to be heard, consulted and advised of direction. It is important to touch base throughout the branding process, from development to launch to maintenance.

**DON'T** be a victim of death by consensus. With such a complex undertaking and competing agendas, consensus simply will not be possible. Your role is to solicit input and feed progress back to stakeholders for information purposes and further input. They must see their input reflected, but they must also see that the real value comes from a synthesis and analysis that takes the strongest ideas and translates them into a community brand and marketing strategy. This is a delicate balance that you must strike, but don't shy away from making this investment. It will be critical in the long run.

**DO** create community consortiums to lead the initiative. Buy-in will come easier if your brand and strategy are set by a core group of community leaders, rather than being perceived as a directive from the EDO or city. Be careful in selecting this group. Keep it to 5-7 members from various sectors who are able to set aside their own agendas and see the big picture. There's no room for ego in this group or it will quickly collapse.

DON'T blindside anyone with a finished strategy. Too often we've seen economic development teams and their consultants huddle around a boardroom table for months crafting a brand strategy for the community, only to be met with a lukewarm reception. Instead, find ways to let the community know that the process is underway. Use media releases, public events or a city blog to communicate the purpose of the initiative and the expected outcomes. Create some buzz and excitement long before the launch, and continue to use these channels to publicize the success of your initiative so that the community can celebrate together.

DO use examples to convince stakeholders of the need for their buy-in. There's nothing like a little healthy competition to light a fire under your leaders. Profile municipalities that are getting it right with buy-in and show the impact of a sophisticated and coordinated branding effort. You can even share the results of your google experiment from the previous section if the findings were as telling as the town we told you about in the introduction to this paper.

DO start an ambassador program. This allows you to extend your consortium significantly and fosters a formal commitment from your business leaders towards promoting your brand to their peers. Ambassador programs are one of the most impactful place branding initiatives you can undertake in your community. These programs will also be the subject of the next white paper in our series, so stay tuned!

## Conclusion

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The title of this white paper is "Buy-in Begins at Home". We've chosen that for a good reason. If your own residents, business leaders and politicians don't "buy it" when

it comes to your community, then how can you expect anyone on the outside to? Stakeholder buy-in can be likened to a root canal at times, and we suspect that is the reason it is so often overlooked in marketing and brand strategies. But, as this white paper demonstrates, failure to secure buy-in has lasting consequences. Take the time to engage your stakeholders in your branding process, and do it often and with patience. Everyone wants to see the community thrive, and it is your role to help them understand how your municipality's brand strategy will do just that.

### **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](http://www.onthree.ca) or read the blog at <http://blog.onthree.ca>.*

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