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Branding works in two directions – inward and outward. Inward branding builds identity and strengthens sense of pride and ownership, thus creating an attractive environment with the ability to attract new citizens, tourists, and businesses. Outward branding is concerned with external communications that support sales and marketing potential.

To change outside perceptions, you must first achieve internal clarity. Prime reasons for brand-program meltdown include everything from deficient market research and little interaction with stakeholders, to ambiguous goal setting, to failure to gather feedback and measure results achieved.

Only by coming to grips with how everyone (from council members and business owners to residents and tourists) truly feels about and experiences your community can you identify gaps in reality and perception. Then, you can start to develop a strategic plan of action to correct, strengthen, or moderate awareness. Act with purpose, from writing and speaking with conviction to choosing brand-relevant events to host.

Ensure your community is perceived as intended by achieving internal clarity and vision before you roll out those glossy campaigns. When departments communicate ad hoc, the brand story lacks focus, cohesion, and consistency, neither shared and understood by staff

and council nor synergized by stakeholder involvement.

Your Role As A Community Leader

In business, one in six customers fail to complete a purchase because of how they are treated. Just fewer than 70 percent of people stop doing business with a company due to gaps in brand promise and reality of experience. The same applies to place branding. Are you aligning with your goals and aspirations by contributing to the strength of your brand, or do your actions serve to weaken and undermine? Like all great business owner-operators, you need to sell your community 24/7. Whether it's a trip to the supermarket or a major conference, every outing is a golden opportunity to influence prevailing attitudes and perceptions.

If you are responsible for hiring staff, make brand alignment a critical component of the interview criteria. How do candidates' views align with your brand vision? Will they actively engage in achieving your goals and objectives? Consider the impact your decisions have on your community's brand. This does not mean just potential voters, but all stakeholders who have something to lose or gain. Leave your mark by making the right choices for your community. Stand behind your decisions and use your place

brand to support your decisions. Consider the impact of a statement such as "after reviewing stakeholder input and our brand strategy we felt blank was better aligned with our shared community vision and best suited to strategically position us five to 10 years from now."

As a returning elected official or a member of staff, your task is to educate new council members on any findings, research, or plans already in action. It takes years to achieve community vision, which is virtually impossible to reach if you start over after every election. Your constituents want to see action and progress, and that you are striving to do what is best for your community by keeping your eye on the social and economic prizes.

You may have a mandate for change, but issuing stop or re-work initiatives, which are not measurable and tied back to your community vision, only impede progress. Get out in the community – walk and talk, engage in the shared experience, and be a proud booster of community spirit. Remember, branding is not something you plan to do later – it's something you do every day, whether you strive to control it or not. If you don't have a vision, it's time to roll up your sleeves and get down to it! If you're newly elected, there's no better time than now to start branding your office with the stamp of excellence! *MW*

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