

# MARKETING AND BRANDING STRATEGY GUIDE



A tool for Michigan communities looking to establish  
a marketing and branding strategy



## INTRODUCTION

Economic development efforts are meant to be operationalized with near-term initiatives and an annual recalibration of strategy going forward. Economic development measures also require support by taking steps to communicate and promote local opportunities. A community can be doing all the right things to enhance economic potential, but if it does little to deliberately market itself with a strong brand, results may be delayed or otherwise diminished.

This guide assists communities in creating a basic marketing and branding strategy. It provides direction for how communities may undertake a modest marketing/branding effort, recognizing that such efforts can require far more time and resources, and that they are essentially ongoing and evolving efforts. Some communities may have the resources to utilize a marketing firm, but for those who don't; this guide is intended as a place to start. As with the local "Economic Development Strategy Guide," the following material frames a concise, modest and efficient process to develop marketing and branding efforts. It also respects the fact that local conditions differ and creative approaches are always encouraged and supported.

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# OVERVIEW AND EXPECTATIONS

This guide describes how a community can take steps toward greater ownership and control over how it is perceived and how it expresses local opportunities and general appeal. It also describes basic steps to develop and maintain a strong community brand and image. Marketing and branding are common private sector activities associated with efforts to sell products or services. The private sector has long recognized the power of marketing and branding, sometimes overwhelming consumers with advertisements that promote products and services in skillful ways.

Michigan communities are certainly not consumer goods, but there are many reasons to proactively draw attention to community appeal and local economic development opportunities. Viable development projects may lay dormant for years in some communities without a local champion and marketing efforts to promote the opportunity. There are also good reasons to pay attention to and maintain a community brand, image and identity. Some communities have dated logos and uninspired tag lines that don't provide a strong first impression and give few reasons to discover more about the community. Considerations such as these become all the more important when you factor in the increasing levels of competition between communities today. It is undeniable that communities (and states and regions) compete for investment, job creation, entrepreneurial talent and tourism.

Local governments often lack the specialized expertise of private business that can drive human behavior. However, there are simple steps that can be taken to help

create a more favorable community image and draw to economic opportunities. This guide first approaches the topic of community marketing, and then delves into the matter of community branding and brand development. These elements connect with both external and internal audiences. Further, while this guide is motivated primarily by economic development benefits, other less tangible benefits associated with building community pride and general image development should not be overlooked.

For the purposes of this guide, marketing is defined as being the intentional efforts to communicate with target audiences. Branding on the other hand, aids marketing efforts and is the conscious effort to define, shape and manage community image. It is often expressed with the consistent use of a logo and tag line. Essentially, branding attempts to define what you are, while marketing involves the steps to tell people. This guide does not fully explore all the nuances of marketing and branding for a community and does not describe a long and costly process. The goal is to identify modest steps a community can take to promote and market itself. Some communities have spent large sums of money on marketing efforts and some have spent many months developing new logos, tag lines and new web sites. While these larger efforts are encouraged and can reap major rewards, they are not required for Redevelopment Ready Communities® (RRC) certification. What is required is evidence that a community has taken an introspective and thoughtful look at itself from the standpoint of how it communicates local opportunity, desirability and appeal to internal and external audiences.

# MARKETING STRATEGY

A marketing strategy defines deliberate steps to promote and draw attention to community attributes and economic opportunity. It shows how a community intends to take more control over how it is perceived, while leaving less to chance. Rather than simply hoping that word gets out, or that the community will somehow be discovered, a marketing strategy identifies steps to highlight community attributes and opportunity. Without such a strategy, communities will be at an increasing competitive disadvantage because:

- Other municipalities who understand the power of marketing are fine tuning efforts to draw distinctions between their community and others. This can further widen the gap in perceptions about desirable communities.
- The community will continue to be defined by past experiences, external media, word of mouth and stereotypes.
- Any positive attention to development opportunities, community progress toward economic development goals, or other image-enhancing events may be more happenstance than deliberate and intentional.

Before describing what a marketing strategy is, it is important to describe what it is not. A marketing strategy is not the same as public relations. Marketing is generally more proactive, while public relations tends to be more reactive and oriented toward events, relationship-building, correcting mistaken impressions, explaining past actions and general information management. Marketing is more action-oriented and typically strategically focuses on target audiences.

A marketing strategy is also much different than a market study. A market study objectively identifies voids in local economic activity that could potentially be filled<sup>1</sup>. It provides information that is informative to the master plan, economic development strategy, redevelopment opportunities and other related planning documents. Market study results help drive public policy and priorities.

To provide more context to a marketing strategy, we can borrow from the expertise of marketing professionals, and consider a concept called the four Ps of marketing. The four Ps of marketing include; product, price, place and promotion with reference to the fact that all are important

and interrelated. In the context of a community, these include:

- **Product:** The community or specific aspect of the community is the product. In some ways it is similar to other products, as we choose where to live and where to invest our time and money (and for how long). Communities are more of a product today compared to what they once were, as we live in an increasingly mobile society where residents can easily move and sometimes create their own job opportunities (and take them elsewhere).
- **Price:** Price represents an expression of value. People are motivated to purchase goods and services after they recognize value and worth. Similarly, people are drawn to live and invest in places where they see the value of community attributes and offerings. Such offerings include educational opportunities, parks, low crime rates, rising property values, sense of place, natural beauty, prospects for economic growth, etc. For communities, value can be expressed in two ways. First, it can be expressed in terms of what now exists. Second, because new or sustained connections to a community is often a long-term proposition, value can also be connected to a sense of optimism and confidence in the future as the community draws attention to plans and opportunity.
- **Place:** In the pure marketing sense, place refers to the place of sale and distribution channels. In the community sense, place is similar to product as highly desirable locations attract people and new investment in a variety of settings. Place also evokes the emotional attributes that form connections with people at a deeper level. Most importantly, place is fundamental to lasting economic development as attributes of a strong place can't be outsourced, relocated or closed. Once a community has successfully created place-based attributes, the challenge becomes managing and further developing these attributes over time.
- **Promotion:** Promotion is the specific effort to target people and it should be guided by a strategy. While communities are not typically engaged in direct selling, general advertisement or steps to create publicity, there are ways to promote (as described later).

<sup>1</sup>A market study or target market analysis (TMA) is typically an effort to identify development opportunities based on socioeconomic characteristics and an existing mix of residential, commercial or industrial land uses in a community. A market study will often identify a need for specific types of business, industrial or residential space given local conditions and spending patterns. Market studies can also define and describe "business clusters" that enjoy local competitive advantages.

# MARKETING STRATEGY

All four of the “Ps” above provide a general structure to consider when developing a community marketing strategy. However, further consideration suggests that effective marketing should be strategically targeted (rather than trying to reach everyone, everywhere) and that people see communities from one or more perspectives. These perspectives include seeing communities as places to live in, as places to invest in and as places to visit. Undoubtedly, qualities that make a community an attractive place to live in, may also make it attractive to invest in and visit.

Targeting community marketing efforts with an eye toward these three perspectives adds structure to the community marketing strategy. Defining multiple target audiences may be challenging, but it should include the need to focus on talent attraction and retention. Talented workers are generally associated with creative, entrepreneurial, well-educated, highly skilled or artistic people. These people often create jobs and attract investment and therefore can dramatically enhance redevelopment readiness. They are also often more inclined to choose where to live based on local amenities and community attributes (and less because of local job proximity). Therefore, efforts to reach them with strong

and compelling messages regarding community attributes and opportunity can resonate particularly well. The marketing strategy, and specific forms of messaging can then be directed toward the following groups to align more intentionally with local economic opportunities.

- **Existing and prospective residents:** People who call the community home, or may be inclined to.
- **Business interests:** People willing to invest in the community
- **Tourists:** People inclined to visit for a first time or many times.

These perspectives should be considered in the context of RRC Best Practice 6.2 (marketing and promotion). More general marketing efforts that elevate community pride and strengthen community image can connect with residents, business interests and tourists at multiple levels. However, more focused marketing efforts can be directed toward increasing investor confidence as they relate to physical community-building projects. Marketing efforts can also focus on building a stronger business case for local investment and opportunity in the context of the community’s prioritized redevelopment sites.

# MARKETING STRATEGY

## Process

There are five steps associated with developing a marketing strategy. These steps are intended to help provide some structure and sequencing of efforts that help organize the marketing strategy. These steps include:

### Step 1: Define core messages

A community should be able to define its core messages to tourists, residents, potential residents and investors/developers. This messaging should express authentic strength and compelling reasons or target audiences to take notice of the community.

### Step 2: Engage with community partners

Community partners can include a wide range of traditional and non-traditional organizations. Obvious partners include the chamber of commerce, convention and visitors bureau, downtown development authority, economic development corporation, etc.

### Step 3: Define target audiences

Developing the list of target audiences is a chance to identify opportunities to speak to groups of people you most want to reach. A local chamber of commerce membership is one target audience of local business interests.

### Step 4: Define the strategies

Armed with information from steps 1–3, a list of strategies can be developed that describes future steps to market the community. These steps should be defined in the context of both steps that can be taken more unilaterally, and steps to be taken in partnership with other entities.

### Step 5: Connect to EDS

Marketing efforts are intended to support the community economic development strategy (EDS). Therefore, direct and indirect relationships between the economic development strategy and the marketing strategy should be identified.

A first step in this effort is to draw attention to the need for core messaging. Before a community begins to engage in marketing efforts, it should attempt to define core messages to three key audiences. These three audiences include visitors, residents/potential residents and people and organizations who may be inclined to invest in the community. There may be overlap among these groups, but the essential focus is to try to speak to each group with a brief and compelling core message. In other words, complete the following sentences:

1. To a potential visitor: You should visit (*city name*), Michigan, because...
2. To an existing or potential resident: Living in (*city name*), Michigan, is great because...
3. To a potential investor: You should invest in (*city name*), Michigan, because...

Steps to define the core messaging should involve dialog with partners and collaborators (step 2). The community does not necessarily own the core messages. Rather, it is a partner with organizations such as the chamber of commerce and convention and visitor bureau who generally promote the community and its attributes more directly. Other less obvious partners include local educational institutions and local services clubs, business groups and economic development organizations. Therefore it makes sense to collaborate and join forces. The basic challenge is to reach agreement on the core messages and utilize them with some degree of coordination and consistency. Marketing efforts have greater impact when consistent core messages originate from multiple sources.

Steps to define the core message should also include steps to consider the competition. As mentioned, communities are becoming increasingly competitive, so it makes sense to consider what competing communities offer (and don't offer). It may be helpful to put oneself in the position of being a potential tourist, resident or business person considering options and choices about where to visit, live or invest in, and then honestly considering strengths and weaknesses. A formal SWOT analysis may be helpful if the core messages seem illusive or are not easily defined.

# MARKETING STRATEGY

## Process

Because communities may not have large marketing resources at their disposal, they must find ways to communicate core messages as a part of routine governmental activity. A local unit of government generally has the attention of the local press and therefore can communicate in a way that can support marketing goals. Perhaps the more significant challenge is to identify the core messages and then express them as part of routine government activity and conversations. A community can frame common communications around core messages. This provides opportunities to express a larger story of purpose and meaning. In essence, it is an effort to connect the “what” with the “why” and in the process change the common narrative somewhat to achieve some marketing objectives. The following are examples:

- A waterfront is considered to be a huge community asset and its importance is reflected in a community’s core messages. The waterfront is a reason to visit, live and invest in the area. When the community is engaged in work that enhances this waterfront, it is an opportunity to not only talk about the project – but also communicate the core messages. This can be done through press releases, quotes, and the general way the project or activity is presented to the public. It is the opportunity to describe the project as an expression of the core message.
- A core community message includes the notion of local opportunity, partnerships and optimism. A brownfield is about to be cleaned up in this community and made ready for redevelopment. Events and activities associated with the brownfield project can become an actual expression of the core messages in action.

Communities also routinely publish documents, pamphlets and other material that is widely distributed. Further, the municipal website is a great place to express core messages. Depending on the circumstances, printed and electronic material can include core messages that reach thousands of people in a single day. In all marketing efforts, it is important to maintain a high level of quality. For example, using professional-quality photos is important in marketing materials so that images provide the best possible account of the local environment and surroundings. Core messages might also be expressed as signage in public spaces, or on public facilities such as water towers.

Along with the identification of core messages and community partners, steps should also be taken to

differentiate between target audiences (step 3). Core messages are most useful when directed to intended audiences – rather than in a more scattered way. The identification of target audiences also helps to differentiate how and when outreach might be most beneficial. Step 4 includes the creation of specific strategies. While specific strategies may vary widely from community to community, some examples include:

- Create targeted marketing materials that draw attention to the community’s prioritized redevelopment sites.
- Develop a “Request for Proposal” related to redevelopment/development opportunities.
- Intentionally attach the community brand to specific community events.
- Join organizations such as the Michigan Urban Land Institute (ULI) and attend state and national events to develop connections and relationships. Organizations such as the Michigan Economic Developers Association (MEDA) have useful resources.
- Local officials appear on local media (TV/radio/print) and express core messages.
- Produce news releases that draw attention to local accomplishments that support core messages.
- Become more engaged with professionals who are actively responding to inquiries regarding available buildings and raw land. These professions include commercial realtors, utility companies and other economic development professionals.
- If a community hosts events (sports tournaments, festivals, concerts, etc.) develop marketing materials that encourages an extended stay to shop, dine, discover other local attractions, etc.
- Update the community web site to express core messages.
- Express core messages on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.
- Develop banners and signage that express and support core messages.
- Sponsor events that align with core messages (business summit, cultural event, festival, outdoor event, etc.).
- Communities with strong vacation/tourist activity may try to capture business activity by suggesting that tourists may want to live and work in an area that is an appealing vacation spot.

# MARKETING STRATEGY

## Process

The final step (step 5) is to make sure that there are firm connections between the local economic development strategy and local marketing strategy, including specific approaches to market the community’s prioritized redevelopment sites. Marketing strategies are not intended to be developed and implemented in a vacuum. They are developed and implemented to support and enhance the local economic development strategy. Therefore, it is important to review the local economic development strategy to be sure that there is alignment with, and

support for, various economic development initiatives. By following the steps previously outlined, communities should be able to produce a marketing strategy summary as shown below and a list of marketing strategies going forward.

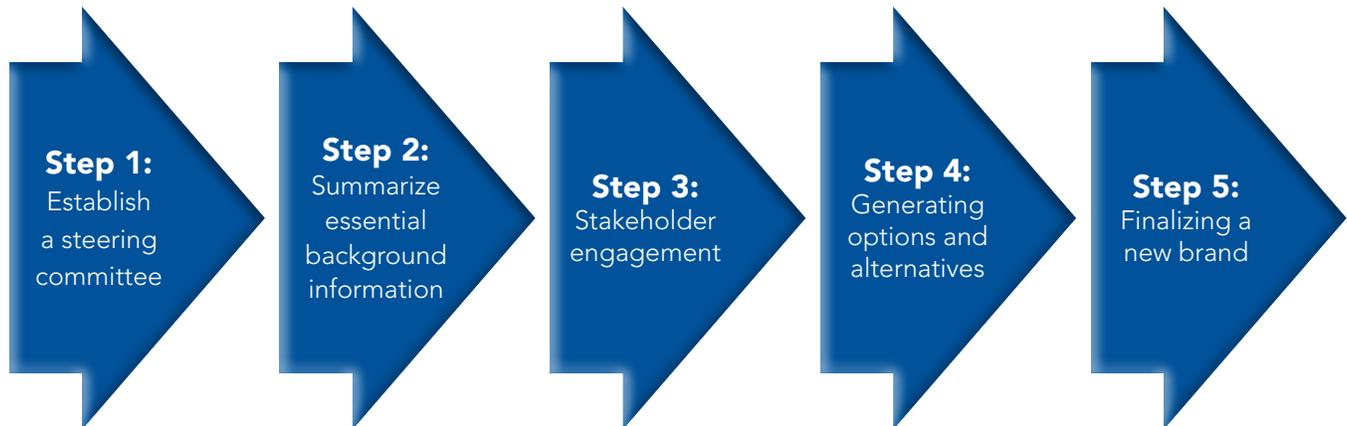
MARKETING STRATEGY SUMMARY			
	Visit here (Tourism)	Live here (Quality of life)	Invest here (Economic appeal)
Define core community messages (and sub-messages).	You should visit ( <i>city name</i> ), Michigan, because...	Living in ( <i>city name</i> ), Michigan, is great because...	You should invest in ( <i>city name</i> ), Michigan, because...
Define the community partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Define the target audiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Specific marketing strategies to be undertaken.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>
Relationships to the economic development strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ...</li> </ul>

# THE COMMUNITY BRAND

Marketing efforts include the consistent use of a community logo and tag line to develop and maintain an appealing community brand. Apart from use on the community website, letterhead, business cards, vehicles, etc., it can also be used on identification signage for public buildings, banners, elevated water towers and gateway signage at major community entrances. Such steps can support many community goals, but it also reinforces a community's image and drives home the impression that a community is a unique place with opportunity and redevelopment readiness.

## Process: Branding

The process to develop a community brand is described separately from steps necessary to develop a marketing strategy. The branding process centers on updating a logo and tag line for consistent use on the community website, business cards, letterhead, signage, etc. The process should be one of discovery and consensus-building. Ideally, the process unfolds naturally and there is ample time to pursue ideas and alternatives that present themselves. Still, there is a need for structure and defined steps that offer a linear course of action and sense of progress.



# STEP ONE

## Establish a steering committee

A steering committee can help guide the branding process. Choices regarding the composition of the Steering Committee is a local one, but such a group should have the authority to direct the ebb and flow of public and private conversations that lead to the development of a recommendation to the legislative authority to consider. Committee formation should avoid more than a dozen members so that group dynamics are more easily managed. External interests should be included in the conversations and process. These interests can be

represented as actual steering committee members, ad hoc members, or otherwise involved in the process. The local convention and visitor bureau, chamber of commerce, and other regional entities can be important partners in the process. Recommended members include architects or design professionals that can contribute an artistic eye, the municipal planner, economic development staff, a local businessperson that has an exemplary website of their own, a local web designer or local design students.

# STEP TWO

## Summarize essential background information

### STEP 2:

A community branding exercise must begin with steps to assemble information. This step is critical as a community branding effort needs to build on authentic attributes. Communities are encouraged to recreate and reinvent themselves as described in the master plan and related planning documents, but they should avoid being drawn to an arbitrary image and identity that is something they are not. The result will almost certainly fail by most measures and perhaps do more damage than good. If a community brand is truly a promise to deliver an authentic experience, it must be able to deliver on (and often surpass) expectations. The best opportunity to do this comes from building on core strengths, undisputed leadership and authenticity.

Knowing these core strengths and areas of undisputed leadership and authenticity begins with assembling key information to define the essence of the community. These are largely factual considerations that represent undeniable truths in categories such as the following examples:

- 1. Locational context:** (*City name*), Michigan, is located along Lake (*name*) or in a region called “the Thumb,” or in “Irish Hills” or in a part of Michigan commonly associated with “Up North”
- 2. Size:** (*City name*), Michigan, is a small community (under 5,000 people)
- 3. History:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known for \_\_\_\_\_ historical features (lighthouse, Heritage Trail, National Register Buildings, etc.)
- 4. Culture:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known for a concentrations of ethnic groups, art/craft expositions, popular concert events, athletic races, botanical gardens, etc.
- 5. Natural landscapes:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known for scenic lake vistas, rolling topography, wildlife populations, vineyards, fruit trees, waterfalls, etc.
- 6. Population characteristics:** (*City name*), Michigan, may be known for having a more seasonal population (cottages, resorts), or it may be known for a younger population associated with a major college or university.
- 7. Man-made features:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known for (*name*) bridge, iconic religious elements, recreational boating ports of call, a concentration of tourist attractions, etc.
- 8. Culinary features:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known for specialty restaurants and/or unique cuisine.
- 9. Notoriety:** (*City name*), Michigan, has consistently been named as being among the top (#) communities in the state (or nation) for (*topic*).
- 10. Key employers:** (*City name*), Michigan, is associated with a specific local employer that provides a substantial share of local employment opportunities.
- 11. Schools, training and education opportunities:** (*City name*), Michigan, is known as being home to a major educational institution.
- 12. Transportation:** (*City name*), Michigan, is associated with a major element of transportation infrastructure (bridges, ferries, recreational trails, etc.)

From this list, some common themes may be able to be developed and expressed. A smaller and more rural community may be able to isolate just a few formative elements for the community brand. Larger communities may have many elements that speak to community brand and identity. The themes that are evident at this point should be regarded as preliminary and foundational to more efforts.

Beyond the effort to uncover factual considerations, steps should also be taken to consider how the community is branded and marketed today. Private businesses, schools, other local institutions a Downtown Development Authority (DDA) and or organizations often express local identity through signage, web sites and print media. They sometimes use logos, tag lines and other imagery to express a local association. Gathering and considering these elements can help identify common themes that already have some local meaning and context.

# STEP THREE

## Stakeholder engagement

Developing a good brand and community image is not an endeavor to be completed by a select few. Most residents and community leaders have strong attachment to the places they call home, and this emotional energy should be harnessed to add strength and value to the process that leads to an updated community logo and brand. One direct way to accomplish this is by conducting a public workshop that offers creative conversations about creating a locally-meaningful brand. Such a workshop should be open to the public with specific invitations to key community leaders. It is also an opportunity to follow steps described in the RRC's "Public Participation Plan Guide" to help build the local culture of strong public involvement and with a high level of transparency. The workshop can begin with a brief presentation about the value of a new community brand/image, a review of the factual background information from step 2, and perhaps some examples of best practices.

Participants can then break into groups to respond to key questions such as:

1. How would you express the essence of *(city name)*, Michigan?
2. What is the one positive thing that *(city name)*, Michigan, can always deliver on?
3. What is your favorite place in *(city name)*, Michigan?
4. Are there any images or associations with *(city name)*, Michigan, that you think are overdone and should be avoided?
5. What personality traits does *(city name)*, Michigan, have?
6. What are the most common values that residents of *(city name)*, Michigan, have?
7. Is there an obvious tag line that *(city name)*, Michigan, should use?

Like similar planning exercises, individual groups can record comments and results, and then report out to all workshop participants, so that common themes can be identified. A parallel effort could involve an online survey to gather input from residents and stakeholders who are unable to attend. Survey questions can ask people to provide feedback to questions such as those listed above. Later (step 4), an online survey can also be used to obtain feedback to alternative graphic logos and taglines. In such an effort, survey participants can be asked to indicate a favorable or unfavorable reaction to alternatives. Surveys can be available on the community website with access for a set period of time. Opportunity to provide open-ended responses to questions can also provide general insights and feedback.

# STEP FOUR

## Generating options and alternatives

Generating options and alternatives includes the need for a graphic designer. Use of images, color scheme, font styles and shapes can speak volumes without the use of a single word. It is unlikely that one acceptable image will be developed initially, so it is typically necessary to develop several alternatives. In so doing, graphic elements can be blended and combined to better express a desired outcome. Professional graphic designers may be available locally, and talented students at area colleges or universities may also be available to generate alternatives. A tag line is often used along with a logo to verbally

express a message. A tag line is simply a very concise statement (or group of words) that represents a verbal summation of community identity. Alternative tag lines may be combined with other logo/graphic choices to arrive at more options. In creating alternative logos, think about how well it will translate across paper and digital media and reproduce in black and white.

For illustrative purposes, the following images show variations of graphical themes that might be generated for consideration.



# STEP FIVE

## Finalizing a new brand

Generally, common themes emerge from prior steps and lead to a single logo and tag line that is expressive of authentic community character and identity. Once developed, it should be approved by the governing body of a community. It is important that the logo and tag line be used consistently and not be allowed to be modified by others. Basic guidelines should be established to specifically define graphic elements (font type, numeric values of color choices, line spacing, use of B&W versions, acceptable variations, etc.). Larger communities and institutions such as universities often develop style manual to standardize many details associated with the use of a logo and tag line.

The opportunity to create new logo and brand can be especially significant in the context of attracting/retaining talented workers in today's more innovation-based economy. An outdated logo, tag line and general identity can hamper efforts to build a more positive community image that supports a sense of economic opportunity and potential. Since community logos and tag lines can reach thousands of people in a single day (even in a small community), there are important opportunities to create (and reinforce) positive impressions on both residents and visitors.