

Downtown Promotion Reporter

Branding

Discover and develop your brand

“Every downtown, town, village, and city has a brand. Whether you want it to or not, it already has one. There’s something in people’s minds about it,” says Dennis Erokan, president and CEO of the Placemaking Group, which specializes in marketing cities, commercial real estate, travel destinations, and entertainment.

“So then the next step is, if you have plans for growing the equity of the properties, or some ideas for what you want to achieve with your town, then it’s time to start thinking in terms of doing something about the brand,” he says. “Making the brand positive. Making it exciting, maybe, or comforting. Whatever it is, come up with some clear vision of what your downtown is going to be,” he says.

The process of discovering downtown’s brand can be as different in each case as the downtowns are themselves. This is illustrated in the Placemaking Group’s work with the Napa Downtown Association, Napa, CA (pop. 72,590), and the City of Fairfield, CA (pop. 96,180), which is recruiting businesses and has a downtown to improve in preparation for its marketing.

Branding downtown is a matter of analysis and critical thinking

“In the case of the town of Napa, the downtown area was always the also-ran,” Erokan says. “It was second-fiddle to Napa Valley. It just happens to have one of the most famous names of any town in America. But really, the Valley is what everybody knows about.”

In looking at the strengths and weaknesses in preparing to market the downtown, “one of the things we came

up with was the fact that downtown Napa has as many Zagat-rated restaurants for a given number of square blocks as San Francisco does. If that’s the case, then we’ve got something to talk about,” he says.

“So what we started talking about was the fact that, ‘Sure, you’re going to go to Napa Valley and spend a number of hours looking at the wineries and tasting wine. But you also want to come back to have dinner in downtown Napa.’ Once you get that into people’s brains, everything else starts to play through.”

That is, once people come downtown for its fine restaurants, they’ll tend to visit shops next door, and find out that there are some very nice bed and breakfast houses and hotels downtown.

“Everything starts to play out of the concept that when you are going to the Napa Valley, where you want to have dinner is downtown Napa,” he says.

Reflecting the change in thinking about how Napa Downtown should be positioned, a tagline displayed on its old website was “Where the Valley Begins.” This suggests it was the place to start a wine tasting journey, but not come back to for dinner.

A tagline at the revamped website is more inviting and cozier: “The Hometown of the World’s Most Celebrated Wine Region.”

Similarly, two of its press release headlines this year draw attention to downtown, not the Valley: “Napa Downtown Swoons with Romantic Notions for Valentine’s Day Celebrations” and “Napa Downtown is a Day Tripper’s Delight.”

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Implementation of this strategy through PR and other marketing efforts, Erokan says, “is already starting to have an effect in terms of people really thinking that. That’s the kind of thing that any town can do, as long as they just start *thinking* about it.”

A brand is more discovered than invented, but must still be nurtured and focused

“Generally, if you’re trying to build a brand, it has to be discovered. Because no one has enough money to invent the brand for a town. There’s just too much infrastructure already in place, and too many people already there,” Erokan says.

“If you were starting a downtown from scratch, you can invent the brand. But if not, it has to be discovered. And nurtured. Once you get the specific idea for the brand, there’s going to be plenty of individuals and organizations that are not going to feel completely congruent with that idea,” he says.

“So once you discover the brand, it’s even more effort to then play through — to make sure that most everybody is onboard with it. While a brand is discovered, meaning it’s already there, it still has to be nurtured, it has to be fine-tuned, and it has to be focused.”

Research to ensure downtown’s brand gives people the right ideas

It’s also important to reality-check the results of branding and marketing efforts. That is, test how well the brand plays before investing in it.

For example, “Fairfield has had a really good city government. They know what they’re doing. They’ve got their multiyear plan in place. But one of the things that they had come up with was a tagline which is ‘Fairfield: The sweet spot between San Francisco and Sacramento.’”

Local officials were hoping that this would focus people’s minds on what Fairfield is. But what came up very clearly through brand research was that “saying that you’re ‘the sweet spot between San Francisco and Sacramento’ sounded like you’re in the middle of nowhere. That’s what people were thinking. No one knew where Fairfield is. It seemed like it’s really far away,” the marketer says.

What’s more, businesses in Sacramento weren’t found to be interested in relocating to Fairfield. “It was the people in the Bay Area that were interested in what Fairfield has to offer, if they just knew where Fairfield is,” Erokan says.

So a new tagline is more specific about where this

town is located. Following that change as well as a new website and PR to implement the revised brand message, “a lot of businesses are calling and wanting to move in.”

Now, the city is focusing on how it will improve the appearance of its downtown. The next task will be determining how downtown will be marketed once aesthetic upgrades have been made.

Downtown marketing should begin no sooner than as good changes start to occur, Erokan says. “You can start talking about it as the refurbishing is going on, or months before, if there is a timetable for all of that to happen. If not, you want to wait until it’s done, and then you start talking about it.”

Get property owners in alignment

In a lot of ways, downtown marketing is not very different from other forms of place-based marketing. The essential challenge that’s especially acute downtown, however, lies in building consensus among property owners. The mayor, city council,

Once downtown finds the brand that fits, then what?

Downtown marketing is a complex production that requires well-coordinated teamwork to succeed, says Dennis Erokan, CEO, Placemaking Group.

“The first thing you’ve got to do is, make sure you have a website” that is focused just on downtown and has its own URL or Web address.

“In this day and age, without a website, you’ve got no way of people really accessing you from a distance,” he says.

“The next thing is making sure that there’s a PR campaign that is out there, warming everything up. Start with PR to get people talking about downtown, and then switch over to advertising once you’ve got an awareness built up.”

Third, wayfinding signs in downtown have to reflect the brand or image you’re working with.

Special events don’t have to all be large, but should be frequent, he adds. “The best thing is to have a calendar that looks really full” year round. “And the events have to make sense to the image of the downtown that you’re trying to portray. You have to think through that also, and make sure that what you’ve decided to do resonates with the brand.”

steering committee, and property owners all have to be on the same side for downtown marketing to take root.

“The property owners in the area have to be aligned as to what the point of all this is,” Erokan says. “What has to happen is, the downtown has to *look* like a downtown. It has to look like an inviting, exciting, interesting downtown. That’s the first step. The second step is then doing the marketing.”

“The essential thing with a downtown is that the property owners are in line, that they all want this to happen. It’s not enough for just the retail stores on the ground floor to want this to happen. It’s got to be the property owners also. Because in a lot of cases, there’s going to be [a need] for new facades. And definitely new signage.”

Set the stage, rehearse the cast

To use an analogy, marketing “downtown is like doing a Broadway show. You’ve got to have every piece of it in place,” Erokan says. “The stage has to be set, meaning the landscape has to be there, the architecture has to be buffed up or played with, the people have to be in place in terms of the owners of the businesses wanting this to happen and talking it up. In other words, you’ve got to have the cast, the stage set, and the basic idea,” which means discover-

ing downtown’s brand and then talking it up.

“You can’t talk it up without the incremental pieces of it. Like ensuring that every single person that works downtown understands what’s going on there,” he says. “An important part of making this happen is that the people that work downtown in the stores, shops, and other businesses have to be part of the cast. They’ve got to be able to talk it up.”

Some downtowns make the mistake of marketing themselves before they’re ready for showtime.

“Do they have the pieces in place? Do they have a really clear understanding of what the brand is going to be? I think you can start talking about the brand before all the facades are built or painted, if you know that they’re going to be done during the course of this year. If you start talking about the brand and you keep saying, ‘It’s going to happen in the year 2014,’ that’s a little less exciting.”

Once downtown puts its message together and is willing to do the work that needs to be done, all else falls into place. “There are ways of setting the image in people’s minds. You just have to understand what it is and then be willing to do it,” he says.

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