



JUMPING ON THE BRANDWAGON: How To Give Your City A Motto Makeover In 10 Easy Steps

By Eric Swartz

So you're thinking of creating a new slogan and brand identity for your city...

Join the club. The entire country is caught up in a frenzy of sloganeering. More than 80 percent of towns with populations greater than 25,000 either have a motto or are attempting to develop a new one.

The surge in branding can be attributed, in large part, to our friends in Las Vegas, whose daring motto, "*What Happens Here, Stays Here*," hit the national airwaves in 2001 and shows no signs of abating. Of course, it helps if you're blessed with a towering budget, an endless supply of neon lights, and hordes of tourists who are admitted adrenaline junkies.

Other big cities that have jumped on the *brandwagon* to polish their image include the likes of Cleveland ("*Cleveland Rocks!*"), Omaha ("*O!*"), Atlanta ("*Every Day is an Opening Day*"), San Diego ("*City with Sol*"), and Atlantic City ("*Always Turned On*"). They have launched city-wide campaigns to help sell their new brand message and make it stick. The results so far have been favorable and city fathers are relieved. Projects of this magnitude are usually accompanied by a fair amount of anguish and nagging doubts, especially when detractors start chomping at the bit. After all, a city's pride and reputation are at stake.

City Branding Isn't For Sissies

To put it bluntly, branding isn't for sissies. Big cities can expect to spend nine months to a year in brand development and several more years promoting their *brandiwork*. They also have to contend with lots of stakeholders, such as city officials, neighborhood leaders, corporate sponsors, downtown redevelopers, the Convention & Visitors Bureau, and the Chamber of Commerce. Oh, and let's not forget the opinions of vocal city residents and members of the press who weigh in throughout the entire process.

So if branding is painful, protracted, and perilous, why do cities do it? Why don't they keep their old motto? Why can't they simply quote that cool Latin inscription on their official seal? What difference does a brand new slogan really make?

Well, I'm here to tell you...it makes a huge difference. A slogan is a valuable ambassador. When conceived correctly, it can reflect a city's style and personality, leverage its assets, and communicate a compelling message. Think of it as urban renewal without having to pass a bond measure.

Every city is unique, possessing both positive and negative perceptions. It has a history, a culture, and a constituency. The key to effective branding is to embrace an appealing slogan that promises an experience that can't be duplicated anywhere else. A good slogan is just the tip of the iceberg, an exclamation point at the end of a municipal pitch to the world at large.

Cities that succeed in incorporating their refurbished brand message into their campaigns and advertising creative provide the impetus for attracting visitors, retirees, home builders, and investors, which, in turn, helps generate greater tourism, tax revenue, unity, and goodwill.

Cleveland's motto makeover is a case in point. After 30 years of living with the shameful moniker, *"The Mistake on the Lake,"* and the ever-so-brief, yawn-inducing slogan, *"America's Comeback City,"* it has emerged with its self-esteem intact and is now enjoying renewed pride and optimism largely inspired by its new slogan, *"Cleveland Rocks!"* Cleveland has fast become a popular destination for the rockers and the Dockers® set, and its brand barometer has never looked brighter.

Preparing Your Motto Makeover

Your city's motto is the focal point of your brand message. It tells a story, your story. It should be succinct, positive, original, and memorable. It should be believable (this is who we are), but it can also aspire to be something bigger and greater (this is how we're evolving).

Mottos can be humorous (*"Experience Our Sense of Yuma" – Yuma, AZ*); alliterative (*"Livable, Lovable Lodi"*); quaint (*"Where the Trout Leap on Main Street" – Saratoga, WY*); clever (*"There's More Than Meets the Arch" – St. Louis, MO*); disarming (*"It's Not the End of the Earth, but You Can See It from Here" – Bushnell, SD*), or rhyme (*"Where Nature Smiles for Seven Miles," – Spring Lake, MI*). Whatever motto you select, it reflects on you and vice-versa. Think of it as a robe you put on that fits well, feels good, looks great, and makes the right impression.

Since your motto competes with others in the municipal, regional, and national marketplace, it should also be strikingly unique so that it stands out in a crowd.

In the long run, you need a solid strategy for not only developing a motto, but also promoting it and communicating its value. A motto is just part of an overall brand awareness program that your town's citizens and the rest of the world will judge by its clarity, consistency, and creativity.

The Ten Steps to Successful Sloganeering

As a public service, I have identified 10 easy steps that any city or town can follow, regardless of size, budget, or inclination, to ensure that its branding and sloganeering process is satisfying and successful. Here we go:

Step #1: Build Your Case

To kick off a city branding project, you need top-down and grass-roots buy-in. The officials who control the budget will want to know why re-branding is necessary. Be prepared to give them a good answer. Conduct a brand audit to benchmark your current thinking and build consensus. As you move forward, try to obtain pro-bono support from a leading ad agency and donations from a few local corporations. Assemble a plan, a timetable, and a set of expectations. Refer to the branding success of other cities and focus on bottom-line results. Start thinking like a brand manager...not a city manager.

Step #2: Don't Be Afraid to Re-brand

Okay, so you have a tired, worn-out slogan that's negative, unoriginal, boring, and trite - and it doesn't do justice to your fair city. Well, then, do something about it! If companies can re-invent themselves with exciting new slogans, so can you. Perceptions change and you can find yourself in a rut very quickly. You don't need to spend millions on urban redevelopment to have an excuse to re-brand – just a strong belief shared by others that your slogan is no longer channeling your city's *mojo*.

Give your citizens something to rally around. Give them a new battle cry. Create a new platform for delivering an enduring message that expresses confidence and shows some attitude. Who remembers Las Vegas's former motto, *"Las Vegas Loves Visitors?"* That's ancient history. The city re-branded itself and never looked back.

Step #3: Test the Waters

Brainstorm as much as possible. Solicit opinions and ideas from newspaper readers and all of your key stakeholders. Organize their responses in a meaningful way and ask your agency to help you sort, craft, and polish them. Narrow down the best slogans to a manageable list. For a reality check, do a little focus group testing. Feedback is always invaluable. Be sure to determine in advance who will make the final selection of your motto – a branding committee or the results of a city-wide contest. In some instances, a branding committee will select three to five mottos and then ask city residents to vote on them.

Step #4: Focus on Brand Attributes

What are your town's assets and attractions? What words best describe its past, present, and future? Focus on slogan attributes that illustrate your town's brand character (traditional or innovative), style (colorful or understated), tone (informative or imaginative) affinity (Main Street or Wall Street), and personality (playful or serious). What core values are ingrained in your town's culture? Be sure to survey the competition (e.g., other cities and other slogans) for added perspective.

Step #5: Make Your Slogan Specific

Me-too, cookie-cutter slogans are a dime a dozen. If you borrow another city's brand style, personality, or message, you're selling your town down the river. What are you proud of? What are you known for? Are you merely the gateway to someplace else or is there a there, there? Too many towns have generic mottos or monikers that sound notoriously alike ("*America's Hometown*," "*A Great Place to Live*," "*A Place to Call Home*," etc.). Don't go down that road. Instead, you can:

- Honor your hometown hero: "*Birthplace of Johnny Cash*" – Kingsland, AR
- Confer a title upon your town: "*Goat Ropin' Capital of the World*" – Gotebo, OK
- Emphasize something unique: "*Home of the Candy Dance*" – Genova, NV
- Play up a weird attraction: "*The World's Largest Chee-to*" – Algona, IA
- Make an unusual claim: "*The Poison Oak Capital of the World*" – Forestville, CA

Step #6: Turn Your Brand Into an Ambassador

Your slogan is your brand ambassador. People experience your brand every time one of their five senses comes in contact with it. Your job is to package the most positive impressions that comprise their experience, and then brand it for them. "*The Sweetest Place on Earth*," the motto of Hershey, PA, is a perfect example. Its brand image and message capture the joy and happiness that people feel when they experience chocolate.

As your brand ambassador, use your slogan to make your town more appealing. Is it a fun place to visit? What are the benefits of living there? Does your motto inspire us to learn more about your town? A good brand ambassador hits all the emotional touchpoints.

Step #7: Keep Your Brand Visible

More than 80 percent of the web sites of the 50 largest U.S. cities don't even mention their official slogans, which just goes to show how little thought they give to their own branding. Too often, a city will spend months on brand development and then fail to make its new slogan and logo a visible part of its communications. Make sure your new brand identity is front and center on business cards, brochures, e-mail messages, and the home page of the Web sites that promote your city (e.g., city government, Chamber of Commerce, Convention & Visitors Bureau, etc.).

Strive for synergy and consistency among these sites, especially a common look and feel in the treatment of your logo, slogan, and city colors. The creation of a style guide will help achieve this. Finally, give some thought to turning your slogan into a web site address, such as Charlottesville's www.soveryrvirginia.com, which takes you straight to its C&VB site. Now that's branding!

Step #8: Tell a Compelling Story

It's the story behind the slogan and the theme that drives it that gives it "legs." It should be told and re-told with conviction and enthusiasm. Since your stakeholders are your strategic partners and strongly invested in the outcome, get them on board from the get-go. Early adopters make the best evangelists. When it's time to announce your slogan publicly, make sure you inform your team how and when you're going to roll out the new brand message. Make sure they have the talking points they need to help promote your program. You also may want to take a few members of the press into your confidence. Whatever else you do, publicize, publicize, publicize!

Step #9: Devise an Integrated Marketing Plan

The first six months after you announce your brand identity and new slogan are the most critical. Many people will be in a state of shock; others will be totally nonplussed; and there are those who will write nasty letters to the editor and turn your fresh new branding into rancid lunchmeat. Don't worry, this is normal. You don't have to embrace these opinions, but you can rise above it all with a carefully-planned and well-honed market strategy.

An agency can provide expert guidance and the necessary overview if you're planning to mount a communications campaign that involves print, radio, or TV advertising; collateral development; e-mail marketing; and web messaging, as well as the creation of signage for billboards, buses, and downtown banners. An integrated marketing plan is designed

to work multiple channels for maximum effect, leveraging all of your resources under one branding umbrella.

Over the past year, the city of Omaha has enjoyed great success at promoting its new brand identity and slogan, embodied dramatically in a bright, eye-catching red logo. The “O!” has popped up on street corners, public buildings, local businesses, festival streamers, and even election stickers. Merchandise emblazoned with it can be purchased online, and city residents are encouraged to submit photos of “O!” sightings to www.ososurprising.com.

Despite the uneasy comparisons with *Oprah*, *Oxygen*, and *Overstock.com*, the city of Omaha has played the branding game with a lot of smarts – partnering with key stakeholders in the management of its brand awareness campaign, integrating its message across complementary web sites, and encouraging the entire community to get more involved and embrace the spirit and surprise of “O!”

Step #10: Think Beyond City Limits

City mottos were not meant to change with every passing mayoral administration. If they did, they wouldn’t address what is universal and timeless about your town. They would simply serve as a convenient catchphrase to spur, at best, downtown economic growth. When you sit down with your creative folks, focus on things like vision and values and the qualities that define your city’s greatness. That’s the level on which you should communicate.

There are no absolutes, no right or wrong answers in the branding game. When all is said and done, success in branding is measured by the integrity of the concept that underlies your main message. It’s the bridge that lets you reconcile the experience of your city with the expression of its message. Remember, your city’s motto is more than just a calling card; it’s a special invitation. So treat it like one.

Summary

In the last five years or so, sloganeering has become a popular way to spruce up or overhaul city image and brand identity. Most efforts have succeeded: mottos are being crafted more cleverly and competitively, and are being promoted in creative and compelling ways. More importantly, they’re treated as an integral part of an ongoing branding and communications campaign designed to raise awareness and crystallize public opinion.

However, those cities under pressure from various camps to refresh their message and update their slogan need to step back and ask themselves, “Is it really necessary to re-brand?”

The pros and cons should be weighed carefully based on shifts in the political, economic, cultural, and competitive climate. *Caveat civitas*: branding requires more time and effort than a simple roll of the device. Just ask Las Vegas.

Of course, if the slogan-savvy town twenty miles down the pike is siphoning off much-needed tourism dollars, there’s probably sufficient reason to ramp up your branding lickety-split and play some old-fashioned hardball.

One thing is for sure, city branding is here to stay. As long as we’re influenced and inspired by iconic ideas and expressions, mottos and monikers will continue to strike our fancy, capture our imagination, and resonate in our lives. The good ones have staying power. They move and inspire us. They make us think and laugh. They guide our vacation planning.

Rome wasn’t built in a day. Either are the best slogans. Since all branding is local, make sure the roads you take lead back to your home town.

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