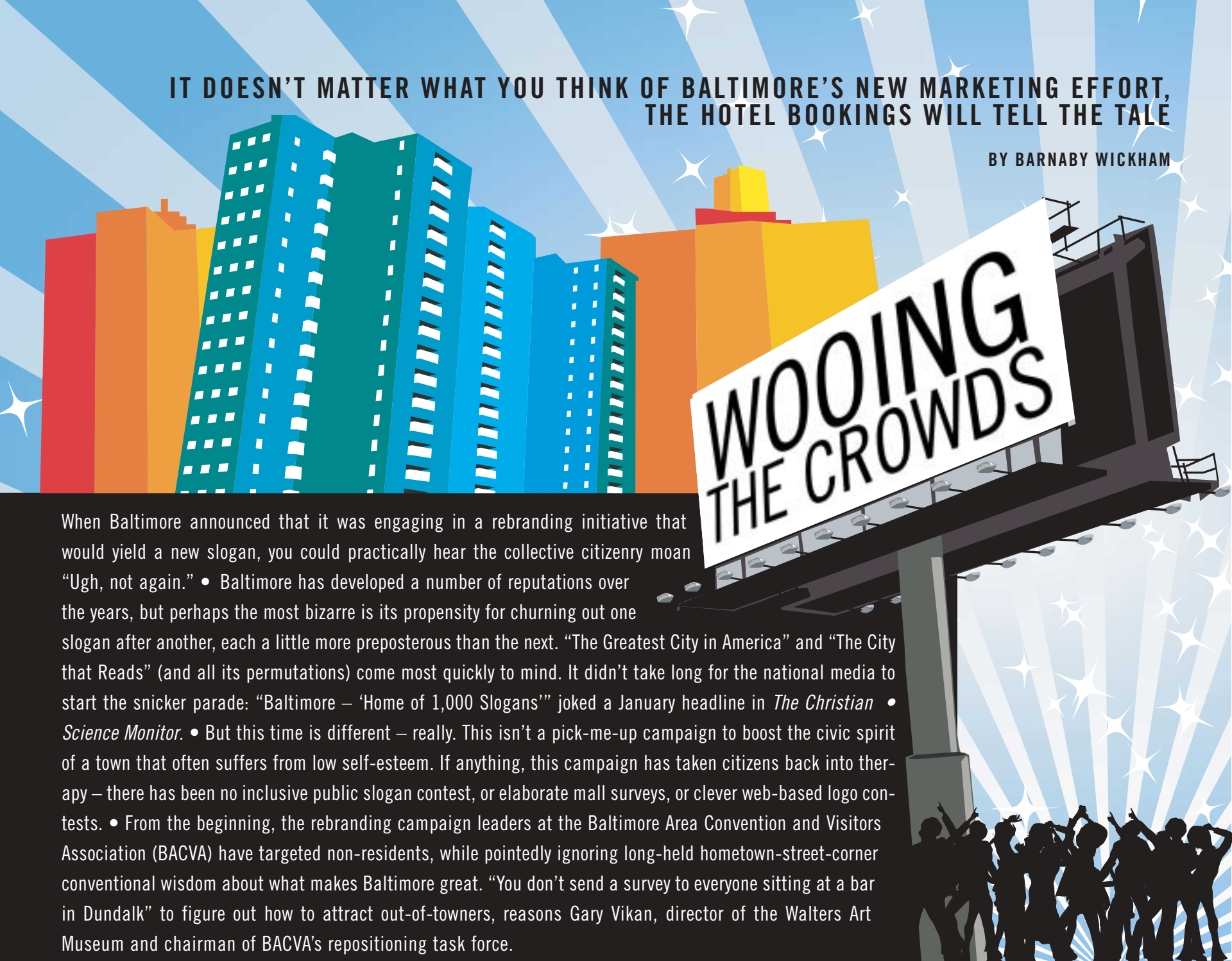


# IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOU THINK OF BALTIMORE'S NEW MARKETING EFFORT, THE HOTEL BOOKINGS WILL TELL THE TALE

BY BARNABY WICKHAM



When Baltimore announced that it was engaging in a rebranding initiative that would yield a new slogan, you could practically hear the collective citizenry moan “Ugh, not again.” • Baltimore has developed a number of reputations over the years, but perhaps the most bizarre is its propensity for churning out one slogan after another, each a little more preposterous than the next. “The Greatest City in America” and “The City that Reads” (and all its permutations) come most quickly to mind. It didn’t take long for the national media to start the snicker parade: “Baltimore – ‘Home of 1,000 Slogans’” joked a January headline in *The Christian Science Monitor*. • But this time is different – really. This isn’t a pick-me-up campaign to boost the civic spirit of a town that often suffers from low self-esteem. If anything, this campaign has taken citizens back into therapy – there has been no inclusive public slogan contest, or elaborate mall surveys, or clever web-based logo contests. • From the beginning, the rebranding campaign leaders at the Baltimore Area Convention and Visitors Association (BACVA) have targeted non-residents, while pointedly ignoring long-held hometown-street-corner conventional wisdom about what makes Baltimore great. “You don’t send a survey to everyone sitting at a bar in Dundalk” to figure out how to attract out-of-towners, reasons Gary Vikan, director of the Walters Art Museum and chairman of BACVA’s repositioning task force.

## DUE DILIGENCE

For positioning guidance for this tourism-boosting campaign, BACVA asked tourism research firm Longwoods International to apply a strongly quantitative approach that had a heavy external component. Along with 30 one-on-one interviews of key bigwigs in the city, Longwoods sent out 1,000 mail surveys to consumers within a 250-mile radius of Baltimore, 535 of which were returned.

The results were stunning: Baltimore rated well among those who had visited (12 million of which did in 2005), and poorly among those who hadn’t. Longwoods said it had never seen such a disparity in scores. Talk about an urban marketer’s dream scenario. “That was our big ‘aha’ – that means Baltimore has the goods,” says

Susan Palombo, director of brand strategy at Landor Associates, the New York destination branding consultant that worked with Longwoods and led the project. From there, it is simply an effort to close the “perception gap.”

But how? What differentiates Baltimore from larger and better-known east coast cities? Landor, which has also branded Hong Kong, Florida, and Altoids mints, convened focus groups in the key feeder markets of Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and northern New Jersey to find what “attributes make Baltimore, Baltimore,” says Palombo.

What they found would make the shoulders of a native slump. The generic, antiseptic, national-chain-heavy Inner Harbor is the only thing that registers. Deep in his heart a Baltimorean

knows this to be true: Who could forget their first glimpse of the teeming Inner Harbor masses during a sweltering summer Saturday in July?

“I was really surprised actually that our history and heritage didn’t resonate with visitors,” says BACVA’s VP of marketing and Baltimore native Margot Amelia of the focus groups. “I was surprised they didn’t have any idea of Ft. McHenry. We heard people say ‘Well Baltimore doesn’t have any history.’ It’s really kind of appalling.”

Similarly, beloved quirky neighborhoods don’t make the radar screen. “We love our neighborhoods, but they don’t think about them, although they may visit them,” Amelia says.

Fortunately, the same ignorance applies to something for which city

boosters have always rung their hands: Baltimore’s reputation for violence, fueled by gritty shows like “Homicide: Life on the Streets” and “The Wire.” “Not one person mentioned them [in the focus groups],” maintains Amelia.

“Concern about safety is way down there,” marvels Vikan. “If it weren’t so, why is New Orleans the number three tourist destination, or whatever it is. It’s a lot like buying cars; it’s not a rational decision.”

An affinity for only the Inner Harbor actually made the brand formation relatively easy. Focus group responses painted a picture of a fun and laid-back waterside destination that is easy to get to and navigate. “Our competitive market is brutal – New York, Washington, DC and Philadelphia,”

notes Vikan. “Baltimore is the only city in our market where hotels and major attractions are all within walking distance.”

## SLOGANEERING

Curious then that the resulting nine-letter slogan – “Get in on it” – isn’t more specific. Of the finalists – which included “All city, no hurry,” “The city you savor,” and “Breeze into Baltimore” – it’s the one most easily transferred to any other city – “Get in on it – Albany” or “Get in on it – Tampa.” After all, what city doesn’t imagine it’s experiencing a renaissance.

City branding veterans will all tell you that the slogan is only a small piece of the pie, and that its importance is overstated. That said, the tagline is the most visible part of any city campaign and a lightning rod for criticism. In that light, we too will give it the once over. To help, we consulted Eric Swartz, the self-anointed “Tagline Guru.” Swartz’s website (taglineguru.com) ranks old and new city slogans and monikers in over 20 categories; Baltimore placed second in the “Big Wup” category, with “The city that reads.”

The verdict on the new slogan? He doesn’t hate it. “They’ve had worse,” he says. “It says that we know something

that you don’t know. It’s intriguing, beckoning. If they don’t get in on it, they’re missing out on it. It’s a slogan that does need marketing and branding to explain what ‘it’ means. They have to explain the ‘it’ and differentiate it from other cities.”

Swartz says the best slogan is a distillation of a vision. “It works on many different levels and many different layers,” he says. “It’s not just the text but the context and the subtext.” Everyone’s favorite – including Swartz – is Las Vegas’ “What happens here, stays here.” Abandoning a failed attempt to market the city as a family-friendly destination, Las Vegas has found phenomenal success by alluding to its Sin City reputation. Vikan is also a fan of their outward emphasis: “The people in Vegas don’t like it [the slogan], but who gives a shit,” he says.

Other Swartz favorites include Omaha’s “Rare. Well done.” and San Diego’s “City with sol” (replacing an O’Malleyesque “America’s finest city”). He even takes his hat off to his San Francisco home. “Only in San Francisco” goes both ways, sarcastically and straight. It appeals to everyone.”

Ironically, as a boutique shop, Swartz doesn’t work much with cities, who generally want a more sizable part-

ner. Ninety-five percent of his sloganeering is with corporations and non-profits. And while the marketing of the slogan is “very different,” Swartz says slogan development is quite similar in both arenas.

He’ll start by administering his brand audit questionnaire to internal constituents to synthesize the personality, character, tone, and affinity of a company or product. From there, he’ll develop 15 or 20 slogans for each of three or four ideas. After a couple rounds with the client, the list will be winnowed down to 5-7 finalists. The winner is generally the one that doesn’t conflict with another at the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office, has a suitable available URL, has marketing and promotional capability, and has that unknown something special. “To have legs it has to transcend common experience,” says Swartz.

## LOGO: LACKING PATRIOTISM

After the slogan, the logo is the next most visible part of a campaign. Again, Baltimore’s choice was driven almost entirely by target market feedback. Six logos were presented to focus groups in Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and northern New Jersey, and the campaign logo was the clear winner. “You have to

sit behind the glass to see how people respond to it,” assures Amelia.

“I’ll be honest, this was not my favorite logo,” she says of the 14-icon image that includes a dinosaur, shark, and baseball cap. Each icon is meant to refer to a particular attraction (dinosaur = Maryland Science Center, shark = National Aquarium, and so on), but also a lot more. For example, the baseball cap represents Oriole Park at Camden Yards, but is also meant to evoke a “casual youthful attitude,” says Amelia.

The blue, green, and orange logo is certainly a contrast to surrounding cities, which all try to out-patriot each other, with red, white, and blue color schemes interplaying with a liberty bell, statue of liberty, or American flag. “It truly does differentiate us as the colorful, vibrant city we are,” says Amelia.

## COMPETITIVE FIELD

For the longest time, Baltimore didn’t get in on it. Part of the reason BACVA is making a lot of right steps, is because it was so late to the game. Just as states that were late to deregulate their electricity generally did a better job at it, Baltimore had a lot of case studies from which to learn.

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, most cities and states

# BUMPER STICKERS: A COMPARISON

What’s the saying? “Don’t knock it, if you haven’t tried to walk a mile in those shoes?” Something like that. When we received the press kit from BACVA for the “Get In On It” campaign, it included two bumper stickers that none of us felt especially inclined to slap on our cars. It didn’t feel quite like Baltimore to us. As the above story explains, BACVA’s mission is not to woo the locals, but who else would plaster a Baltimore bumper sticker on their vehicle?

Of course, criticism is easy. There’s no sticking out of one’s neck. We had seen what \$1.2 million, focus groups, research and international branding consultants could produce over seven months time. We humbly wondered what could a few proud Baltimoreans produce with virtually no time, no market research and no budget?

I selected a slogan volunteered to us by one of our readers, Rob MacDonald, pres-

ident of Smith Content: “Harbor Your Dreams in Baltimore.” I then asked our design department to think of how best to design a bumper sticker. They quickly agreed the phrase needed an understated presentation and chose to use a soft blue to convey water and warmth. They talked about how Baltimore’s neighborhoods are underappreciated. They wanted a font to convey that Baltimore’s waterfront has every bit as much class and charm as its cousin to the south, Annapolis. In a tip of the hat to Fort McHenry, they chose as the lone symbol, a star, reflecting a moment when Francis Scott Key sat in Baltimore Harbor dreaming of our country’s future while poetically marveling at its present.

If you like the sticker, let *SmartCEO* publisher Craig Burris know and maybe he’ll have some printed. They’d make a good handout at our 5th Anniversary party in September, don’t you think?

went all out to attract retrenched business and leisure travelers. Most regions couldn't afford not to. In Baltimore, for example, tourism contributes \$3 billion to the local economy, generating \$948 million in tax revenue and supporting 79,000 jobs; only healthcare and education employ more people.

One of the most aggressive at luring visitors was Philadelphia, which by September 24, 2001 had announced a new \$3 million campaign aimed at leisure travelers. Out of that came the "Philly's more fun when you sleep over" campaign, which mercifully replaced the trying-too-hard "The city that loves you back."

The new campaign, coupled with limited-time reduced hotel rates that were equivalent to a second night free, had a profound effect. "At the time it was the most successful post-September 11 recovery program – it yielded 30,000 hotel room nights," says Cara Schneider, spokeswoman for the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC). Since then, Philadelphia has continued to build on the brand, adding the taglines "Philly's more fun when you stay up late" and "Philly's more fun with Salvador Dali" to highlight the Philadel-

phia Museum of Art exhibit in 2005.

(But even Philadelphia lays eggs: the city rolled out the lame "Philly's Got Benergy" for the 300th anniversary celebration of Benjamin Franklin's birth.)

The reason Philadelphia was so quick to react to the chilling effect of the 2001 terrorist attacks was that it had already established a progressive approach to attracting tourists. The private, non-profit GPTMC was established in 1996 with the sole purpose of luring leisure travelers to the five-county region centered on Philadelphia.

Bold niche marketing initiatives followed. In 2003, the City of Brotherly Love was the first city to introduce a gay-themed campaign, headlined by the "Get your history straight and your nightlife gay" slogan. By 2004, gay Philadelphia tourists were spending on average 30 percent more per person than they had been the year before.

For the city's "Philly's more fun when you sleep over" campaign, GPTMC stretched limited resources in Baltimore by only advertising in targeted black communities. "It was a very good match for us," says Schneider.

The target varied but the call to action of the advertising was always the

same: surf to gophilla.com and check out the hotel packages. According to independent research, GPTMC has been very effective: the Greater Philadelphia region scored an impressive 55 percent gain in overnight leisure visitation between 1997 and 2005.

Notable is that leisure hotel nights and spending account for the bulk of visitor impact, according to Philadelphia-commissioned research. In 2004, visitors spent \$6.8 billion in the Greater Philadelphia region, an estimated \$4.01 billion of which is attributed to leisure travelers. Going forward, this advantage will only likely increase as businesses continue to find ways to forgo time-consuming and expensive travel.

Compared to GPTMC, BACVA operates at a distinct disadvantage. It is responsible for attracting leisure as well as convention/event traffic, making tightly targeted branding more difficult. Leisure travelers don't give a with about

hotel conference rooms, while business travelers generally aren't toting their thrill-seeking kids. Amelia says the eventual brand position minimized those differences. "It was amazing that both markets responded to both elements [of the campaign] – the unique expanding waterfront and easy access. We knew we were on to something when that happened," she says.

#### MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

The next stages of the branding initiative will be crucial to the success of the campaign. "An average 'B', 'B-minus' slogan that is marketed well is better than an 'A' slogan that isn't," says sloganeer Swartz. "It's about getting the word out to the people who need to hear it." Swartz was surprised to find during his informal review of the websites of the 50 largest cities in the U.S., that 80 percent have no mention of their city's slogan.

## HISTORY OF BALTIMORE SLOGANS, MOTTOS, AND MONIKERS

1827: **"MONUMENT CITY"** *Bestowed by John Quincy Adams in an 1827 visit.*

Early 1880s: **"MOBTOWN"** *Name given Baltimore due to street riots in 1812, instigated by the decision to make war on Britain.*

Early 1960s: **"LAND OF PLEASANT LIVING"** *National Beer commercial lyric referred to brew's origin. Ditty ended: "...it's brewed on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay."*

1974: **"CHARM CITY"** *Created by adman Bill Evans at the behest of then-mayor William Donald Schaefer. Prior to "Get in on it," most recent tourism-focused campaign. Well received by locals but didn't resonate with visitors.*

1975: **"BALTIMORE IS BEST"** *Another Schaefer contribution, program recognized prominent and not-so-prominent citizens that made city great.*

1987: **"THE CITY THAT READS"** *Introduced by former mayor Kurt Schmoke on inauguration night, campaign never made much of a dent in city's illiteracy rate.*

1999: **"DIGITAL HARBOR"** *Coined by chair of Baltimore County Technology Council and promoted by developer C. William Streuver in association with his American Can Company and Tide Point redevelopments.*

2000: **"THE GREATEST CITY IN AMERICA"** *Created by Mayor Martin O'Malley. Even Schaefer says it is "over the top."*

2001: **"BE...BECOME...BEGIN IN BALTIMORE"** *Part of campaign developed by trend forecaster Faith Popcorn for \$275,000 that aimed to attract younger people to the city.*

2002: **"BELIEVE"** *\$2.1 million initiative began as an effort to engage citizens in the fight against drugs, and matured into a civic pride campaign.*

Others of unknown date of origin: *Crabtown, Clipper City, Nickel Town, Queen City of the Patapsco*

In June, BACVA spent \$700,000 to run two television and two radio spots in the Philadelphia and Washington, DC markets that featured a hip-hop-lite rendition of "Get in on it" that was developed by Baltimore advertising agency Carton Donofrio Partners Inc. (The third targeted feeder market – northern New Jersey – was mostly excluded due to its expense.) Far from cutting edge, the foot-tap-inducing jingle is clearly aimed at the 34-65 year old women who BACVA says are the summer leisure travel decision makers.

The video features ordinary citizens and downtown workers instead of celebrities because, you guessed it, focus groups didn't associate any one star with the city. Amelia says that of local celebrities, Cal Ripken Jr. would be the best fit for the campaign. (As former manager of the \$40 million Choice Hotels International account for Gray Kirk Vansant Advertising – remember the celebrity popping out of the suitcase? – Amelia is an authority in celebrity advertising.) Other city star endorsers include Jimmy Carter (Atlanta), Kevin Bacon (Philadelphia), and George Lopez (Los Angeles).

Even without the cost of a star

endorser, BACVA will run out of cash before long. Amelia says BACVA's yearly advertising budget is \$1-2 million, and that unless hotel occupancy increases (BACVA is predominantly funded from the hotel occupancy tax), additional advertising will be limited. If research conducted for Philadelphia is any indicator, advocating for increased funding for additional advertising is a no-brainer. Econsult Corporation studied three of GPTMC's "Philly's more fun" campaigns and determined that for every \$1 spent on advertising, \$13 in state and local taxes was generated. Philadelphia has spent over \$13 million so far on the campaign.

Still being developed for Baltimore is a Web-based viral marketing initiative that will "take the brand to the next level," according to Amelia. "It's really important the brand lives as a viable brand with local residents, to turn them into brand ambassadors," since 44 percent of leisure visitors are in town to visit friends and relatives. This initiative will be announced this fall and implemented in the spring and summer of 2007.

Some question whether BACVA – which had to settle for AreYouInOnIt.com due to a previous

registration of GetInOnIt.com by a California resident – can successfully manage a viral campaign. It is the type of trendy difficult-to-execute marketing technique for which large bureaucratic municipal organizations don't normally excel.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Baltimore's last attempt to be the coolest kid in class didn't end well: futurist Faith Popcorn and her then-sizzling New York-based BrainReserve took the Greater Baltimore Alliance for \$275,000 in 2001. All she left was a couple of slogans that involved the letter B and a report that mostly stated the obvious. "Key Insight No. 1" said "Greater Baltimore needs to offer conspicuously safe cities and counties, as well as diverse and affordable housing." As far as anyone knows, Baltimore was her first and last urban branding project.

Baltimore can take comfort from another city that has stumbled even worse. Indianapolis – looking to recover from the corndog "Move over New York, Apple is our middle name" of the 1980s – spent \$350,000 on a two-year campaign that is still sloganless after "The New Midwest" was scuttled. It was pulled at the last minute after the city's new

tourism CEO insisted on focus groups, which roundly panned the tagline.

Love or hate the repositioning, but give BACVA credit: it had the conviction to allot the appropriate investment (\$500,000 just for the branding), the wisdom to hire seasoned city branders, and the thick skin to stick with a campaign that inevitably takes arrows from all sides. BACVA was determined to be successful at drawing more tourists for a longer period to an area that has more often been a local daytrip than a regional destination.

"Tourism marketing is not for sissies," concludes Amelia. Unlike in the corporate world, the marketer has no control over the product, only the message. "You have to be very research driven – you have to go back to the customer. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what I think."

And in the end, with this campaign, it doesn't really matter what Baltimoreans think either. After years of esteem-building, all that matters this time is whether local hotels experience year-over-year double digit percentage increases in bookings. Any local feel-good that comes out of that is strictly accidental. **CEO**