

Rochester aims for upbeat and sassy with its new logo

The city aims to move beyond its reputation as a great place for gallbladder surgery with its new logo: "Rah Rah Rochester."

David Peterson, Star Tribune

ROCHESTER, MINN. - Rochester is rich. Rochester teems with doctors and engineers. Rochester is growing fast.

But Rochester on Wednesday made an endearing confession: It's a city that doubts itself.

Waving their arms on a stage set up on a downtown street, the city's civic leaders announced the launch of what one of them called a "monumental" campaign aimed at transforming the city's image. Under the theme "Rah Rah Rochester," the city will seek to attack both an attitude problem within its borders and an image problem beyond, where it's often known merely as a place to get world-class prostate exams and gallbladder operations.

In other words, something other than being, as some local residents wryly say, "Sick City."

The "branding" of cities has become a huge national trend, propelled in part by Las Vegas' success in recasting its image from family resort to destination for guilty fun under the tag line, "What happens here, stays here." In fact, inspired by the success of Las Vegas and other cities, Minneapolis might be mulling a new brand for itself.

But developing a city brand can be a huge risk, likely to inspire as much derision as inspiration. "It's not that hard to create something disastrous," said Eric Swartz, president of the San Francisco-based marketing firm Tagline Guru.

A recent case in point: Baltimore's "Get in on it" campaign led one city council member to sigh, "Get in on WHAT?"

Sterile impression?

Rochester's effort, 18 months in the making, is aimed in part at countering a certain municipal lack of confidence that can't help but be transmitted to others, said Brad Jones, head of the city's convention and visitors bureau.

"Research verifies what we feel ourselves," he said. "People tend to talk about what there isn't here, instead of what there is."

Research also has found, officials say, that the city's downtown, dominated by huge medical buildings, creates a "sterile" impression.

The Rah Rah Rochester campaign aims to spread the word that there's more to Rochester than Mayo and medicine.

The branding campaign's advocates say that Rochester is full of treasures such as 135 miles of uncrowded hiking and biking trails. Another trail that runs through Lanesboro, a small town in the area, is often cited as one of the state's most scenic. To help spread the message, there's a second phrase in the Rah Rah Rochester tag line: "More Than You Know."

Not everyone is keen on the new slogan. Dennis Hanson, president of the City Council, said he likes the campaign. The "rah-rah" bit made him wince a little at first, he said, but it's something

different, and it's aimed in the right direction.

"I'm not sure we need a 'new attitude' as much as a little spark in the attitude we have," he said. "Mayo quietly grows by another 500 jobs a year and not a lot of excitement comes out of here. We need a little bit of excitement."

Sassy is good

Many people expected a theme that leveraged the Mayo Clinic's renown. But Robin Mindt, vice president of Ellingsen Brady, the Milwaukee advertising agency that came up with the campaign said that approach carried its own dangers.

"We're not going to do 'Mayo-licious,' " she said. "High tech can feel cold. We wanted something upbeat, exciting, with some sass."

Officials from the Greater Minneapolis Convention and Visitors Association are keeping an eye on the Rochester branding initiative.

Rochester's challenge is not that different from that of Minneapolis and St. Paul nationally, said Shana Steidl, spokeswoman for the Visitors Association.

For the past few years, metro tourism officials have been studying what Americans know about and think about the metro area, and the answer is that "people who know, love it, but people who don't, have no clue. People think we drive to work on dogsleds."

In addition to its new riverside art center, officials in Rochester say, the city could use some new attractions. But it's a conservative place, they say.

"Half the people here read technical journals in the bathroom," said Jones. "We need to get them to loosen their ties a little. The good news is, there is no emergency; we aren't in decline. But we do have to look in the mirror a little and be ready to take things to the next level."

David Peterson • 612-673-4440

©2006 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.