***Telling the Untold Story****: Branding in Rural Communities*

Randy Wilson and Ben Muldrow

More people are living in urban areas today than ever before. However, significant portions of our population still reside in rural areas. As preservation advocates, we understand these rural areas are priceless resources worth saving and promoting. Community marketing and branding is one approach to preserving our communities and stimulating economic growth.

But what about the citizens who live and work in these rural areas? Why should they care to market and brand their communities? The simple answer is, *if we don’t brand our rural areas, everyone else will*.

Every single day, citizens, visitors, workers, and tourists brand communities, whether rural or urban, based on their experience and interaction with the community and its assets. If the community does not brand and market itself, others will do it for them…and, perhaps, without the best intentions.

When considering community branding, what is the best approach? Is the approach to branding and marketing rural communities the same as that used in urban areas? If not, what are the differences? Do we brand and market the same kinds of cultural assets or take a new direction? Finally, what are the general principles that might apply when forming a branding and marketing plan for a rural area?

**Community and Product Branding**

Before answering these questions, it is probably wise to consider the more fundamental questions: What does *community branding* mean? How does community branding differ from the branding of products and services?

One helpful way to understand the concept of community branding is to first understand traditional branding. Consider the successful brands of Starbucks, Nike, and Apple. Scott Bedbury, creator of the Starbucks brand, defines a brand as *a* *collection of perceptions in the consumer’s mind*.

What immediately comes to mind when you hear the word *Starbucks*? The aroma of coffee? A comfortable atmosphere? A round green logo with a mermaid? A friendly barista? Or perhaps something entirely different, like, “You want me to pay $4.50 for a cup of coffee?!” The point is, a brand name summons all of your past experiences with the product or service, forming an instant opinion.

Branding and marketing addresses both the promises made and experiences created by using products and services. Starbucks promises to provide a “third place” of social interaction apart from the two most common places, work and home. Nike promises to provide athletes with the equipment, accessories, and clothes necessary to reach their athletic goals. And Apple promises to deliver a seamless, user-friendly experience with technology by reducing complicated devices to their simplest forms.

A promise is hollow, however, unless it produces a positive experience. While there are certainly exceptions, most customer satisfaction surveys would reveal that these three companies have done an excellent job delivering on their promises and have garnered very faithful followings. The real magic of a brand is the reaction of individuals when they see the green mermaid of Starbucks, the swoosh symbol of Nike, or the silhouetted fruit of Apple. These logos achieve the status of universally recognized icons and evoke feelings in people about the experiences each company promises.

Although no mermaid will greet you at Starbucks, no swoosh sign can be purchased at a Nike store, and fresh fruit is not for sale at an Apple store, these icons have become an identity or “brand” that represents many positive experiences made possible by using the products and services of these companies. As such, these brands have become the dynamic expressions, or essence*,* of each company.

**Community Branding: Urban vs. Rural**

This same approach applies to branding communities, whether urban or rural. An opinion is formed based on your experience with the places, people, and cultural offerings of a community. The goal of a branding and marketing campaign is to re-tell these positive experiences in a compelling way to a broader audience, while diminishing the negative experiences (without being dishonest). Ideally, the negatives will eventually be turned to positives.

Our communities must be branded in such a way that the people, places, and events become dynamic and evoke positive feelings about the potential experiences to be had there. We must be aware of the tendency to reduce all potential experiences into a single identity that features only one aspect of the community. While there is nothing wrong with featuring a single icon, a good branding and marketing system must encompass multiple interpretations of the ever-expanding options for positive experiences within a community.

Consider the potential pitfalls if Starbucks changed its logo to a coffee cup, Nike switched its swoosh to a shoe, or Apple replaced its logo with an iPhone. While these new logos are actual examples of company products, each fails to capture, or represent, the full range of the products and services (*read: promises and experiences*) they provide. Yet how often have we seen a community represent its entire essence with a single physical icon? This single-asset approach to branding is not wrong, it is merely incomplete.

Therefore, our rural communities must be branded to represent a full range of cultural offerings and positive experiences. However, there are distinct differences between branding commercial goods and services and branding our communities. We must understand our rural communities as *assets*, *resources*, *destinations*, and *cultural offerings* rather than merely as a list of products or services. Each rural community is different, and the list of assets will change, and, one hopes, expand, based on its unique offerings.

So, how is this done in a practical way? Based on our experience with hundreds of communities, most of which are primarily rural, we have discovered the following guiding principles:

**General Recommendations**

***Understand Community.*** There is no substitute for thoroughly understanding a place prior to branding. A simple tour or single interview will not suffice. Countless hours must be spent researching, touring the area, and visiting the obvious sites, as well as places off the beaten path. One must speak with numerous individuals (in groups and one-on-one), dine in local restaurants, listen to local music, smell the smells, walk the streets, and essentially immerse oneself in the local culture. Only then can one truly understand a community and its essence.

***Redefine Cultural Assets.*** When considering rural areas, we must dismiss our usual list of what we consider “assets.” What works in an urban area might not work in a rural area. Frankly, sometimes one must look a bit harder for the compelling and unique story in a rural community. With hard work and an open mind, one will almost always uncover the intriguing “unknowns”—the beautiful edifice, the remarkable history, the fascinating rumor, the mesmerizing song, the amazing meal, the comical character, the clever craft, the famous son or daughter, etc. Individually, these “assets” might not rival a major attraction in an urban area, but taken as a whole, they weave an authentic, cultural tapestry that tells a real story.

***Determine Points of Emphasis.*** Key to branding a rural community is to establish whether to emphasize a town or region’s “hard” or “soft” assets, or both. “Hard” assets are the physical characteristics, sites, and destinations in a community. “Soft” assets are the people, culture, and practices in a community. There is no right or wrong approach; however, the decision must be made from a thorough understanding of both kinds of assets in the community.

The following example illustrate branding based on different points of emphasis.

**Emphasize Character: The Arkansas Delta**

The Arkansas Delta boasts many places of significance, but we believe its most compelling feature is the character of its people. The culture of the Arkansas Delta features what we termed a “culture of agriculture.” Namely, it is a culture wholly dependent upon the land. This agricultural lifestyle produces an attitude of resolute resiliency, forged from both good and hard times. The blues music genre, which originated from the people of the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta, best expresses this attitude of resiliency.

The cultural identity of the Delta focuses on a lifestyle united by food, family, and faith. Across 15 counties, there is a regional pride felt among the people of the Arkansas Delta, or “Deltoids,” as they refer to themselves. This sense of identity is rare in our cultural mixing bowl and made for the most compelling branding approach. The branding campaign developed from the theme “Arkansas Delta: Soil & Soul,” a direct reference to the very nature of its people, place, and “culture of agriculture.” *For more information see “Arkansas Delta Byways: Connecting the Dots” in this issue and also www.deltabyways.com. Note: The Arkansas Delta project was a National Trust for Historic Preservation Rural Heritage Development Initiative.*

**Emphasize Place: Atchafalaya, La.**

The Atchafalaya National Heritage Area is a 14-parish region of Louisiana along the Atchafalaya River Basin. In the 1950s, a massive dam and levee system was built to control the Atchafalaya River and to preserve the future flow of water down the Mississippi River to New Orleans. The levees run the entire length of the National Heritage Area, and in most places, limit access to the river.

When studying the area, it was obvious that this region (like the Arkansas Delta) was defined by its connection to the river. Although the parishes lined the river basin, the levees made it nearly impossible to actually connect with the river. Our challenge was to connect the region to the river through a marketing and branding campaign.

The separation of the river and the region spurred a study of the cultural experience that made this region distinctive. What was discovered was a place that was home to the Acadian people and the development of the Cajun culture with foods and a language all their own. From this discovery, we created the brand tagline “Atchafalaya: America’s Foreign Country

*For more information see www.atchafalaya.org. Note: The Atchafalaya project was a project of the Louisiana Atchafalaya National Heritage Area.*

**Emphasize Experience: Central Kentucky**

The Central Kentucky Rural Heritage Development Initiative is a collection of eight counties in central Kentucky between Louisville and Lexington. When branding the identity of the region, the stakeholders asked, “Why are these eight counties grouped together?” The answer became very clear after seeing the diverse range of cultural experiences from the east to the west, whether traveling the Bourbon Heritage Trail, visiting a traditional Shaker Village, touring Lincoln’s birthplace, or watching a performance of *My Old Kentucky Home*.

A visitor to these Kentucky “crossroads” can absorb the quintessential Kentucky story without ever stepping foot in the big cities to either side. This region was the perfect cross section of Kentucky and boasted many cultural assets worth preserving in their rural environs.

Understanding and embracing the rural roads was the avenue to creating a brand identity that spoke of the unique cultural experience: “Kentucky Crossroads: Where Everything Comes Together.”

*For more information see www.kycrossroadsregion.com. Note: The Kentucky Crossroads project was a National Trust for Historic Preservation Rural Heritage Development Initiative.*

**Emphasize Order: Covington County, Miss.**

A countywide branding program in rural Mississippi revealed three predominant communities that had minimal cooperative spirit. This disunity was fueled by everything from high school football rivalries to local political and economic competition. We needed a branding campaign to rally and unify the communities as well as foster a spirit of cooperation.

The first step was to search for unifying elements that existed among the communities. Internally, there seemed to be none. However, externally, three organizing elements tied the three communities together: a major roadway, a meandering river, and a historic railway. One of the communities was known for recreational opportunities on the river, another boasted a beautiful train depot and plaza, and the third was known for its boulevard along the major roadway. Therefore, the unifying brand tagline created for the county was “Rails, Rivers, Roads…Reconnect.”

After identifying the external elements that united the communities, the next step was to foster a renewed spirit of cooperation among the communities. A market analysis revealed there was virtually no cross-commerce among the communities. So, we created and designed a countywide loyalty campaign that emphasized shopping “in” Cov**IN**gton County.

**Why Community Branding?**

Let’s return to the fundamental question: *Why is branding rural areas important*? We have already established that we must brand our communities or everyone else certainly will. But, more importantly, branding helps capture the essence of our communities and communicates that message to a broader audience. The greater purpose in branding our rural communities is to build community pride, stimulate the local economy, and promote a preservation spirit that compels people to be better stewards of their culture and the place they call home.

***Randy Wilson*** *is the president of Community Design Solutions, a consulting practice committed to engaging citizens in the process of designing their communities. He also serves as the architect for the Mississippi and South Carolina Main Street programs.*

***Ben Muldrow*** *is a partner in Arnett Muldrow Associates based in Greenville, S.C. He is the community branding specialist for Arnett Muldrow and has developed brands in hundreds of communities all over America.*