Staff Report

Developing a Brand Communications Plan

January 27, 2015

BACKGROUND

At the City Council's latest goal setting workshop, staff was directed to provide information regarding the cost to the City for implementing its own branding campaign. This direction was in response to an objective under the City Council goal of promoting economic development to create a brand communication plan for Ames. Prior to providing the requested information, staff believes it would be helpful to review basic information regarding branding and, equally important, for Council to answer a few critical questions that will guide the response by staff.

The City Council should understand that there is a wide scale of possible approaches to branding our community. Options range from maintaining the ongoing efforts of the Public Relation Office in promoting Ames through partnerships (including ACVB, AEDC, Ames Chamber, ISU, MGMC, and Ames Community School District) to implementing a multi-year, consultant-led implementation plan. Just as the approaches to achieving this goal are varied, so is the potential budget.

The Ames Public Relation Official primarily focuses on ensuring that the City of Ames, as an organization, is recognized as a premier provider of municipal services in a vibrant, innovative university community. This focus provides direction for City of Ames advertising, marketing, cable television production, website content, and social media postings. **The primary audience is Ames residents and visitors, and nearly all communications use local resources and dissemination tools.**

Developing a brand communications plan, as identified under the goal of "Promote Economic Development," necessitates a look beyond traditional local government promotions and explores marketing Ames to a wider population.

POINTS TO CONSIDER

Before pursuing a brand communications plan, communications professionals consulted suggested there should be agreement on these questions:

- What is the City Council's goal for a brand communications plan?
- Who is the target audience for the brand message?
- What is the desired geographic reach of the plan?
- What is the brand message (Is it the community vision or some other message)?
- How will success be measured?

The goal of branding is to establish a positive, differentiated, emotional response about a person, product, or entity. A brand is a promise made to each customer that must be delivered on consistently in every interaction. Effective City branding would evoke specific feelings of enthusiasm, advocacy, or patronage. It would build loyalty and cultivate goodwill.

COMMUNITY VISION HISTORY

In an effort to identify the Ames brand, more than 6,000 people participated in the successful community visioning of 2011 (see below). The process continued with the adoption of a logo and tagline shared among the City of Ames, the Ames Chamber of Commerce, the Ames Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Ames Community School District.

The Ames Promise/ Vision

Ames, Iowa is a forward-thinking community. As a city, we are committed to fostering creativity and innovation at the forefront of the world's important issues that the Midwest is uniquely positioned to address, including agriculture, veterinary medicine, sustainability, development, diversity, education, and health care.

For those who want the charms and convenience of a small town with the opportunities and amenities that come from a major university, Ames' position as an intelligent, progressive community creates a city and a region where everyone has opportunities to discover and thrive.

The Ames Strategic Platform

WHO we're for	Those who want the charms and convenience of a small town with the opportunities and amenities that come from a major University		
WHAT we do	**Ames is the Smart Choice,** fostering creativity and innovation at the forefront of the world's important issues that the Midwest is uniquely positioned to address		
WHY we do it	To create a community where everyone has opportunities to discover and thrive		
HOW we do it	REQUIRE innovative solutions	Stand for COLLABORATION	Be DECISIVE
WHO we are	Smart	Open-minded	Confident

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

Several years ago, the City of Des Moines collaborated with several partners to improve perceptions of Des Moines with residents and non-residents through the “Change Your View” campaign. Des Moines residents who feel better about their city become advocates for their community, said Doug Jeske, president of the Des Moines-based Meyocks Group. The campaign message worked outside of Des Moines to bring positive attention to recent renovations and upcoming projects. Jeske suggested the best

branding plan would have an internal and external appeal.

When considering a brand communications plan, Jeske discourages a “one and done” approach. Branding is a long-term, multi-year commitment that requires ongoing attention and resources. While not a municipal campaign, Carole Custer, Director of University Marketing at Iowa State University, said ISU is seven years into its “Choose Your Adventure” campaign, but did not see measurable results from their efforts until the fourth year.

The City of Dubuque identified community marketing as an opportunity years ago. While Dubuque was active in tourism and economic development promotion, no single organization was responsible for advocating for the community as a whole, said Public Information Officer Randy Gehl. Efforts to pursue community marketing faltered after preliminary cost estimates were excessive. “Funds were never specifically designated for community marketing, but we have tried to strategically promote our accomplishments, partnerships, awards, and recognitions to showcase the community,” Gehl said. “We remain interested and see value in promoting Dubuque as a thriving community in the region and nationally.”

Improving community pride is one of the goals of the City of Johnston’s recent rebranding campaign, which includes the tagline “Thrive. Every Day.” According to City of Johnston Communications Specialist Emily Price, of particular interest for the City of Johnston is building its business base and distinguishing the city from the other Des Moines suburbs. Johnston is working with West Des Moines-based Red Dot Advertising + Design and has budgeted $38,000 for a logo redesign and visual identity system. The Johnston rebranding will help in economic development recruitment, but no wider general marketing is planned.

Todd Senne of Trilix, a Des Moines-based marketing company, advises a “slow, steady stream” of marketing materials to promote a brand rather than a short, concentrated burst. He suggested a budget of $20,000 to $40,000 for the creation of materials, and ten times that amount for placement (ad buys). “Awareness itself cannot be a goal,” Senne said. “What are we trying to achieve? There must be a return with this investment. There must be some sort of definition of success.”

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

When a municipality makes the decision to implement a marketing campaign in an effort to distinguish itself, there is the potential for criticism. Most of the resistance concentrates in the area of “show me, don’t tell me,” or the idea that a community does not need to market itself because investment in the community coupled with word of mouth and low-cost publicity (website, local media and social media) will do the job. Yet there are many examples of cities that have moved forward with campaigns and that reinvest years later – suggesting there must be satisfaction with the results. There is no way to measure “lost opportunity” when a city opts not to pursue external marketing.

Don McEachern, president of North Star Destination Strategies, discourages cities from pursuing “shot gun” marketing strategies without clearly defined goals or market focus. He promotes tapping into each city’s biggest strength – its people – for brand advocacy.

“If you want to move the needle on the reputation of Ames, you need a reputable source. Those who receive a message about a city from the city will immediately be suspect. Instead, facilitate the naturally occurring advocacy in your community and use that to your advantage.”

THREE STEPS TO DEVELOPING A BRAND

Crafting the vision, tagline, logo, and visual standards is the first step in developing a brand. Therefore, Ames is well ahead of other cities who hope to initiate this effort. The second step is formulating the brand message and developing the creative materials to promote it. The final step is implementing the brand communications plan and disseminating the message through a multi-media strategy of paid and non-paid message placement. The professionals agree that a multi-media branding campaign designed to reach markets beyond the state borders could come with an annual budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

NEXT STEPS

Prior to hiring a consultant to develop a brand communications plan, the professionals recommend an understanding of what the plan should accomplish, an identification of a target audience, a declaration of the desired reach of the plan, and a determination if there is a long-term commitment to branding. With additional City Council direction from answering the bulleted questions on page 1, a more accurate cost estimate can be determined. However, the general rule is: the broader the reach and the wider the audience, the larger the investment needed.