

Calgary Chamber of Commerce

Calgary's Brand

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I want to thank the Chamber for hosting me today, as well as Calgary Economic Development for sponsoring this event.

My subject today was described by the Chamber as being "the importance of our community's brand, and to share current thoughts on the topic of 'what does it mean to be here in Calgary today?'" The issue of the Calgary brand, which has been embodied in the slogan and visual identity of "Calgary Heart of the New West", has become a very active topic lately, at least for me. We have also seen some attention in the media to the fact that our province is engaged in a rebranding process, and that has generated a fair amount of commentary.

Alderman Joe Connelly recently presented me with the book "Cowboy Ethics" and I read it carefully. Consistent with the 'Code of the West' identified in that book, I have tried to craft my address today to reflect pride in my work, fairness, a desire to do what has to

be done, and, frankly, a little courage, although it feels presumptuous for me to say that. I think we have a lot to learn from the values in that book as we explore this issue of branding for Calgary.

My interest in brand development stems from my own background (first as a sociologist, and then in the field of design strategy), as well as from occasionally working with corporate leaders in the areas of brand development and innovation. In addition, I am a member of the steering committee for the Alberta provincial rebranding project, and, at the request of the Mayor, have been chairing the branding exercise for the Calgary community.

The word branding is used far too often and with too little clarity in the world today, so I would like to outline some ideas about what I think we are talking about when we consider the Calgary (or Alberta) brand.

When most people hear the words branding or brand, they immediately think about a logo, or what we call a wordmark. We all know the Nike “swoosh” or the polo player that is on Ralph Lauren clothing. Those graphic treatments are, in the language of branding, really “icons” (or trademarks) although they are often referred to as logos. In essence, an icon or logo is the visual expression of a brand.

A true brand, technically speaking, is a perception of something. I like the simplest definition of brand (proposed by Marty Neumeier,

one of the gurus of branding); it can be thought of as someone's "gut-level reaction" to something. So, for many, "Volvo" conjures up safety, "Rolls Royce" luxury, and "BMW" sport and speed. Not only corporations have a brand, but also people, places, and a lot of other things or experiences in the world (think of your own associations for "Banff" versus "Barcelona" for example; they convey different impressions). Brands are incredibly emotional because we are, above all else, emotional beings with feelings about things.

Branding, then, is really about identifying the ideas, the values, and the core purposes that should underpin a visual identity or a logo. The product of a branding exercise is to develop the language that is the infrastructure for that public experience of logos or public language – think of it as the steel that forms the underlying structure of a building. The existing "Heart of the New West" phrase and the cowboy hat image that accompanies it are really the simplest expression of much more language and a set of ideas that lead to that public visual identity.

I also like to think of brand as a promise. For example, at ACAD we rebranded about four years ago, and in doing so we identified for ourselves a set of common values we hold, our big goals, and what we feel we can promise to the world and to ourselves, including what we aspire to be. In doing this, we can see more clearly where we are going, and what we need to do to get there. In this sense, branding is really a business tool and maybe a type of corporate therapy, a method by which we focus on who we are, what we do, and where we want to go.

In these tough economic times, some are asking if we can really justify the expense of engaging in branding projects. After all, are these initiatives really all that important? Are they worth the money and the effort, especially in a recessionary economy? These are some of the questions that I have been asked lately, and that have been asked in the media, and they are all excellent questions.

Engaging in a branding process can seem like fluff from the outside; many question why a community, a province, or a company would spend resources on such a thing, especially right now. Drawing on all of the information we know from the business world about brand development, business cycles, and profitability, I can tell you that companies that use challenging economic times to refine their purposes and directions, always emerge from downturns far more successfully, and quickly, than those who simply ignore such work. Knowing the core business proposition, whether for a company or a community, is essential to success.

While a brand is what others think and feel about us, we want to make certain that we maximize our brand's effectiveness so that those feelings and ideas about our community that others have are aligned with what we would hope them to be. This is the value proposition; especially in terms of economic competitiveness, we need to invest in our community brand so that we gain momentum even when it might seem counter-intuitive to do that. This is just smart business.

Now, more than ever, this is the time to promote Calgary; we must remain (and become even more) competitive in the global marketplace. The internal and external perceptions of Calgary as a place have a profound effect on our success as a community, and for all of our organizations, because no matter how well I establish ACAD as having its own brand promise, ACAD is very much a part of the “Calgary perception” when we hire employees, recruit students, or act as an institution. We are all competing for global talent, investment, and tourism, and like any product or service we have to use the tool of branding to establish and maintain awareness of all that we have to offer.

In my view, the fact of a recession only makes the case for branding more compelling; we would be horribly shortsighted if we stop promoting our community; that could affect future investments and the people that will come to Calgary when the economy turns around. Calgary and Alberta have been successful to date, however if we want to maintain our advantages, we need to evolve our brand, adapt with the times, and adjust to demographic trends. Only by having an active brand that is forward looking will we be able to participate in what our image is, rather than only hoping for the best. No businessperson would want to adopt that stance for his or her company.

I would like to spend a moment talking specifically about the Calgary branding initiative.

The origins of this project actually began with the development of a ten-year economic development strategy for the city. That was a project that was initiated by Calgary Economic Development in 2006, and I was privileged to be a part of the steering committee for that project. The entire strategy was adopted by City Council in January of 2008, and in that report we identified a variety of key tactics that, together, constitute a comprehensive economic development approach that we think will serve our community well past the next decade.

One of the recommendations in the final strategy document was for Calgary to “promote itself as a successful, diverse and growing city in an increasingly competitive environment. The source of Calgary competitiveness must be drawn from its intellectual capital, the quality of the local business environment and the degree of entrepreneurship... a vibrant urban culture for families and individuals, and the wide range of public and recreational amenities.” We need to be certain that our brand is authentic, aspirational, and covers the promises and hopes outlined in the economic development strategy that our city has adopted. This meant that we needed to assess the current brand as part of the implementation of that strategy, which is so important for Calgary.

In 2007, I was asked to serve on an initial steering committee to launch an examination of the “Heart of the New West” brand; this was managed through Calgary Economic Development, but was a process that was to be “owned” by the community rather than CED. Our initial (and current) steering committee included representatives from the Stampede, the creative industries, tourism, heritage stakeholders, and others. We recommended the hiring of a firm to engage in a thorough

examination of the current Calgary brand. The “big questions” about the “Heart of the New West” brand included:

1. Does the brand reflect the Calgary of tomorrow as well as the heritage of Calgary – what the city aspires to become?
2. Is the brand meaningful, relevant, and differentiating for Calgary?
3. Do key agencies, businesses, and organizations support and promote it?

To get to the answers, our consultants set out to assess perceptions of Calgary through an analysis of themes in the media, reviewed the Imagine Calgary and Centre City plans, as well as others, and interviewed at least 60 individuals and groups including the business community, a variety of city agencies and departments, tourism stakeholders, and members of the Brand Steering Committee.

So, what did we find?

Perhaps most telling were the responses to questions like “On a scale of 1 to 5, please indicated how well the ‘Calgary Heart of the New West’ positioning and logo serves Calgary’s needs?” The findings indicated that a large majority of our respondents did not feel that the current brand represented Calgary in a complete way.

Specific comments conveyed the sense that the current “Calgary Heart of the New West” brand speaks too narrowly to only a specific experience (and really a style) rather than what Calgary is, and is becoming, and that the “Heart of the New West” did not reflect a city that is increasingly urban, innovative, and pushing the boundaries in

the best sense. Many felt that the brand did not engage the imagination in terms of Calgary as a developing creative or cultural center, with global aspirations built on local history and values. If you think about the current brand, it really only addresses two things; one is a location (the West), and the second is a visual representation of a cowboy motif, the hat.

In terms of the big questions we were asking, our assessment phase concluded the following:

1. The current brand does not have buy-in from the community and suffers from inertia...very few agencies or community groups have actually used it.
2. The current brand was not seen as inclusive; it is narrow and only speaks to one aspect of the Calgary experience.
3. The brand is seen by many as only tourism or hospitality-centric.
4. The city is changing dramatically and the current brand does not reflect those changes.

The issue was not that the current band was inaccurate; mainly that it is only accurate with regard to only a specific aspect of our community. What does the current brand say about Calgary becoming a more complex place, about different cultures, innovation, and participation in the global context?

My personal feeling, and this is reflected in the work of our initiative, is that I would like Calgary's brand to cause people to associate this place with not only the Western values of hospitality, pride of place, community, and integrity (to borrow from the

Stampede's brand values), but in addition to celebrate and point to a city that is characterized as international, world-class, dynamically changing, creative, smart, focused on knowledge, complex, and innovative. We may have served some values and ideas well with our current brand, but the question is, are we doing justice to the complete Calgary that we are becoming, and hope to become?

We are just about to enter the third and final phase of the branding project; soon we will have met with over 30 people during this phase to listen and get feedback on our findings to date. We will take that information and distill it into a final brand positioning (the language infrastructure that underpins everything else), and we are working to identify a firm to conclude the project by fine-tuning the brand and designing a visual identity. In all of this, we have met with representatives from tourism, convention businesses, hotel representatives, the Stampede and other stakeholders, and will have seen all of our aldermen before we are done, in addition to members of the corporate and non-profit communities.

Because it was suggested that I offer some observations about what Calgary is and is becoming, let me step back from the specifics of the brand project for a moment and talk a bit about my own perceptions of Calgary. As you might know, I arrived here just about five years ago from my home city of Los Angeles; when considering relocating to Calgary, I went to great lengths to discover what I sometimes call the "promise of the place" or, in other terms, the brand promise.

I found it very hard to determine exactly what the comprehensive “big picture” of Calgary was; I found a lot of comments about hospitality, about the heritage of the city, I saw a lot of Western motifs or styles on the websites of different organizations, but I had trouble understanding what the future of Calgary might be, what is aspired to, and what it might offer a newcomer like me. It was not that what I saw was not good, but it seemed to be incomplete as a promise. When I had my final conversation with my then-board chair after I was offered the job, I asked about the Calgary of the future, about its willingness to embrace new ideas, cultural development, and about its courage to become a city that is part of a contemporary, global world.

When I left that conversation his answer stayed in my head; he said, “Calgary is the sort of place where things can happen; if you come here, you can make a difference.” And that is what stayed with me, and that is why I came to Calgary.

When I got here and began to involve myself in our community, I did find that this is a place where one can make things happen pretty quickly, where the values of personal integrity outweigh formal contracts, and where ideas that are new are (for the most part) embraced. I saw incredible support from the business community for the ideas surrounding innovation and creativity, and I was amazed at the willingness of people to welcome me into their homes, and into this community.

I have seen Calgary change a great deal even in just five years, and for me, the questions about the promise of this place have to do with the extent to which we really are a community that truly takes wise risks in our actions when it is not so easy to do so. Any city can boast of being entrepreneurial and a home for mavericks when the economy is booming and risk seems far away. But, it takes a community that deeply embraces a bold vision for its future to get past the immediate economic situation and exert leadership so that our city can become what it says it is, and wants to be. In this sense, we need to reflect on another value from the book "Cowboy Ethics" and "ride for the brand", or in other words, stay the course with regard to being the forward-thinking entrepreneurial place that we say we are. That is not always easy, and it is a test for us. It requires courage and leadership.

In my work, I think a lot about an idea called institutional sclerosis; a Swedish economist by the name of Mancur Olson developed it. Basically, the root of the concept is that communities or organizations will often try to revisit a time when they think they were more successful, by adopting strategies or creating situations that existed in that earlier time in an attempt to make the present better and more understandable. Olson tells us that this is doomed to fail, as it does not recognize that progress is what we can do from this point in time, not what we did before. Economically and in terms of community development, it almost never works. Small towns do become big cities, the way people relate to each other changes, and different ideas emerge as time passes.

I believe that we, in Calgary and Alberta, can live up to the maverick stance and values that Stampede and others write about, and that we will not surrender to the anxieties that always accompany change. If our brand promise is authentic, we will see Calgary continue to embrace its heritage even while we courageously act to craft a vibrant and exciting promise for our future.

Thank you.

White Hat

I, having experienced Calgary as a diverse and vibrant urban centre, having been duly immersed in the heritage spirit of welcoming entrepreneurship, creativity, innovation and sophistication demonstrated by its citizens, do solemnly promise to spread the word of this vital and growing international capital in the West to everyone I meet hereafter.

Formal Version

DIGNITARY RESPONSE

I, \_\_\_\_\_, having visited the city of Calgary, which I find to be a unique and exciting urban centre of Western Canada, and having been duly immersed in the Western heritage of entrepreneurial, creative, innovative, diverse and sophisticated spirit of this place, do solemnly promise to spread the word of this vital and growing international capital in the West to everyone I meet hereafter.