

A Cohesive Image and Identity

The input process revealed that – while there is always room for improvement – most Greater Columbus residents truly love their community. According to many stakeholders, the challenge then is to simply communicate what the region has to offer to outside audiences. This involves cultivating an outward facing “image” that boosts external perceptions of Greater Columbus as a competitive location for business and talent, a home of excellent amenities and philanthropic assets, and so on. A substantial portion of this work is captured in other goal areas – such as marketing activities geared specifically toward potential residents or companies that might invest in the region. But national best practices and local stakeholders are in agreement that coordinating the region’s external messaging across a variety of channels will increase its effectiveness.

KEY FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH AND INPUT:

-  A significant number of input participants feel that there is an overall lack of external awareness about Greater Columbus, and the perceptions of many individuals are tied to having simply passed through the community while undergoing military training at Fort Benning.
-  Stakeholders identified a need to update the Greater Columbus “brand – the symbols, marks, and messaging that formulate the community’s outward identity. Input participants, including those with experience representing the region to external audiences, suggested that consistent, cohesive messaging across a variety of channels is vital.
-  Greater Columbus attracted more than 1.7 million visitors in Fiscal Year 2014, some of whom were certain to have been experiencing the region for the first time. Travel and tourism can therefore be a highly effective way to introduce new individuals and business leaders to the community. Stakeholders expressed a desire to see coordination in messaging between travel and tourism marketing and other forms of outreach aimed at business, talent, and general awareness building.

OBJECTIVE 5.1: ESTABLISH A UNIFYING COMMUNITY BRAND

Input participants frequently remarked that Greater Columbus is not well known to external audiences, and what image it does have is typically tied to Fort Benning. Many stakeholders believe the community must proactively “tell its story” to a wide range of audiences and that an updated and enhanced community brand is necessary to do so. This is a common concern among regions that do not benefit from an “organic” identity that is developed over time. Standing out in a crowded marketplace can be difficult and expensive, and crafting an image as memorable as “the Music City” or “the Research Triangle” is an unlikely outcome. But Greater Columbus can nevertheless take steps to develop an updated community brand that can be utilized by a wide range of partners to better tell the community’s story to a wide variety of audiences.

5.1.1 Research, define, and develop a community brand.

Seeking to create an impactful community brand inclusive of an overarching image and logos, slogans, marks, etc. can help ensure cohesion across its various messages. Ideally, the updated brand would function as an “umbrella” under which public and private organizations could align a portion of their messaging. There is a

precedent for doing so in the community. As discussed in the Marketing Review research deliverable, entities in Columbus-Muscogee, including the local government, Chamber, and CVB, have been using the “What Progress Has Preserved” tagline and a set of similar logos for more than a decade. Stakeholders suggested that the time is right to update and broaden this brand for wider use, and the CVB has already begun the process. The community should leverage this momentum and convene a marketing work group comprised of local creative professionals, marketers, and other relevant parties to oversee the definition, development, and management of a community brand.

Potential Actions:

- 👥🗂️ Convene a network of volunteers and identify a formal organizational structure and funding sources for a marketing work group to oversee the development and management of a community brand
- 👥🗂️ Evaluate the need to retain a marketing firm or consultant with significant experience in community branding exercises to create an impactful community brand and identify internal and external audiences to which it should be communicated
- 👥🗂️ Conduct research and gather community input to clearly define “what we want to be” and “how we want to define ourselves”
- 👥🗂️ Based on research and input, develop the community brand
- 👥🗂️ Develop a targeted internal communications strategy to introduce and build support for the brand with various organizations and constituencies within the community; make residents the community’s foremost ambassadors for promoting the region to visitors and friends, family, business contacts, and other individuals outside the region
- 👥🗂️ Explore options to partner with the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer’s* Together 2016 campaign to develop and/or promote a revised community brand to internal audiences
- 👥🗂️ Following the development of strong internal support and recognition, introduce the brand identity to external audiences and ensure cohesiveness of messaging across a variety of channels, including talent marketing, economic development marketing, and earned media

BEST PRACTICE: “We Don’t Coast” Campaign (Omaha, NE)

BEST PRACTICE: ThinkOneKC (Kansas City, MO-KS)

OBJECTIVE 5.2: PROMOTE GREATER COLUMBUS TO EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

This strategy outlines multiple ways in which Greater Columbus will promote itself to a variety of external audiences. Tactical recommendation 1.4.1 focuses on outreaching to talented and educated individuals in an effort to convince them to relocate to the region, while recommendation 2.2.1 focuses on economic development marketing geared toward attracting outside firms to invest and create jobs in Greater Columbus. But there are other means by which Greater Columbus can increase external awareness. Specifically, the

community can seek to generate more positive stories about itself in national and out-of-market media outlets and continue its work to attract and showcase the region to visitors.

5.2.1 Pursue a major earned media campaign to generate positive coverage of Greater Columbus in external media markets.

As previously discussed, building a community image with external audiences can be difficult and expensive. But, one of the most efficient and effective ways to promote Greater Columbus is through investment in “earned media.” Earned media is generally thought of as coverage that is “won” as opposed to “bought.” It involves reaching out to and interacting with media outlets such as newspapers and websites. Done correctly, earned media programs can be among the most valuable investments made by organizations seeking to build legitimate awareness of local strengths and successes. Greater Columbus should consider retaining a national marketing and public relations consultant with significant experience in community and economic development marketing to develop and launch a national public relations campaign to seed positive stories about the region with influential media outlets.

Potential Actions:

-   Develop funding sources and retain a national consulting firm with significant community and economic development marketing experience
-   With the guidance of the consulting firm, identify potential story pitches and an overall media strategy
-   Ensure that any successes are prominently featured throughout the region’s talent and economic development marketing activities

5.2.2 Support efforts to promote Greater Columbus through travel, tourism, and events.

Travel and tourism has a significant impact on Greater Columbus. According to a report prepared for the Convention and Visitors Bureau by Columbus State University, visitors to the community spent \$348 million in the local economy in Fiscal Year 2014, resulting in \$37 million in state and local sales tax revenue and more than \$22 million in sales and lodging tax revenues for Muscogee County alone. Beyond the obvious economic benefits, travel and tourism can also help boost the region’s image and name-recognition to outsiders. Accordingly, the region should continue supporting strategies that bring in outsiders for travel, tourism, meetings, trade shows, events, and so on. Many individuals who come to Greater Columbus for business or pleasure will be visiting the region for the first time or the first time in a long time. Stakeholders agreed that outsiders are frequently pleasantly surprised by what the region has to offer upon visiting.

Potential Actions:

-   Support the CVB, Trade Center, and other venues in their pursuit of meetings, trade shows, and other events that can bring large numbers of visitors to the region
-   Leverage the knowledge and connections of economic development practitioners and the business community to identify and provide referrals for professional associations/conferences, corporate meetings, and conventions
-   Work to identify additional public or private funding as needed to support destination marketing activities

