

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY BRAND: Approach and Methods for the Park Rapids Lakes Area Branding Study

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“The purpose of a community brand is to build a positive image that attracts the desired residents, visitors, and businesses.”

– Scott Kolbe, Creative Director, Sikich^a

Introduction & Purpose

The Park Rapids Lakes Area, located in north-central Minnesota, is currently undertaking a strategic community branding initiative in collaboration with many community stakeholders. The initiative seeks to cohesively craft and share the area's unique story with investors, residents, seasonals, and visitors alike in order to attract business and investment, recruit and retain a talented, desirable workforce, and develop local tourism.

Working with the Center for Small Towns at the University of Minnesota – Morris and University of Minnesota Extension's Tourism Center and Community Economics program, the Park Rapids Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce is developing a branding study. The Chamber hopes to better understand the factors that motivate and attract visitors and shoppers, and use those factors to develop community marketing and promotion initiatives to draw and retain more people. Results of the branding study will include themes and narratives that a consultant will then use to create the brand and related marketing plans and tools.



Project team members (L-R) Greg Holder, Brenna Cook, Kelly Asche, and Tayler Vetsch.

The information that follows discusses the ongoing project work of the Park Rapids Lakes Area Branding Study and the methods used to gather data addressing the research questions of community stakeholders.

DEFINITIONS

BRANDING develops a message and a feeling about the community.

MARKETING creates the vehicles that deliver that message to target audiences.

Methods & Process

The Park Rapids community has created a number of marketing themes over the years. The Chamber's current goal is to develop the area's first overarching community brand. To this end, the project partners are employing the following research process:

1 Craft a Research & Education Approach

After looking at community branding initiatives in other Minnesota communities, project partners developed a research methodology to address the interests of different stakeholders in the larger Park Rapids community.

2 Facilitate Small Group Discussions

A series of small group discussions were conducted with business leaders, lodging/tourism owners, visitors, and residents. Feedback was sought from these participants to build a consensus brand with a vision that locals and visitors alike could relate to and support. Discussion questions went beyond rational analysis to focus on participants' emotions, e.g., "What do you love about the Park Rapids Lakes Area?". Extension developed a small group facilitators' guide to support this research phase.

3 Resident and Visitor Survey

Project partners will use small group discussion results to create an online survey instrument for broader outreach, inviting residents and visitors to respond. Again, respondents' feelings, along with their thoughts and perceptions, will be emphasized.

PROJECT NEXT STEPS:

4 Analyze Survey Data

5 Develop Community Brand Themes & Narratives

6 Publish Final Report

Once the data from online questionnaires has been received, the Center for Small Towns will analyze the results. Survey output will become the basis for a final report highlighting Park Rapids Lakes Area brand themes and narratives. A consulting marketing firm will use this harvest to build a specific brand and marketing content. Local partners will implement brand and marketing recommendations.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Shared Goals yet Different Roles

The Branding Study project team consists of a diverse group of project partners who perform unique roles that together contribute to achieving the project's overall objectives.

Tourism Center U of M

ROLE
Research Approach & Methods; Consultation as needed

TEAM
Daniel Erkkila, Tourism Specialist/
Economist

Community Economics Program U of M Extension

ROLE
Research Approach & Methods; Group Process

TEAM
Merritt Bussiere & Ryan Pesch,
Regional Educators

Park Rapids Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce

ROLE
Project Leadership & Coordination

TEAM
Nicole Lalum, President
Greg Holder, Board Member
Chamber Volunteers

Center for Small Towns U of M-Morris

ROLE
Project Approach, Development, & Management

TEAM
Kelly Asche, Program Coordinator
Brenna Cook & Tayler Vetsch,
Student Researchers

Central Regional Sustainable Development Partnership U of M

ROLE
Travel funding for research staff & students

Preliminary Findings & Discussion

Preliminary analyses of the small group discussions revealed that participants valued the appeal of easy access to the woods and lakes in the area, the traditions associated with living or vacationing there, and its generally welcoming sense of community. Participants were open to change, but indicated a preference to avoid large-scale commercialization, preserve the friendly small-town atmosphere, and protect the opportunities available for small businesses.

Findings drawn from these small group discussions along with data collected in the later phases of the study will be critical to the design of a relevant and cohesive community brand for the Park Rapids Lakes Area. The project's unique research design—which gathers the perceptions and preferences of both permanent and part-time residents, and encourages small group discussants and survey respondents to convey their passions and emotions about the area—will lead to the collection of more meaningful information to help guide the final brand and marketing strategy decisions.

“To become what you are, you must know what you are.” This involves “..the hard work of self-examination, building consensus, defining goals, and demonstrating commitment through meaningful actions.”

– Scott Doyon, PlaceMakers^b

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Citations

^a Scott Kolbe, Creative Director, Sikich. Presentation, February 2016.

^b Scott Doyon, Principal, PlaceMakers. "Defining the City: On Being and Becoming." Guest Editorial in Terrain.org: A Journal of the Built and Natural Environment. No. 28: Fall/Winter 2011.

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