Making Sense of Civic Brands

PART 1: THEY AREN'T THE SAME AS CORPORATE BRANDS

by Cathy Fromet

Studio Graphique's promise is "We promote **economic vitality** by leveraging our strategic **branding** and wayfinding expertise to produce and preserve exceptional **place-based** experiences."

We believe so strongly in the power of brand that our founder Rachel Downey created another consultancy, PlaceHolder (www.placeholderllc.com), built on the belief that purpose and brand should always come first when you are thinking about, planning or actively doing place-based design.

With these beliefs that feel so self-evident in our minds, it is always a surprise when our clients are confused, unsure or maybe a little apprehensive of the value and power of civic branding. In Part I of this two-part series, we seek to provide some clarity as to what a civic brand is, how it differs from the traditional views and uses of brand and its function and purpose for your place.

IDENTIFYING WITH BRAND

I think it's fair to say that most people have a general understanding of brand. Our relationships with brand stem from what we will initially identify as corporate branding. This is closely associated with the marketing of branded products or branded services under a branded company name. Most people associate with the visual representation of corporate brands — the logos — and perhaps may feel that this, in essence, is the embodiment of brand. As a result, often when a new client contacts us and says "We need a new brand," their expectation is the development of a logo. This is perfectly fine and one of the deliverables we will most likely provide, but when you are talking about civic branding you may be missing an enormous treasure trove of value if the visual mark is the only thing you seek.

DISSECTING THE TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTION OF BRAND

When we begin to identify what the differences are between corporate/ product brands and civic brands, a few topics become apparent: What is their structure? How do they function? How do they interface with other brands? Who owns them?
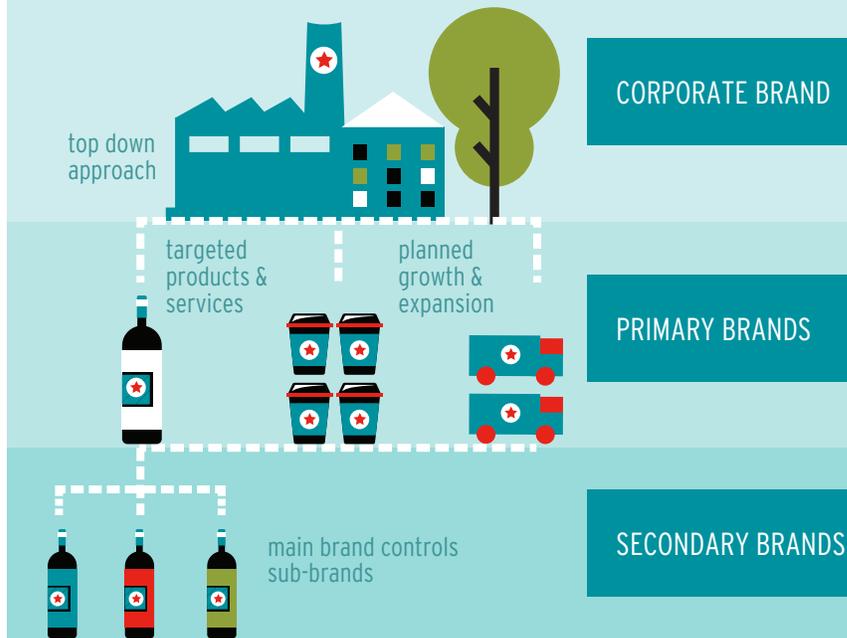
The structure of corporate brands is very much planned. A company forms, they choose a name, they conceive of their mission, they develop a few products and then they build a brand that can market their product or services to their selected audiences. Message and purpose is specific, targeted and controlled. For that reason, we have identified this method as *controlled branding*. Just like the companies they embody, the structure of this type of brand has a top-down approach, carefully controlling and managing the various sub-brands, products and messages under their roof.

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CONTROLLED BRANDING
TYPICAL HIERARCHY EXAMPLE

top down approach

CORPORATE BRAND

targeted products & services

planned growth & expansion

PRIMARY BRANDS

main brand controls sub-brands

SECONDARY BRANDS

When we talk about *civic branding* you may not have the same amount of control that you would have with a corporate brand. It is a collection of perceptions, whether planned or incidental that are inherent to your city, town or district. You're not inventing a new place; you are working with what you have. You don't have a self-selected audience, but one built of your residents, business owners and potential visitors. Their past experiences with

by a singular over-arching entity; they are subject to the dynamics of a moving city comprised of thousands of assets and people. But if well cultivated, a solid civic brand can relinquish control and become loved, leveraged and owned by the people who are invested in that community.

The differences in what we have described as *controlled branding* and what we will identify as *foundational branding* — the type we feel should be used in the

> ## a foundational brand can define your boundaries, influence the perceptions and connect to the experiences your place has to offer

your place influence your existing brand. It may be alive and well, or maybe not so healthy — and your cultivation of your brand may have a lot to do with that health. We say cultivation, not control, as public-place brands are difficult, if not impossible, to control because they are not within the power of control

civic realm — is nuanced. Where a controlled brand is specific and targeted — "this product is for these people" — a foundational brand has a different job. It can *define* your boundaries, *influence* the perceptions, *achieve* the aspirations and *connect* to the experiences your

place has to offer. It's a tough job. Few cities start a branding process with a perfect set of circumstances. You may not be completely pleased with the area you are defining; its most likely not new and pristine and not always within your ability to change. The perceptions that have been built are created from years of existence, stories from the past, and experiences with specific *stakeholders* in your footprint — businesses, institutions, transit systems and neighborhoods. They have identities, impressions and purposes all their own that are out of your control as the entity seeking to craft a civic brand.

FOUNDATIONAL BRAND FUNDAMENTALS
When you seek to use brand as a tool within the civic realm, you are actively making a promise for what a person may experience within your place. And as we said, you are doing this with a relatively small degree of control. So what can you expect from a foundational brand? A foundational brand stands on several merits (the ACES):

Authenticity - uncovering and elevating shared ideals, beliefs, and experiences that already exist. It is about finding your purpose. The reason why people choose to live in, do business with or visit your city versus other places.

Connection - recognizing the value of the community stakeholders and creating a platform to nurture shared commonalities and experiences. This is about finding the thread that strings your best parts together.
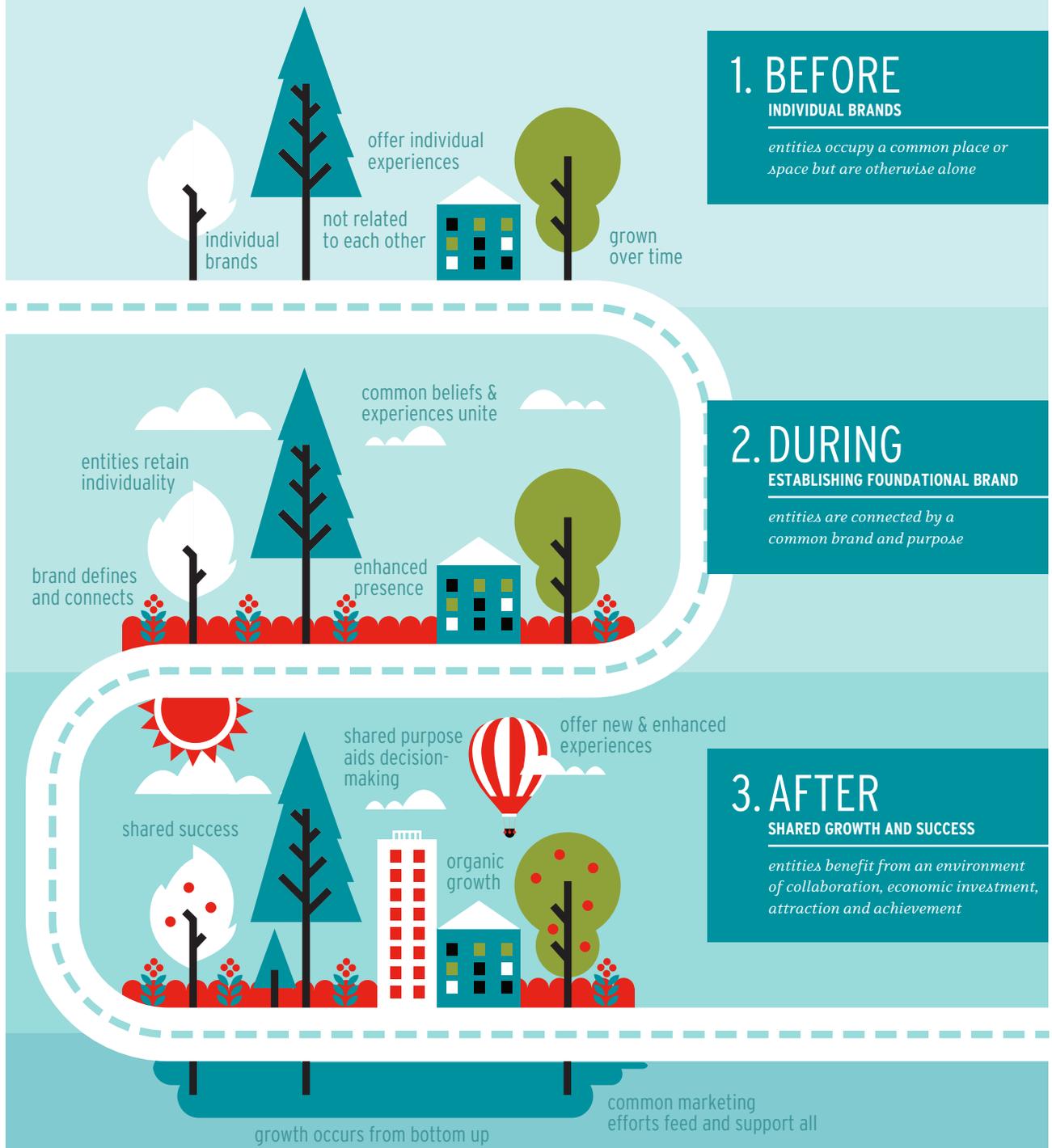
Extension - with foundational brands, stakeholders can (and need to) retain their own brands and identities. The presence of a strong foundational brand can enhance their ability to market and attract patrons/visitors/talent, etc.

Success - with a common vision and understanding of the thread that connects the assets of place — the essence and unique

FOUNDATIONAL BRANDING PATH

BUILDING ON EXISTING PLACE

offer individual
experiences

individual
brands

not related
to each other

grown
over time

1. BEFORE

INDIVIDUAL BRANDS

entities occupy a common place or space but are otherwise alone

common beliefs &
experiences unite

entities retain
individuality

brand defines
and connects

enhanced
presence

2. DURING

ESTABLISHING FOUNDATIONAL BRAND

entities are connected by a common brand and purpose

shared purpose
aids decision-
making

offer new & enhanced
experiences

shared success

organic
growth

3. AFTER

SHARED GROWTH AND SUCCESS

entities benefit from an environment of collaboration, economic investment, attraction and achievement

common marketing
efforts feed and support all

growth occurs from bottom up

Our illustration of the progression of a developing Foundational Brand
before, during and after that brand has been established.

value proposition, all boats rise together to create a stronger sense of community and purpose. This creates an environment of collaboration, economic investment attraction and achievement of aspirational goals to be the city you know you can be.

Yes, well-planned, strategic civic brands can do that.

A PLACE TO BE ENJOYED BY ALL

North Coast Harbor District (www.northcoastharbor.org) in Cleveland, Ohio is the perfect example of how a foundational brand can stand on authenticity, identify a shared belief and create connections with the existing stakeholders with the purpose of activating a place. Like our infographic on page 3, before the foundational brand was established, North Coast Harbor existed with some rather large assets such as the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Browns Stadium and the Great Lakes Science Center, not to mention Lake Erie! It's the only place within downtown where you can interact with our Great Lake – but people rarely did. When people visited, they came for one place/one experience and then left.

Our clients, The City of Cleveland and Downtown Cleveland Alliance, used brand strategy as a tool to better define the potential experiences of North Coast Harbor and build connections with the existing stakeholders. Together, we established their core belief: "Because North Coast Harbor is Downtown Cleveland's connection to the Lake, we believe it is a place to be celebrated and enjoyed by all."

By discovering a purpose that didn't control or overpower the existing brands that lived in the district, these entities have begun to provide and support a variety of shared experiences – from concerts and happy hours to new programming such as Lunch by the Lake and North Coast Namaste, a weekly free yoga event. These new activities aim to encourage more people to extend their experience – enjoying all this distinct area has to offer. For the full case study, visit our website: www.designwithdirection.com/work/north-coast-harbor/

of concerns from both the place and the places within. Stay tuned to part 2 of this series, "Making Sense of Civic Brands," where we dive deeper to reveal some of our observations and best practices about the interplay between the civic brand and the various brands and destinations within it.

WHAT DO YOU GET IN RETURN?

The purpose of brand is connecting with people. Brands work hard to package up a lot of information and promises and make it easier for people to pay attention and

> A foundational brand can be your competitive edge in attracting economic development, talent, residents and visitors

COMMUNITY INTERFACE AND OWNERSHIP

Foundational brands allow the community stakeholders to be the stars by providing the support of shared meaning and purpose, and significantly, shared marketing. BUT… those stakeholders have their own specific, targeted and controlled brand; their own purpose and their own promise. So when you have a family of controlled brands living in your place, how and when do they adopt the promise of the foundational brand? How is this done? What does this look like? Who truly "owns" the foundational brand?

When place brands are first getting established, these questions and many others often rise to the top

determine their level of interest in engaging with your product or place. Creating a logo that uses a physical attribute such as an iconic building to represent your city can no longer cut it as a brand. A foundational brand is your competitive edge in attracting economic development, talent, residents and visitors. A poorly managed (or ignored) brand can result in millions of dollars in lost income, investment and opportunities.

If a civic brand is authentically created with the purpose of defining, influencing and connecting people to your place, the return is economic vitality – enhanced quality of life, engaged people, and ultimately financial growth and stability. ■

About the Author

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For most of her career, Cathy has cultivated a solid and diverse branding and environmental graphic design expertise. Her sweet spot and greatest value to our clients is seeing all aspects of a project challenge and guiding teams to exciting and connective design solutions. Cathy's core service strengths are identifying and implementing planning and design strategies for branding and wayfinding challenges experienced by public places and spaces. Cathy lives in South Euclid, Ohio with her co-worker husband, Kevin and their two sons, Jack and Nicholas.