

Revitalizing the “Old Chamber” Image and Message

By Latricia Trice

In April 2011, new President/CEO Rick Baker challenged staff to re-think our 125-year-old chamber and how we work. During the summer of 2011, we began developing a three-year strategic plan using a process that engaged the staff, board, members and the community. We launched the new plan in January 2012, which set the stage for us to rebrand.

Our previous messaging didn't communicate how we grow business and build a strong community. It didn't convey our strength as a regional leader. We were known mainly for great networking events and cost-saving benefits, but we offer much more.

We needed to show our unique value as an ally, advocate, and change agent for our 2,700 member businesses, of which more than 80% are small companies with 50 or fewer employees. We needed to show how we're actively developing leaders, our workforce and a business environment that fosters economic prosperity. Our image was dated. It suggested “Old Chamber of Commerce,” not “the premier business membership organization in West Michigan.” It was time for a complete makeover.

Who are we?

We hired a small marketing communications firm, a member of course, to help the marketing team through the rebranding process. We gathered member and community feedback on their perception of the chamber, reviewed past membership surveys, and analyzed why members join, stay and leave. Then we talked with chamber leaders and staff about our identity and how we want to be perceived. We wanted our:

- Vibe to be solid, established and bold
- Voice to be strong
- Personality to be assertive, self-aware and a leader
- Colors to be vibrant and marketing materials to be modern/clean

Next we refreshed our logo and established new colors that reflected a bold, strong personality. Then we moved on to messaging. To craft the message, we narrowed our organization focus areas so they aligned with our strategic plan of work. We identified three areas that are critical to improving business in West Michigan:

- Developing strong leaders
- Building a diverse workforce
- Shaping the business environment (through advocacy, economic development)

We then established our purpose and approach:

- Ally: The chamber connects businesses to the people and resources that get things done. We help entrepreneurs, business owners and community leaders make things happen.
- Advocate: The chamber creates an environment for business to grow.
- Agent of change: The chamber shapes a community that people and businesses love.



After our messaging was approved, we developed new flyers, business cards, brochures, signs, envelopes, folders, and more, all of which incorporated the new brand and positioning. We agreed on a timeline calling for a new image, messaging and marketing materials by the end of 2012. We began rebranding meetings in August 2011, about the same time the strategic planning process started, but most of the work took place in 2012. Most of the \$80,000 branding expense went to fees for the marketing firm and printing.

Surprises

It took some time to reach consensus on how bold our messaging and look should be. What's bold to one person is arrogance to someone else. Another problem was our website, which needed a redesign along with the new marketing materials, but there wasn't enough time because of the amount of work involved. We updated the website's logo, colors and some of the messaging, but the bulk of the web work became a 2013 project. It will be the last piece of our rebranding puzzle.

OLD HANDOUT



NEW HANDOUT

We were surprised that the process took more than a year, but when you rebrand countless details arise that must be dealt with, and it has to be done correctly. You must ensure your message is clear, concise and meaningful because once it's announced, there is no turning back.

Results

The staff now delivers a consistent, confident message about who we are and what we do, which wasn't the case before the rebranding. Conversations with members and prospects about the value of chamber involvement are more compelling, and our marketing materials are more useful and visually appealing. We also have a brand guide that everyone follows. With 25 staffers, a brand guide is a must to maintain consistency.

We've received numerous compliments from the board, members and community members on our new brand, new messaging and new look. The most prominent benefit we've seen is an increase in social media activity. In December 2011 we had some 10,000 social media followers (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn); today we have more than 15,000 and growing at nearly 100 per week. ☑



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