

Being Regional Without “Regional” in Your Name

By Orsola Andersen

OLD LOGO



NEW LOGO



Established in 1868 as the first chamber of commerce in New Jersey, the MIDJersey Chamber of Commerce, formerly the Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce, had experienced several name changes over the past 145 years, all the while remaining true to the principles of our chamber forefathers: vision, strategic planning and responsiveness to members.

In recent years, we’ve grown stronger and become a more prominent voice for the business community through our public relations strategies, membership campaigns and advocacy. Our sphere of influence has expanded to six additional counties, and it was clear that “Mercer Regional Chamber of Commerce” no longer reflected current reality—35% of our membership is now located outside of Mercer County—or our ongoing expansion in Central New Jersey. We also recognized a void in business and political representation in the Central New Jersey region. We don’t fit into the traditional two-region nomenclature of North Jersey and South Jersey.

Following 2½ years of research, focus groups, surveys, and interviews with business leaders, we found that the Central New Jersey community had an identity crisis. Central New Jersey has its own diverse and unique qualities which make it an ideal location to live, do business, and have an identifiable region to call home. With more than 4 million people within a 30-minute drive from our center, we were ready and confident to take on the challenges of defining this region, uniting its business community and raising awareness of being a MIDJerseyan.

Secret agents

We carried out a kind of stealth mission for more than a year, researching and testing for opposition, negative or positive feedback, and name ideas. All of our marketing and public relations activities soon included the phrase “representing the Central New Jersey region.”

After analyzing data and feedback from our surveys and focus groups, it was clear that some chamber members were unsure about how far our rebranding should go. We needed to establish a comfort level with the formality of our name change and its regional focus. We developed a six-month tactical plan to communicate the “why’s” and “how’s” to many of our smaller members as well as the non-member business community. We began the dialog of rebranding and expansion through local events and chapter meetings, plus a few strategic leaks to news media. The idea gained broader acceptance as it bubbled up through our membership.

Once the board formally approved the new brand, we selected Creative Marketing Alliance (CMA), to help us develop a comprehensive plan for rolling out the new identity. CMA is a 25-year-old marketing firm and a 25-year chamber member.

Going public

The chamber staff, the CMA team and board leaders worked together to ensure all angles of the rebranding strategy were covered. How would this be communicated to the membership and the media? The team drafted clear plans to ensure all parties involved understood the rationale for the rebrand and supported the direction before it was announced to the public. >

The centerpiece of the brand is a new logo symbolizing an inclusive yet expanding region united by common goals of economic, social and cultural growth. The tagline, “The hub of New Jersey business,” implies a central focal point of growth solutions, economic resources and diverse services. Other deliverables included key messages/talking points, website redesign, advertising campaign, direct mail campaign, public relations campaign, e-blast template, press conference planning, stationery, press kit folders, a video series, as well as banners and signage. All had to be completed within three weeks.

Aftermath

The chamber has rebranded several times in its past, using various names that included “Mercer County” or “Trenton.” The new name is vastly different from the others, and we were surprised that it was so well-embraced. Our message struck a chord not only with the business community, but also with residents of the region.

It has been rewarding to see so many groups and individuals refer to themselves as belonging to Central New Jersey or mid-Jersey. Columnist Jeff Edelstein, writing in *The Trentonian* newspaper, said “The team at the former Mercer Regional Chamber of

Commerce—now the MIDJersey Chamber of Commerce—has taken the steps to create, once and for all, an identity for a place that has struggled without one forever.”

Comparing numbers from Oct. 2011-Feb. 2012 and Oct. 2012-Feb. 2013, new membership increased 31%. We’ve also seen a surge in membership of state-wide and national organizations such as American Repertory Ballet, New York Life, Goodwill Industries of South Jersey and Philadelphia, The Howard Hughes Corporation, Tekmark Global Solutions and Snap MyLife, Inc.

The chamber also has been instrumental in major economic development initiatives in the area since the rebrand, such as Frontier Airlines’ decision to begin operating out of Trenton-Mercer Airport. Bringing this type of positive news to the Central Jersey business community wrapped with our new logo and brand identity is precisely what we envisioned for our newly-energized and forward-thinking chamber. ☑



Orsola Andersen is marketing and communications manager at the MIDJersey Chamber of Commerce.