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## Branding lessons learned from the 'City of Champions' debate

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Branding lessons learned from the 'City of Champions' debate

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One thing you can't deny about the 'City of Champions' slogan: it's got more lives than a cat.

Like a Walking Dead extra, the much discussed brand lurched into [the civic](#)

[conversation](#) again following the reappearance of our beloved Oilers in the playoffs.



So the debate now rages again with solid arguments both pro and con, but as is so often the case with this debate – the conversation is rarely examined from the point of view of actual branding best practices and what an examination of those techniques may teach us about the best approach for solving the always thorny issue of effectively branding a city.

## **True ‘generational’ branding is rare and much more difficult than it looks**

One of the aspects of the current ‘City of Champions’ debate that stands out is how often the arguments tend to break along generational lines. Certainly there are notable exceptions to this, but the pro and con camps generally fall into one of the following two buckets:

1. ‘Champions’ advocates that were *present* when the brand was first introduced.
2. ‘Champions’ opponents who have *inherited* the brand.

Because advocates were present at the inception of the brand, they are naturally more inclined to feel both a personal affinity and positive association with it. When ‘City of Champions’ was first introduced to our lexicon, Edmonton was enjoying an unprecedented run of sporting success and a well-deserved reputation as a charitable city with a heart of gold and a passion for volunteerism. In tugging at the heart strings of these two distinct attributes that all Edmontonians can legitimately can take pride in, the proposed brand fulfilled a crucial requirement that is sought in any effective brand execution: identify traits that the consumer feels both passionate and positive about internally, and make the brand an effective externalization of those qualities.

So, the ‘City of Champions’ brand was off to a good start.

The problem, as any Brand Manager will tell you however, lies in sustaining this ‘externalization’ over a number of years and ideally, for generations.

This is precisely the reason that brands with true generational appeal like Coke, Apple, Lego, Disney, etc. are so celebrated, studied and emulated– because achieving this level of brand resonance is so rare! Not only do you need to establish the brand on a timeless foundation, you need to both reinforce and reinvent that brand for each successive generation to ensure it retains the same feelings of pride of ownership.

As times change, so do hearts and minds. So, as Edmonton’s sports teams inevitably fell from those historic heights, a core aspect of ‘The City of Champions’ brand failed to find resonance with those Edmontonians who struggled to connect these brand attributes with their own personal experience. This experience was particularly prevalent amongst those who ‘inherited’ the brand and thus found it difficult if not impossible to nostalgically draw on those positive associations established at the brand’s inception. Quite simply, for some it seemed the height of hubris to self-identify as ‘Champions’ amidst a 10 year playoff drought for their hometown team.

Which leads us to where we are today, two passionate and vocal camps with distinctly different brand associations.

## Civic brands must be authentic and easy to maintain

The fact that Edmonton is now so divided on this brand is actually a point in favour of those opposed to the 'City of Champions' brand going forward.



CIVIC BRANDS MUST BE AUTHENTIC AND EASY TO MAINTAIN



After all, if a sizable segment of our own population doubts the merits of this civic brand, how can we hope to convince the world at large?

The big picture goal of branding your city is to encapsulate your civic identity into a friendly face that resonates universally with your local populace, and of equal importance, with that larger global population that may want to visit or do business with you.

With that big picture objective in mind, it's absolutely mission critical that your civic brand achieve near universal acceptance with your own citizens. Identifying a brand that nearly everyone can agree on confirms to the Brand Manager that they've landed on an expression that carries true authenticity and resonance, which is the necessary foundation for true longevity.

This 'authenticity' is vitally important in the initial launch of the brand, but is exponentially important in the ongoing reinforcement and reinvention of the brand.

- 'The Big Apple' AND 'The City That Never Sleeps'
- 'The Big Easy'
- 'The City of Light'

The reason City slogans, like the famous examples above, have retained their resonance over generations is largely because the citizens of these great cities so readily and universally identify with the attributes encapsulated within these evocative phrases – and the cities themselves reinforce these attributes daily in their very infrastructure!

- To retain its title as 'The Big Apple' and 'The City That Never Sleeps,' New York simply needs to stay cosmopolitan and fast paced. **Check.**
- Residents of New Orleans have seemingly mastered the art of laidback southern hospitality so 'The Big Easy' seems applicable for another generation or three. **Check.**
- And Parisians will always go to great lengths to dress up their 'City of Light' because preserving the glitzy glamour of their beautiful city is both a source of deserved civic pride and an intrinsic expression of French 'joie de vivre.' **Check.**

In short, these civic brands achieve transcendence precisely because they are so easy to maintain and reinforce. The brand attributes are such a perfect expression of both the city and the citizens themselves, that in many ways, reinforcing them requires simply that the citizens act naturally!

By contrast, when Edmonton's professional sports teams stopped doing some of the heavy lifting associated with their positive reinforcements of the 'City of Champions' brand, the resonance of the brand inevitably suffered. An intuitive Brand Manager could have stepped into this breach to reinforce the other core attributes of the 'Champions' brand – philanthropic generosity and active volunteerism – but therein lies one of the great challenges of maintaining this brand's resonance in perpetuity. Modest as most Canadians are, it is not in our nature to publicize our charitable and volunteer efforts, and for many, doing so is in poor taste. We like to keep these things on the 'down low,' because our core motivation in helping others is not to shine a spotlight on ourselves.

This modesty is a great quality in a human being. It's problematic in a brand that requires visible and consistent reinforcement to maintain an aura of authenticity.

## Keep it 'loose' to keep it real

From a brand management point of view, another factor that makes it difficult to maintain a brand's timelessness or potential mass appeal is when the brand attributes are too specific.



This is illustrated to great comedic effect in the [National Anthem of Kazakhstan parody](#) featured in the movie, **Borat - Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan**.

As the anthem singer trumpets his country's virtues as 'the number one exporter of Potassium' and 'friend to all except Uzbekistan,' we can immediately spot the folly of being too specific in the context of destination branding.

An unescapable constraint of the 'City of Champions' brand is that it undeniably carries more inherent appeal to a sports fan than it does to a wider audience outside those confines – and that is very much reflected in the current dialogue in which many of the brand's most ardent advocates are also passionate sports fans or athletes.

By contrast, compare the specific thrust of 'City of Champions' (sports and philanthropy/volunteerism)

versus the more metaphorical approach of these hugely successful City/destination brands:

- 'Keep Austin Weird'
- 'What Happens in Vegas Stays in Vegas'
- California – Find Yourself Here

In avoiding specificity, these brands land on language that is potentially inclusive for all, appealing to the inner weirdo, rebel, or spiritual 'seeker' in all of us. Most importantly, they do so without losing the qualities that carry heartfelt resonance for the citizens themselves. Whether resident or tourist, 'Sin City' will always appeal to those with a taste for adult thrills. Austinites pride themselves on being offbeat, and being slightly askew also translates favourably for a potential tourist looking for something new and different. And the California brand positioning is particularly well executed providing a diverse range of applicable attributes that celebrates the locals while enticing potential visitors.

In addition to being inclusive, in avoiding the specific, these brand executions also achieve potential timelessness. Short of a massive cultural shift in the makeup of their collective civic 'id,' these brands contain the 'legs' to maintain their relevance and resonance for years and generations to come.

## To brand or not to brand?

One of the factors fueling the seemingly never ending debate over the 'City of Champions' brand is the lack of a universally accepted alternative. In

A PERFECT EXAMPLE  
OF A BRAND EVOLVING  
FROM A SLOGAN TO A  
STORY

the absence of one, it's only natural that advocates of the 'Champions' brand continue to make their case for their beloved slogan.

This level of passionate brand loyalty confirms that for many Edmontonians, the 'Champions' brand articulates core aspects of who they see themselves to be: Champions in competition and charity/volunteerism – in short, Champions in life. This speaks to a powerful and evocative brand engagement and thus, credit is richly deserved for the originators of a brand that prompts such obvious and unswerving loyalty to this day.



Unfortunately, it does not prompt these positive associations with all Edmontonians and therein lies the crux of the issue. As powerful as the 'Champions' brand association is for some citizens, the brand has not achieved universal appeal or generational sustain and that is a limiting place for a civic brand to reside.

In voting against bringing back the phrase, **Mayor Don Iveson** emphasized, *"We're in the post-slogan era. The idea of Edmonton is conveyed by the name itself on the signs and how we talk about our city."*

In this brief statement, the Mayor shares a revealing branding insight and one that aligns closely with current branding methodology. Branding is evolving. A science that started as advertising-centric logos and slogans eventually became a behavioural tale of psychological affinities and associations, and now it has taken another massive leap forward. Branding in the information age is about an ongoing conversation, one in which new brand associations are explored and nuances revealed on an ongoing basis. In short, in the context of a civic brand, it *is* about 'how we talk about our city.'

Authenticity, ease of maintenance, resonance with the consumer, timelessness. All are core factors in the development of a brand striving for true mass appeal and, discussed in the context of the current 'Champions' debate, provides business leaders and nascent brand stewards with ample food for thought as you embark on your own brand development journeys.

With the City's much anticipated Brand Development Strategy set to drop later this summer, perhaps all concerned may finally receive an engaging and embraceable brand that will help put this debate to rest. But if it does not, it's important to remember that the reason that branding a city like Edmonton is so difficult is because of the sheer diversity and cultural complexity of this city and its citizens. Filtered through a lifetime of observation, experience, feelings, and memories, what Edmonton means to me is quite likely drastically different to what it represents to you. And that's ok. In many ways, this diversity may be what truly defines us.

So, if our civic leaders land on that magical phrase that manages to encapsulate everything we and our city represent, a brand that will resonate through the generations, well done and congratulations all around!

And if they don't, perhaps it simply means that Edmonton is simply too rich and varied a tapestry to be summarized in a single phrase. If that's the case? What a fascinating place to live and what a story we have to tell.

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