



POWER OF THE LOCAL BRAND

THE THIRD TIER OF GOVERNMENT NEEDS A BETTER SENSE OF ITS OWN BRAND IF IT IS TO CONVINCE THE PUBLIC OF ITS VITAL COMMUNITY ROLE. **ROB O'BRIEN** REPORTS

Creating a brand and a culture is the essence of every great organisation. It is what makes them tick – it gives employees a sense of purpose, direction, worth and value and communicates a vision to the broader public.

That much is true of the private sector, but today's governments are equally attuned to how they are portrayed.

"The world's changed a lot between the last century and this century and the concept of branding has moved quite considerably," says Reg Bryson, CEO of the Sydney-based consultancy, Brand Council.

"We see branding now as almost central to every organisation. What do you stand for? What's your purpose? What's your reason for being? Why do you do what you do? What's your philosophy? Why should people come and work for you?"

"Every organisation really has to have that kind of sense."

THE LOCAL BRAND

Local government does live in the shadow of the state and federal tiers, which boast vast amounts of resources in terms of building a brand.

Last year, the Federal Government made a \$20 million investment in managing, monitoring and protecting Australia's brand overseas.

"Quite simply, the stronger our global image the easier it is for Australia and Australians to attract attention, make a difference and succeed," according to Austrade's Build Brand Australia campaign.



TOP TIPS FOR BRANDING

- It is essential to understand what people think about the council, their priorities and what they value. If your council comes across as 'remote and impersonal', then consider a scheme to show that you are listening.
- What does the council want to be famous for? Work with your staff and members to identify the council's vision, objectives and key messages.
- Values and key messages define a council's ambition and what it stands for. All too often these are bland statements that could apply to nearly any council, or they are expressed in meaningless jargon. Very often there are simply too many messages and priorities.
- A rebrand in itself will not change the perception of the council. It has to be based on good customer service and effective community services to be credible. Don't brand yourself 'the listening council' if your residents' experience is that you don't.
- To make sure that you get the credit for the services your council provides, you need to develop and promote a strong and consistent corporate identity across all the council's activities.
- Elected members and staff are the public face of your council and regularly give presentations in a range of settings and to a variety of audiences. Whether it's a public meeting, internal briefing or workshop with partners, their presentations need to contribute to consistent and effective council branding.
- The effectiveness of your brand should be measured and reviewed annually.

Source: UK Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)

While local government does not consider itself as a brand, the concept of it is fast catching on. "Communications can play a very important role for local government in explaining who and what they are to the community," says advertising guru Harold Mitchell of Melbourne-based Mitchell Communications.

"The modern day use of communication can be very important in laying down the foundation of who you are and at the same time tying you to the mast to say that 'this is what you said you'd do and now you've got to do it'."

In contrast to state and federal governments, communities view councils first and foremost as service providers rather than political entities.

"The community can see that [councils are] an institution that provides services as opposed to the party politics of who is the government of the day," Mitchell says.

NATIONAL MESSAGE

Branding does work on a national scale and could potentially raise the profile of local government in Australia.

In 2008 the UK Local Government Association launched a national campaign to help councils improve their brand.

The campaign was based on the premise that one of the main reasons councils were viewed negatively was that residents had no idea what role they performed.

According to their own polling more than three in five people did not realise that their council provided dog wardens, swimming lessons or promoted tourism. And much the same could be said of Australian councils.

In 2007 the New Zealand government took the bold step of unifying government services under an all-of-government brand, to show a unity of purpose across all service areas and to promote the 'visibility of government activity'.

According to the brand policy guidelines the move was about placing value on service delivery "through improved public recognition by linking government-funded services, programmes and products through consistent imagery".

Logos were used consistently across all of the government's departments and adopted on all marketing material and websites. The aim was to improve credibility and trust.

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BRAND COUNCIL CEO, REG BRYSON

CHALLENGE OF COST

Storm Designs, a small media company in Melbourne, has worked with a number of councils to develop their brands.

"It seems to me one of the key issues they have is getting awareness of what they've done for their ratepayers and constituents," says director of design Derek Carroll.

"They don't want to be seen as wasting money by putting up flash signs everywhere, but on the other hand they've got to make them aware that their rates are going towards these facilities.

"Everyone seems to know more about parking tickets and fines for bins and stuff like that – the enforcement side of councils."

Mitchell agrees: "Governments at all levels will always have the problem that advertising and communication seems to be an obvious cost and an easy target... the real challenge always is to remain strong to the cause."

But council branding also suffers from a lack of cohesion.

Opportunities to spell out their operational role can be lost in third-party contracts, says Carroll, where councillors sign away the right to stamp their mark on the facilities that they run.

The council brand can also disappear among competing departments and the differing visions they have for the organisation.

"Those are the key opportunities that they need to pay attention to," he says. "One of the most difficult things we find is dealing with the difference in thinking between what the marketing department sees as an actuality of the council's brand, and what the councillors – who have the power – see the role of it is."

Carroll says much council branding is old and out of date, that residents do not see it anymore.

"It's just part of the background noise. They don't see or recognise all the things around them that make their community or their village or town, the place they want it to be.

"Not taking those opportunities to brand things properly and get the recognition they deserve for it, is a shame really."

THE GOOGLE EFFECT

As a consultant to a number of large corporations, Reg Bryson has helped develop brands for Tourism Australian, NRMA and St George Bank.

He says that the brand is essential in determining the culture of any organisation.

"Branding as a concept to us is the central organising proposition of every single thing the company does – how everyone acts and how everyone talks and what the whole organisation says and why.

"To our point of view the companies that sort of discover they can be heart, spirit and soul-driven become really powerful. The best companies in the world – Apple, Google and Amazon – for them the brand is the culture and the culture is the brand."

“IT PROVIDES A RECOGNITION AND STATUS CONSISTENT WITH BEING THE THIRD TIER OF GOVERNMENT, AND HENCE WITH BEING TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF OUR DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT.”

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW EXPERT PROFESSOR GEORGE WILLIAMS

Google’s well-publicised brand led to it receiving more than 190,000 applications for 104 jobs last year. But Bryson is quick to stress that first and foremost it is the culture of an organisation that drives the brand.

“You can create an aura, image and magnetic field whether you’re Mosman Council, Apple or Google,” he says.

“No matter what organisation you’re in, to make that organisation as effective and efficient and high-performing as you can, you’ve got to actually create that sense of culture.”

He says this does require a lot of thinking and work to get the behaviours right. “It takes a lot of effort to get people to hard-wire the brand through an organisation and get people to understand the value of it, what those values are and why they are important.

“You have to spend time to communicate to people why this organisation has to live those values.

“Whether you’re a council or a government organisation I’d have thought every single one of those could benefit from understanding their values and their philosophy and their purpose and why they do what they do.”

LEAVING A LEGACY

Carroll says local government in Australia could learn from a unitary approach to branding.

“We drive the thinking towards what we call the brand essence

– one central idea that will help you differentiate your market and drive the brand thinking forward.

“It works well because it forces the thinking to be defined and gives you one direction.”

Councils have so much communication to do across so many different groups and organisations that it can be hard to “focus it down”.

“You tend to be insulated from the councillors and the mayor – the people that make the call, which means it makes it harder to get across,” he says. “If you could have the conversation at that level everything would run smoother.”

The broader implications for the local government brand are significant in Australia.

Constitutional law expert Professor George Williams, from the University of New South Wales, says the way local government is portrayed is part of its legacy as a whole.

“It provides a recognition and status consistent with being the third tier of government, and hence with being taken seriously as an important component of our democratic system of government,” he says.

“It’s hard to quantify the impact that has, but over time it could leave a lasting legacy.” **GN**



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