

Four Steps to Creating an Effective Key Message Platform

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Funny in retrospect

I vividly remember sitting with our marketing team around a table in my boss's office to come up with a tag line because we needed to print letterhead and marketing brochures. We literally plucked from the air this tag line: "Fresno County, The Strategic Choice."

Unbeknownst to us at the time, "strategic" is used by hundreds of ED groups for marketing messages. Frankly, I'm not even sure I understood its meaning. How embarrassing to share this story from my time as Fresno County EDC vice president. It was early in my economic development career; now a CEcD and consultant actively involved in helping communities go to market, I have learned a lot.

The Fresno experience was weak on process. There was no time to explore creative ideas; no strategic research; no thought about competitors; and most importantly, it was a lost opportunity to involve community stakeholders. The result? The message fell flat because it had nothing to back it up.

A better approach

One thing I have learned while studying effective economic development programs is that a tag line is only a small piece of the message platform. I often observe communities stalemated for the perfect wording of a tag line. They misunderstand the power of well-crafted and supported key message *concepts* used throughout marketing and sales.

Economic developers have a difficult job of selling a "product" (everything in the community) without control of many elements of the product's features. ED professionals work very hard to influence the competitiveness and readiness of the product to meet the needs of prospective customers.

The same is true for how community stakeholders describe their product's features and benefits. Economic development professionals are often charged with marketing the community product while relying on a broad spectrum of official and unofficial "salespersons." Eager salespersons aligned to consistent messaging can powerfully influence favorable and memorable impressions.

4 Steps to Creating an Effective Key Message Platform

Employing an inclusive process to craft key messages will yield support of the concepts and widespread use of the messages beyond designated campaign marketing channels.

Step 1 – Gather External Perceptions

Understanding how target audiences perceive your community provides helpful insights. Are they aware of your community? Are perceptions negative? Positive? Incorrect? Had we done our homework in Fresno, we would have discovered that Fresno was considered a high-unemployment agricultural region with limited skills. In reality, significant innovation and skill was earning Fresno global leadership for water conservation practices and product development.

What to do: Interview a cross-section of site location consultants and companies from your target industries (if you don't know your targets, here's [one way](#) to [identify them](#)). Phone or in-person interviews are preferred over a survey because follow-on questions flow out of conversations. Your interest in their opinion can also enhance your relationship with these important professionals. Suggested questions include:

- What comes to mind when you think of (community)?
- In your opinion what are the greatest benefits for “X” industry of a (community) location?
- What do you consider to be unique in (community) – one thing or combination of assets?
- What is the most distinct differentiator of (community) compared to other locations?

Step 2 – Hold a Local Employers Work Session

When I was at the Fresno County EDC, I was too inexperienced to see the crucial connection between a strong business retention and expansion program and our efforts to recruit businesses. Not only can local employers provide compelling testimony of the local business climate; their voice is invaluable in the creation of authentic and relevant marketing messages.

What to do: Invite local employers, especially those representing target industry sectors, to participate in a brainstorming session. Sample questions to provoke thought include:

- How do you describe the benefits of (community) to a peer?

- How do you explain (community's) location?
- In business circles, how is (community) known? For what business benefits do you want (community) to be known?
- Why would a company locate in (community) and be foolish to look elsewhere for a location?
- What do you consider to be unique in our community – one thing or combination of assets?
- What differentiates (community's) quality of life from other communities?
- What does (community) offer that will address a business's key problems, needs or fears?
- What sets (community) apart that will make businesses say, "Nobody else can say that?"

As a group, synthesize answers into a few core concepts.

Step 3 – Conduct a "Sales Team" Work Session

Host a meeting with economic development partners and stakeholders – essentially your economic development "sales team."

What to do: Begin with external interview findings and synthesized concepts from the local employer discussion to identify gaps and opportunities for messaging. Test message concepts with the following questions, then refine.

- Are these messages easy to understand?
- Are these messages meaningful to you?
- Do these messages differentiate (community)?
- Are these messages important to business?
- Do these messages address specific issues a business might face?
- Do these messages convey solutions/a customer service attitude?
- Are these messages believable and credible?

With consensus on key message concepts, engage the sales team to identify "proof points" to support each message. Proof points are facts and tangible examples that substantiate and qualify key messages. Collect pictures to illustrate proof points.

You could stop here with community engagement; simply integrate key messages and proof points into marketing. Or, go the extra step and develop effective salespersons for your community.

Step 4 – Host a Sales Pitch Exercise

Host one or more sales pitch exercises for board members, elected officials, economic development partners and others to present key messages, and more importantly, *to practice approaches to integrating key messages into conversations for prospecting and networking activities*. Consider involving non-traditional community representatives too, such as taxi drivers and hotel concierge or reception staff.

What to do: Prepare for the exercise by brainstorming scenarios in which someone has the opportunity to interact with a prospective company or site location advisor – for example, greeting a business traveler at a hotel; a networking event as part of a site consultant tour; dinner with a prospect on a site visit; a trade show or conference introduction; or media interviews. For the exercise itself, distribute scenarios and role-play conversation starters. Every “salesperson” typically speaks from his or her own experience and knowledge to make the conversation more personal while harmonizing with the overall key messages.

From embarrassment to experience

I regret the lost opportunities of our ubiquitous Fresno EDC tag line. By sharing my lesson learned, may you be inspired to empower your economic development marketing program with relevant and compelling messages. I now use these four steps as a practice to position communities, regions and states for earning top-of-mind-awareness (TOMA, in marketing circles). For key message development, an engaging, inclusive process is as valuable, if not more so, than the actual outcome.