THE COMPETITION IS FIERCE FOR TOURISM AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DOLLARS. Townships are not only competing with every other community in Pennsylvania but also with places halfway around the world. Image is everything so we went to the experts to get the scoop on place branding, a strategy that can help your township stand out in the crowd.
H ave you heard? The world is flat.

OK, not Christopher Columbus flat, but it’s flat in the sense that advances in technology and telecommunications have broken down boundaries and increased competition.

People and businesses have more choices than ever about where they put down roots and spend their money. Around the globe, countries, states, cities, regions, small towns, and even neighborhoods are hoping to make themselves attractive enough to lure those dollars.

Some want new businesses. Some want tourists. Some want both.

"Communities aren’t competing only with their neighbors but also with places half a world away," trendspotter Marian Salzman wrote in a forbes.com column. "Around the world, there are 455 metropolises, 3,000 large cities, 2.7 million small cities and towns, and far too many specific districts, boroughs, suburbs, and neighborhoods to tally up. And all want a piece of the action, which means it’s time to step up to the plate."

In this snooze-you-lose economy, states, regions, and communities are increasingly turning to place branding, a strategy that helps differentiate their little corner of the world from all the others. Think of place branding as putting your community out there in a way that resonates with residents and visitors alike.

"Perhaps more than companies, and certainly more than most personalities, locations and destinations need to brand themselves," Salzman says. "They need to have an identity and to have a say in the stories that are being told about them."

‘Place branding matters’

Another term you might hear is placemaking, which the Project for Public Spaces (PPS) has described as “a process and a philosophy.”

"Placemaking," PPS says, “is centered on observing, listening to, and asking questions of the people who live, work, and play in a particular space to understand their needs and aspirations for that space and their community as a whole.

“Turning a shared vision into a reality — into a truly great place — means finding the patience to take small steps, to truly listen, and to see what works best in a particular context," PPS adds.

While many places use place branding or placemaking to attract tourism dollars — think Branson, Mo., Las Vegas, Nev., and Atlantic City, N.J. — others build a brand to boost economic development.

They realize that a strong, positive, identifiable image that is reinforced, subtly and not so subtly, on their website, in their dealings with the public, at community events, and along their streets can help them attract the jobs, growth, and residents they want.

“In economic development terms,

Everyone else

WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE?
In this snooze-you-lose economy, states, regions, and communities are increasingly turning to place branding, a strategy that helps differentiate their little corner of the world from all the others.

Place branding can help your township beat the competition for economic development and tourism dollars. The whole idea behind it is to zero in on the unique characteristics that make your community stand out from the crowd.
Digital strategist Tom Ford says communities of all sizes should give it a chance.

And while it’s not absolutely necessary to work with a branding consultant or company, experts agree that townships may be happier with the final product if they enlist a professional to guide, advise, and educate local officials.

“Branding can be off-putting, especially to smaller communities with limited budgets and staffs,” says Ford, managing director of MarketingModo in Frederick, Md. “They think it’s going to cost a lot of money, but they can build a website that will enhance their visibility for $1,000 or less.

“Many communities have the bones to start branding themselves,” he adds. “They just don’t realize it.”

Ford recommends splashing your township seal or logo on every visual associated with your community so that it becomes immediately recognizable to residents and visitors.

West Vincent Township in Chester County, which is proud of its convenient location and character, has taken steps to reinvent itself, too, with a new logo that is prominently featured on its website, newsletter, brochures, business cards, and signs.

“Our goal was to bring the township into the 21st century with a fresh look that projects a more professional, welcoming image,” township manager Erica Batdorf says. “Consistency is crucial so we put our logo everywhere.” (Note: To learn more about creating a logo, see the sidebar on page 17.)

Communities should also have a thoughtful, professional-looking web presence, Ford says.

“Municipalities are starting to deal with a generation of home and business owners who grew up with the internet. That’s where they go first for information, and that’s where they start forming their impressions.

“Image is everything so invest in it,” Ford adds. “It’s the 21st century. You absolutely need a website.”

In addition to creating a positive first impression, place branding helps local leaders see the big picture by focusing on the community’s mission and devising an ongoing strategy to manage its image and destiny.

Branding expert Marian Salzman says you’ll know when you’re on the right track.

“Done right, place branding sends destinations into a virtuous circle,” she says. “People wanting to visit means people wanting to move there means companies wanting to tap that talent means [communities] becoming even more attractive to tourists and potential new residents.”

So where do you start? Vehr Communications developed the following place branding principles to help local officials navigate the process:
PSATS has created a newsletter to help townships educate residents about local government issues

Do you think your residents misunderstand township government? Do you wish you had something you could share with them to show that townships are taking positive steps to make Pennsylvania a better place to live, work, and do business?

Townships Today is a quarterly newsletter and marketing tool that PSATS has designed to help members provide residents with in-depth information about local government issues.

“Pennsylvania has a rich history, and townships have played a significant role in shaping it,” PSATS Executive Director Dave Sanko says. “For most Pennsylvanians, however, their education about township government ends with their high school civics class and picks up again with the local news, which decides what it wants your residents to know about townships and the issues they’re facing.”

Townships Today, a newsletter written specifically for your residents by the Association’s staff, solves this problem by presenting the township perspective on issues.

“The newsletter’s sole focus is local government because the township story needs to be told — and told in a way so that your residents understand the challenges you face each day,” Sanko says.

Released quarterly, Townships Today has two significant benefits.

“Townships with newsletters will be able to take advantage of the Association’s expertise to expand the information they’re currently sharing with residents,” he says. “At the same time, townships that don’t publish a newsletter can start producing one with very little effort.”

PSATS members are alerted by email when a new Townships Today has been posted on psats.org. The newsletter comes in two formats, a pdf and a Word document, to make it easy for townships to reproduce and distribute the document or post it on their municipal website.

For more information about Townships Today, call Editor Jill Ercolino at (717) 763-0930, ext. 125. To view the current and past issues, go to psats.org and click on “Publications.”

Overlooking the obvious

Some townships, however, have trouble pinpointing what makes their community special — the very linchpin of successful branding — so they tend to rely on familiar and safe messaging. One of the most common is “a great place to live, work, and play.”

McEachern calls this “me too” messaging and says local officials should avoid it.

“Stay away from messaging that your consumers — residents, visitors and businesses — hear every day,” he says. “That messaging is not safe — it’s marketing suicide.”

“A lot of the townships can say they have a low cost of living,” Ford says. “The key is to put the local flavor on your brand — to localize it.”

Community planners Jim and Lisa Segedy aren’t surprised that local leaders struggle to define their township’s distinctive assets and characteristics and capitalize on them.

The Pittsburgh couple, who have spent their careers teaching, researching, and advising local leaders on land use issues, say that officials are often so consumed with their municipality’s day-
to-day operations that they don’t stop to consider what makes it truly unique.

A good example, they say, comes from Grand Island, Neb.

While attending a conference, the Segedys were touring a Grand Island nature center with a local planner when Lisa spotted a cluster of cranes. These weren’t just any cranes, though; they were sandhill cranes, whose annual spring migration has been named one of North America’s greatest natural wildlife phenomena by National Geographic.

When she excitedly pointed out the cranes, the official looked at her like she was crazy. “He said, ‘They’re just birds,’ and that’s when I told him, ‘Those aren’t just birds, and you don’t understand the tourism potential you have here.’ That’s when I saw the light go on in his head.”

Grand Island officials soon discovered that a sandbar on the nature center’s property is the largest crane roost in the world during the migration.

Today, thousands of birders and other visitors make the pilgrimage to Grand Island each March to see the cranes. The state of Nebraska has even capitalized on the event with this messaging: “Some people regard Nebraska as a place you cross on the way to a more interesting place. More than half a million sandhill cranes disagree.”

Growing from the inside out

Another problem, the Segedys say, is that some communities are so focused on what was — maybe a major local employer went bankrupt or moved to another town — that they simply have no idea how to move forward.

“I see that here in western Pennsylvania,” Lisa Segedy says. “We have communities that are connected to what used to be, not what is here now, and they keep waiting for it to come back. The reality is, it won’t.”

This downward economic spiral began for many communities in the last quarter of the 20th century, the pair say. “What typically followed was a local scramble to attract growth...from anywhere,” Jim Segedy notes. “The emphasis was on growing from the outside in, rather than building sustainably on existing resources, something that was already theirs.”

The planners’ advice: If you want to successfully reinvent your community, grow from the inside out.

Pittston in Luzerne County was one of those communities. Wedged between the better-known cities of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, it needed to find a new way to attract visitors.

Township creates positive first impression with welcome packet for new residents

You never get a second chance to make a first impression. That’s why Edgmont Township in Delaware County puts its best foot forward by giving new residents a welcome packet.

“It’s just a nice little thing we do,” retired manager Samantha Reiner says. “It gives people a good feeling about the community.”

The welcome packet includes a township calendar and newsletter, voter registration forms, emergency preparedness tips, a community map, and information about recreational activities.

Townships that want to create a great first impression may want to consider doing something similar in their community.
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and Wilkes-Barre, it struggled to get noticed and recover after the coal mining industry collapsed. In the early 20th century, mining had brought the small city of 7,700 to prominence.

Digital strategist Tom Ford was born and raised there. “When I was growing up,” he says, “Pittston was economically depressed and had a lot of vacant buildings.” However, he says, the city never lost its community spirit, which was evident at the many church festivals held each summer. In the early 2000s, a movement began in Pittston. The municipality along the Susquehanna River was ready to reinvent itself by embracing the local art scene and becoming a regional art hub.

Galleries and massive murals that pay homage to its history and people now dot the downtown as the community proudly boasts that it’s “in the middle of it all.” Pittston also claims to be “the quality tomato capital of the world,” which it celebrates at a four-day Tomato Festival that draws 50,000 visitors.

“Pittston created something out of bare bones,” Ford says, “and has evolved to the next stage.” Others can, too, the Segedys say.

“Local leaders should ask themselves, ‘What do we have that we can build on?’” Jim Segedy says, adding that it could be a local landmark or an event that celebrates a well-loved local food, animal, or activity. “Every community has something. You just have to put your finger on it.”

Noxen Township in Wyoming County, for instance, is home to the annual Rattlesnake Roundup, an educational event that’s the largest fundraiser for the local fire department. Meanwhile, Punxsutawney in Jefferson County has built a whole economy around its famous groundhog.

In Brattleboro, Vt., residents celebrate farmers and food with the annual “Strolling of the Heifers,” a popular weekend event that includes a bovine beauty pageant, parade, and baking contests. One Indiana town embraced
NEED A NEW TOWNSHIP LOGO?

Follow this four-step approach to find the right designer for the job

A logo says a lot about your township, especially if you’re developing it as part of an overall branding campaign, and it’s not something you want to rush.

Exeter Township in Berks County, for example, spent a year working with a graphic designer to come up with an image that it felt reflected the township and where it’s headed.

“We went through at least 20 different versions and did a ton of brainstorming,” says Laurie Getz, the township’s director of communications and community engagement. “We wanted our logo to be a nod to the past and to the future, which was difficult to capture visually.”

In the end, the logo, which was unveiled to the public in April, featured three elements: a young tree to signify growth, new life, and strong roots; wavy blue lines to represent the nearby Schuylkill River; and a cluster of homes to symbolize the community and “the strength of many.”

If your township is considering a similar project, here’s how to find just the right person to create just the right logo for your township:

**Step 1:** Contact two or three designers and have them send you samples of other logos they have designed.

**Step 2:** Interview the designers whose work you like. Take this opportunity to discuss costs and the process for creating your logo, including how many variations of the logo they will create and how many revisions they will do to fine-tune the final design.

**Step 3:** Once you have selected a designer, review your goals — these should be in writing — and explain your township’s mission and philosophies.

**Step 4:** Ask the designer to present several variations of the logo. Use the following checklist to evaluate the proposed designs:

- **Impact:** Does the logo draw attention and interest? Is it easily remembered?
- **Appropriateness:** Does it convey your township’s message and image?
- **Originality:** Is it different from other township logos? Is it distinctive?
- **Aesthetics:** Is it pleasing to the eye?
- **Adaptability:** Will the logo look the same when reduced or enlarged? Is the type readable when the logo’s size is reduced? Will the logo work as well on the side of a township truck as it does in your newsletter or on your website?
- **Longevity:** Is the logo too trendy? Do you think you will like it as much in 10 years as you do now?

Before and...after

![Exeter Township Logo Before and After](image-url)
its perceived blandness by hosting a Lazy Day Festival. Starling and rocking chair contests were part of the festivities. In rural Michigan, several communities have branded the road that connects them as “The Breezeway,” to send the message that the area, flush with farms, lakes, and streams, is worth visiting.

“Look around for your special places, the assets that you can connect to and build on for community vitality and your own unique sense of place,” Jim Segedy says. “Then evaluate what would help people to use and enjoy them more. Improved access? Improved relevance? Improved public safety?”

Next, the pair say, take an inventory of assets that are no longer being used as originally designed. “On first blush, closed-down factories, vacant warehouses, churches up for sale, and boarded-up housing are perceived as intractable problems,” Jim Segedy says, “but has your community looked at ways of allowing these resources to be used in a different way?”

The planners say townships can take cues from places like Asheville, N.C., which has transformed vacant warehouses into thriving artists’ cooperatives. The historic fiber mills in Pawtucket, R.I., are now the centerpieces of many local festivals. In Detroit, vacant lots have become urban farms. Buffalo, N.Y., the Segedys say, owes its resurgence to Garden Walk Buffalo, the largest self-guided walking tour in America.

“A strong local identity becomes important,” Jim Segedy says, “because it’s what brings in people and businesses.”

More than a logo

The trouble is, when building a brand, some communities assume that all they need to do is redesign their logo or come up with a catchy slogan.

Successful branding, however, is more than slick graphics, pretty photos, and clever words, says Mandy Arnold, president and CEO of Gavin, a York-based communications firm that specializes in branding. Your brand is your image, she says, and it should be embodied in everything from your attitude toward the public and businesses to the tone of your public meetings.

“Branding,” Arnold says, “is less about a logo and more about authenticity.”

Or as branding strategist Marian Salzman puts it: “We all know that when you put lipstick on a pig, it’s still a
pig. So just because you give an undesirable destination a clever slogan and stylish logo doesn’t mean it will be a place where people get really excited about visiting, living, or doing business.

“Selling a location involves so much more than sticking a label on it. Actions speak louder than logos.”

With branding, your township is embarking on a journey, but it’s simply not enough to know where you’re going. Your township also has to put a lot of thought into how it’s going to get there. Experts say local leaders shouldn’t fly solo. Residents and other stakeholders need to be invited along for the ride.

“It takes a village to build a brand; local culture and local engagement are essential,” Salzman says. “Place branding has to reflect, engage, and activate the people of the place. Otherwise, it’s all just a logo and a slogan.”

From these collaborative exercises, local leaders can successfully zero in on their township’s or region’s unique assets and attributes, embrace and promote them, and encourage others to do the same.

“The brand must be represented in your community’s architecture, in its events and attractions, in its public art and signage, in the attitudes of residents and public servants, and in the community’s approach to entrepreneurs,” branding strategist Don McEachern says.

“In other words, your community must do more than advertise its brand; it must wear it like a second skin.”

In rural Clinton County, for instance, local government, tourism, and economic development leaders are all working together to put the region’s best foot forward by promoting local businesses, community events, and recreational areas and activities.

“It’s a real grassroots effort,” says Julie Brennan, chamber and tourism director of the Clinton County Economic Partnership, “and we’re all rowing in the same direction.”

One effective strategy has been a weekly things-to-do email that’s delivered to thousands of people. Intended to combat the perception that nothing happens in Clinton County, the email has had the side benefit of sparking enthusiasm among locals, who are just as excited about the events as visitors.

“Now, instead of four ambassadors, we have thousands,” Brennan says. “A lot of positive things are happening here.”

‘Success begets success’

The same can be said for Tobyhanna Township in Monroe County.

Nestled in the heart of the Poconos, Tobyhanna Township is a community on the move. Already home to Kalahari, the largest waterpark in the United States, the municipality will soon be welcoming the Pocono Springs Entertainment Village, a $350 million complex that’s promising 1,200 new jobs and is the largest of its kind in North America.

Economic development projects like this don’t happen by accident, manager John Jablowski Jr. says, giving a lot of credit for this growth to the township’s carefully crafted brand, which is centered on thoughtful, well-planned progress.

“When people say Tobyhanna Township, they know what to expect,” he says, adding that while the community welcomes developers and their projects, it’s also keen on celebrating its natural beauty, recreational areas, and the unique characteristics of its villages.

“We take a lot of pride in what we do.”

The way Jablowski sees it, every community has an identity, and it’s up to local officials to decide whether they’re going to concentrate on where it’s going or where it’s been. Tobyhanna has chosen the former and is using branding to drive home the message that it’s open for business.

“How a community feels about itself becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he says. “Success begets success, and that’s what we’re choosing to focus on.”