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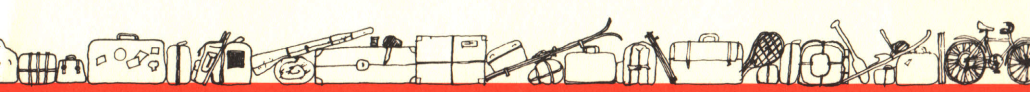


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Creating A Promotional Theme





CREATING A PROMOTIONAL THEME

By Maureen H. McDonough and Gary A. Ackert



People in the tourism industry agree that a critical activity to any tourism business is promotion. Yet, promotional strategies are often begun without working through the very important first step: product identification. This simply means deciding what you are trying to *sell*. This bulletin presents a process for identifying your product or, put a better way, for developing a promotional theme.

Image vs. Identity

The first step in theme development is to understand the difference between image and identity. Your community or business image is based on who people think you are. People often form images of places they have never been and things they have never seen. These images may or may not be based on reality or facts. They are influenced by many things, including facts, education, mass media, other people's attitudes and opinions, and their own past experiences, prejudices, and beliefs. Thus people's image of a community or business may be distorted, inaccurate, or disagree with the community or business image you want. However, you can manage your image through the messages you project to the public.

Before any promotion, you must establish an identity. Identity is based on characteristics that make you what you are, and should equal your image in the minds of the public. The main purpose of promotion is to make sure that your identity and your public image match.

There are many things that make up identity. When promoting a business, identity includes:

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| location | hours of operation |
| type of business | promotional activities |
| size of business | number of employees |
| types of services/products | number/types of customers |
| prices | appearance of your facility |
| climate | community characteristics |



If promoting a community, identity includes:

| | |
|--|--------------------------|
| location | community appearance |
| types of businesses in your community | recreation activities |
| lodging facilities | unique features |
| dining facilities | unique historical events |
| | community hospitality |

Figuring Out Who You Are

The previous list identifies some of the things that make up identity. Every community or business has something that is characteristic or unique that may not be listed here. Review these lists, identify the characteristics of your community or business and list them. Go back and add to the list anything that makes your community or business unique. Once the list is completed, take time to look it over. Make sure to include both negative and positive characteristics. Completeness is important because this list is a picture of your identity.

Your Product

Once identity is established, it is time to decide what you want to promote. It is impossible to promote effectively every characteristic of your identity. Select which characteristics you want to promote. The characteristics now become the *product* you are going to *market* to potential consumers (See Extension bulletin E-1959 for more information).

There are three things to consider when choosing which characteristics to promote:

- 1) Your target audience's needs and desires
- 2) Uniqueness and Positioning
- 3) Honesty and Reality of Your Promotion

People buy or use something because it satisfies a need or desire for them. You need to choose those characteristics of the community or business that will show your target audience that you can satisfy their needs or desires.



When choosing characteristics to help you meet the needs or desires of your target audience, choose those that are unique to your community or business. Every community or business has something that makes it different from the rest. By using traits that are unique you can distinctly “position” your community or business in people’s minds.

Even though you are promoting your community or business, be honest and realistic in how you promote. Do not mislead people. Your community or business must be able to live up to your promotion or people will not visit again. For example, Community A wants to promote itself as a tourist destination. They have compiled a list of the characteristics that makes up their identity. From that list, they have chosen three:

- 1) a large selection of specialty shops;
- 2) these shops are conveniently open for tourists, and
- 3) the community is conveniently located on a major state highway.

These characteristics now make up the “product” that Community A will promote to consumers.

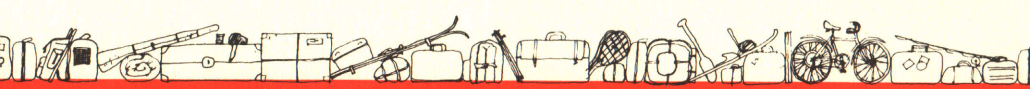
Your Theme

To promote a product effectively, you need to decide on a theme for your promotional strategy. Don’t consider a theme as a gimmick to get people to buy something or as a slogan to attract attention. A theme is the main idea you want people to have about your community. Your *product* becomes the basis for your theme. Each characteristic or part of your product should be reflected in the theme.

Let’s consider Community A. There were three things that they wanted to promote:

- 1) The large selection of specialty shops
- 2) The location along a main state highway
- 3) The convenient hours for travelers.

A possible theme for this community would be: “Community A is conveniently located on M-59 and has the largest selection of



antique specialty shops in the area conveniently open seven days a week.”

Advantages of Themes

The most important function of a theme is to tie all the parts of the promotional strategy together (see Extension bulletin E-1939 for more information). A promotional strategy or plan is similar to a novel or play. A novel or play has many parts, or subplots, which work together to tell a story, as does a promotional strategy. Like novels and plays, your promotional strategy needs a theme to tie all the parts together and to be the underlying message. Having a theme also provides the following advantages:

- 1) A theme provides guidelines for developing your message. Everything in your message relates to the theme.
- 2) The theme helps limit the amount of information put into the message. This makes the messages easier to understand.
- 3) Having a community theme helps bring a community closer together. This provides people with a common identity and pride.
- 4) Themes can be used to “position” you in people’s minds. Positioning means that when people think of something a community has to offer, they think of your community.

Potential Problems with Theme Development

When people start to develop themes, there are three problems that usually arise:

1) “The Theme Park Mentality”—

When people think of themes, they often think of theme parks. Theme parks have different areas with rides that are designated by a theme. These themes are artificial at best. Topics or ideas are chosen for the different areas in the park and the rides are then centered around these topics, making them *themes*. This is completely opposite from how a promotional theme is developed. A promotional theme is based on your identity and cen-



tered around the *product* using the needs and desires of your target market. Your identity is the basis for your theme and your *product* the focal point of it. Make your theme fit your *product*, not your *product* to fit your theme.

2) Uniqueness vs. the “Same Old Stuff”—

People often develop a theme for their community or business, without looking to see if someone else has the same or a similar theme. The key to effective theme development is to be unique. This is not as difficult as it may seem because each community or business has something that is different from those around it.

What is unique about your community? What makes it different from the surrounding ones? Why should people come and visit your community or buy your goods or services? Good theme development involves identifying this uniqueness because people remember promotional themes that are different and appealing.

3) Theme vs. Slogan—

Many people equate slogans with themes. They are not the same! A theme underlies your entire promotional strategy. A slogan is a promotional tool to use to promote your theme. Slogans are statements that communicate different aspects of your theme.

The following list gives some examples of themes and slogans:

| Topic | Theme | Slogan |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------|
| State of Louisiana | The state where dreams can be fulfilled | “The Dream State” |
| State of Montana | Montana is a state full of untapped natural resources | “The Natural Place To Be” |
| Seven-up soft drink | Seven-up is not a cola | “The Uncola” |
| State of Michigan | Take Your Vacation Here in Michigan | “Yes, Michigan!” |



Think again about Community A. Their theme was “Community A is conveniently located on M-59 and has the largest selection of antique specialty shops in the area conveniently open seven days a week.” Possible slogans are “The past comes to life at Community A” or “Shop the past without leaving the present.”

Who Decides?

Deciding who determines what a community or business promotional theme will be is very important. Two important considerations often overlooked are community and employee participation. Community participation is crucial for two reasons. First, your community as a whole projects your identity. To be effective, the majority need to be in agreement. Second, everyone and everything a visitor has contact with communicates and promotes something about your community. Therefore, you need to have a cohesiveness within the community to promote it effectively.

How can you get the community involved in theme development? This can be done by holding special meetings or forums to get input from the community, running contests in local newspapers, or having contests in local schools. This list is not exhaustive. If these will not work for you, develop your own ideas.

In developing a theme for a business, employee involvement is crucial because anything employees say or do that concerns your business communicates something about your business to people. Employees are also in a unique position to be a source of informal, word-of-mouth promotion that influences people. Use a business theme to build employee pride in the business.

Ways to involve employees in the decision process are very similar to those for getting a community involved. Things such as contests, surveys, and calling employee meetings are good ways to get employee involvement. Again, this list is not exhaustive. If these ideas will not work for you, come up with your own.



Theme Implementation and Maintenance

Once a theme is developed, it needs to be implemented effectively by using it in all your promotional activities, whether advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, or publicity. It also needs to be reflected in the community through storefronts, signs, billboards, and city-owned property.

Once a theme is implemented, the next question is how to maintain it? One of the best ways to maintain a theme is to use an organization or committee. (See Extension bulletin E-1958 for more information). This committee or organization is responsible for establishing and maintaining standards on how to use and apply the theme. It is also responsible for evaluating how well visitors are picking up the theme from the promotion being used.

Although implementation and maintenance may seem to be the last steps in the process of developing a promotional theme discussed here, they are really only the beginning. Developing a community theme is a *process* that *never* ends. Constant evaluation is needed to make sure that people are responding to your theme. It must also be in tune with the needs and desires of your target audience and with any changes that occur in your community and business. Remember, be ready to go through this process again to make adjustments to meet these changes.

Conclusion

A unique community theme is an important step in developing a successful promotional strategy. It takes a lot of commitment, time, energy and effort to develop one to meet the needs of both your community or business and consumers. But is it worth it.

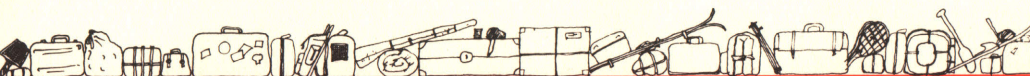


Tourism Information Series

The Tourism Information Series is for those interested in tourism development. To obtain the series, contact your county Extension office. Look in the white pages under County Government.

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3. E-1958, Developing A Tourism Organization
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5. E-1992, Feasibility Analysis in Tourism
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