

Break the Habit:

Branding Strategies for Business Retention



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Break the Habit:

Branding Strategies for Business Retention

Why the BR|E Brand is Ineffective or Worse - Counter Productive

Branding in economic development is interesting. An economic development organization can have a cutting edge BR|E program or a backwater retread. However, with the name business retention and expansion (BR|E) one cannot tell. When the BR|E brand is used, the impact of the brand is the individual's experience or interpretation of the individual words. For example, more often than not, the current economic developer is not the first economic developer to pass through their organization board room. As a result, many Board members and community leaders have seen/heard this all before. We excitedly talk business retention and they hear "rear guard action" (defense). Past experience defines the program's potential, not the current economic developer. If past experience has been bad – more retreading than edge cutting – then the worst is assumed. A new effort will be considered "the same old thing" regardless of its new design or true potential.

New investors/leaders, struggle to understand our BR|E jargon. Frequently they walk away thinking it is just about visiting company executives. An obvious defensive play. Important but, not celebrated. Nothing new or exciting there.

If that were not bad enough, look at this article's negative "positioning" for business retention's target audience.

Northeast states responded with the second strategy, namely, working on ways to keep your own and help them expand. They employed strategies ranging from export led growth, urban redevelopment of older industrial areas, to job training and tax subsidies to modernize existing industries. Business retention expansion became the mantra of economic development in the U.S. in the 1970's and 80's.

There are entire chapters that can be written on how to support existing industry, however; many states and communities have fallen into a trap here: they focus on companies and industries whose products are greatly matured, have become a commodity, and who have little to add in terms of new wealth creation.²

Brand¹

A name, term, symbol, design or combination used to identify a product and differentiate it from competitors **while stirring an emotional attachment.**

Positioning

A statement **crystallizing the critical difference**, setting a product apart from competitors.

Through years of use and abuse, BR|E has connotations that limit the effective deployment of a true existing business strategy. Therefore, defaulting to “Business Retention and Expansion” as a brand name in any of its forms is discouraged. The baggage seriously limits success potential for a new initiative.

Brand

An economic development organization can, and should, have multiple brands: Business Attraction, Workforce, Existing Business Strategy, etc. Multiple brands do not diminish the value of the overall organization’s brand. In fact, marketing multiple brands can have a beneficial effect on an economic development organization primary brand and results. In a recent conversation, Ron Kitchens, CEO, Southwest Michigan First, a seasoned economic development executive shared their approach to brands. “We brand everything!” All brands relate to our overall organization brand with shared elements. We have a brand book to document how brands are used and when they are NOT to be used. Our brands are not reflected on our web site. Our web site is out-facing. It is designed for marketing to external investment prospects. Our brands are inward-facing and used on materials, newsletters, and in event promotion to investors, the public, and our targeted audiences. The brands have been very effective in allowing investors to relate and connect to programs that they are interested in. Volunteering is up by 400 individuals since we implemented the branding. New investments are also up.”

Tougher competition means a product’s superiority is in itself no longer sufficient to guarantee its success. Product and service-related competitive advantages can be mimicked quickly. Generics fade into the background like yesterday’s news. As a result, companies use brands as a more enduring competitive tool. This is most clearly visible in economic development at the campaign level. Today everyone – politicians, educators, government agencies, utilities, niche organizations, and others – boast of their economic development mission and agenda. How can an economic development organization raise money by doing only the same?

Many of the most successful economic development organizations attract funding by program branding. In 2007, the Greater Dubuque Development Corp., IA faced the funding challenge every economic development organization is familiar with: broad mission, many

Reasonable Questions

“How is it that Israel, the land of milk and honey and engineers, is beating New York at marketing its startup scene?”

Israel’s technology startup scene has a far catchier name than the one in New York, the global capital of advertising. Israel’s Silicon Boulevard – the nickname for the Rothschild Boulevard area in Tel Aviv that’s home to many of the country’s most exciting young companies – sounds far more inviting and expansive than the rough, claustrophobic Silicon Alley.”³

priorities, and very, very limited resources. The “Destination for Opportunity” campaign resulted in a bold new plan and raised over \$7 million. The brand led by Info Action, their existing business program, national marketing, and workforce initiatives has been hugely successful. Success was not the result of the brand, but the brand separated what Greater Dubuque did from all the other active players, made them visible and accountable.

As the Dubuque example demonstrates, there is value in branding programs across the organization; however, in this white-paper our focus will remain on branding the existing business program. But, the principles and techniques can be used universally across economic development.

Brand

Think of a brand as a container. It holds ideas, features, services, expectations, and benefits (value proposition) that make up a product or a service.

A name, term, logo, slogan, design, font comprises the identifying characteristics of the brand (container) allowing customers to quickly connect the product, value, and the provider and differentiate it from previous or competitor offerings.

In a service business like economic development, ultimately, your brand is more than your logo, name or slogan — it’s the **entire experience** customers and prospects have with your organization, as well as its products and services. Over time, the brand becomes associated with the reputation of the provider.

Branding

Branding is when a brand (container and contents) is promoted so that it becomes recognizable by an ever increasing number of individuals within the intended audience.

Brand Orientation

Brand orientation is a deliberate approach to working with brands to package products and/or services.

Home Field Advantage

“Ann Burke called it a new way of looking at business retention. She then paused for a second and declared that she didn’t really like that word retention, or at least she didn’t think it worked properly in this context.”

“It sounds too static, like were just preserving the status quo and it’s much more than that, she said, referring to a new program created by the Economic Development Council of Western Mass. (EDC) called **Home Field Advantage**. Describing it, Burke, Vice President of the EDC, said it’s all about effective portfolio management, meaning the region’s portfolio of businesses.”

“Home Field is based on a model used in Louisville, KY and other cities. Home Field is a broader brand to encompass our entire existing business approach, Burke explained, noting that keeping existing companies in the 413 area code is an important part of the EDC’s mission, but only part. We also assist individual business owners with efforts to change, grow, and become more competitive.”⁴

The Power of a Brand

A new brand is a blank slate to be defined by the creator. Color between the lines or spread color everywhere. The creator decides.

The goal of a brand is to give everyone involved a marker that can be used to describe the entire program in a single image (logo) or a few words: Client Solutions (KY). Branding creates the language for others to use to describe or discuss the program.

A brand position, a tagline, a unique selling proposition (UPS) has to resonate with the target audience. It must be believable. It must connect to the activity and or goal. It must address some real – not imagined – need. Info Action (IA) is an excellent example.

Is it necessary to tie the new program brand to BR|E with mentions? Absolutely not! To connect the new brand to BR|E only increases the potential to transfer bad karma and baggage. If BR|E is used interchangeably with the new brand, the desired brand may never take hold. And, members of the target audience may substitute their incorrect or lack of understanding of BR|E instead of taking time to understand the new program.

A brand may be registered as a trademark or sales mark with the US Patent and Trademark Registration Office; however, registration is not required. The advantage of registration is the ability to maintain the exclusive rights to use the brand. Successful registration requires a clear and distinctive mark.

Formulating an Existing Business Brand

Stand out in minds of target audience

Branding is traditionally associated with consumer products (B2C); however, it has taken on an increasingly important role in business-to-business (B2B) as well as service marketing (economic development) over the past 15 years. This was a central theme in our book, *Economic Development: Marketing for Results!* published in the mid-90s. Competition drives the need for visibility and differentiation. Both are prime elements of branding. Add speed of change, and the need for the durability of a brand increases. The program elements within the brand can be evolved or changed as needed over time to keep pace with the demands of the audience to keep the brand current without starting over.

In economic development, good branding provides leverage for attracting investors by making programs more distinct and value more recognizable. A brand gives the economic developer the opportunity to define the programs content and purposes. Brand can be narrow or broad. For example, a narrow brand would cover only the interview element of an existing business program. **Burlington Calling** focuses squarely on the interview process.

Home Field Advantage is a much broader brand and can be used to incorporate a variety of existing industry programs and services. It can encompass all or part of the following elements:

- Existing business strategy
- Cluster strategies
- Supplier strategies
- Programs and services for existing business
- Executive interview/information collection process
- Problem solving
- Technical support services
- Business development activities, aka economic gardening
- Community development

A broader brand is strongly recommended. The advantage may not be important immediately when the goal is just to make personal contact with employers and gather information. However, over time the program must evolve to remain relevant. A narrow brand may not allow integration of new elements.

10 Steps to Building a Brand

Finding your brand name is a process: part science, art, and a little magic. The steps below are the core of the process that we have used repeatedly to develop meaningful brands.

- 1) Who is the audience?
- 2) Think of the brand as a container. What will be inside the container? Will the contents be broadly or narrowly defined? Where will the brand be used? Print. Electronic. Video.
 - a. List the programs/services to be included
 - b. Prioritize these in order of importance to the customer
 - c. Decide what will NOT be in the container
 - d. Determine which have an emotional benefit or appeal to the customer
 - e. Decide how the new brand fits within the overall organization
 - f. Write down key descriptive words
- 3) List partners who will help promote and/or deliver the new program. Seek their input but, do not defer to decision by committee
- 4) List competitors providing the same or a similar service that can be confused with the new program and identify their branding, if any
- 5) Write a brand description
 - a. Focus on descriptive word
 - b. Add emotional hooks

- c. Include personality characteristics (serious, fun, knowledgeable, buttoned down business)
 - d. Describe the desired experience
- 6) Generate a list of possible names. Shorter, simpler is always best.
 - a. Generating names using key words and the brand description
 - b. Don't edit, just add
 - c. Use random stimuli to create new brands or modify current brands listed
- 7) Test the names
 - a. Online search
 - b. Local partners and business executives
 - c. Group as potential, unworthy
 - d. Retest potential using my personal acid tests:
 - i. Number of hits via Bing/Google search. Testing with and without “ ” and + economic development
 - ii. URL name available via Web name search
 - iii. Trademark registration
 - iv. Hash tag reference via twitter search
 - e. Pick a brand
- 8) Collect relevant images or visuals that connect to the names, program, services, key words, emotions, or just stimulate a positive reaction
- 9) Create designs to support the brand
- 10) Prepare a brand launch communication plan. The plan should cover at least 12 months and includes target dates, milestones, potential problems or negative reactions, and what success looks like.

Insider Tips

- Try combining the common with the uncommon. Montgomery EDGE (IL) is an example. While there are many cities and counties sharing the name Montgomery, the addition of EDGE differentiates the Montgomery, County, Illinois program from all others.
- It is OK to take a very common term or phrase and change the context, i.e. **Home Field Advantage**. Home Field Advantage has tons of sports references, but there were no economic development references until the Springfield Business Development Corp. labeled their existing industry program Home Field.

Allow time for the brand exploration process. It just takes time. In a recent branding exercise for a client, we generated over 200 qualified brand name options for a program before finding the winning name. The vast majority of the suggested brands will be eliminated by testing.

Test, test, test. Before finalizing a brand, test it thoroughly. Find out if there are other or similar uses that could be confusing, cause embarrassment, invite a cease and desist letter (been there) or be interpreted in a negative way.

If you are not analytical or creative, find help. One option is to hire or recruit (in-kind service) an agency. An agency can help organize the research phase as well as provide creative input. If you decide to go with an agency, look for an agency with business-to-business branding experience. Then, make sure they put a B2B person on the project.

If the problem is just the creative, there are plenty of creative people and people with B2B marketing experience who can help you think through the brand for your program or create a great logo. There are for example online resources such as [CrowdSpring.com](https://www.crowdspring.com) where a project can be submitted to freelance designers who use your descriptive materials to develop hundreds of possible logos to choose from.

Alternatives to the BR|E Brand

The following is a representative sample of **brand names** currently in use by Synchronist Users in North America. Some have associated logos used to communicate the brand identity to clients, investors, and partners.

Some of the brands listed focus on a specific aspect of business retention like the interview element alone: *Contact (OR)*. Others are broader: *Building Bridges to Business (AZ)*.

Some of the examples shown may be registered trademarks and cannot legally be used without specific permission. It is always appropriate to check before borrowing. Also, some of these programs or the name may have been discontinued; however, the names are included to increase the odds of stimulating new ideas.

Representative Brands Used by Synchronist Users

Advantage Northwest Florida – Florida's Great Northwest, FL

Best of Iowa – Best of Iowa Partnership, IA



Chattanooga Can Do – Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce, TN

<http://www.chattanoogachamber.com/can-do/existing-business-support>

Building Bridges to Business, B3 – Arizona Public Service, AZ

Burlington Calling – Burlington Economic Development Council, Ontario, Canada (inactive)

Business Barometer – Upper Peninsula Economic Development Alliance (UPEDA), MI (inactive)

Business Connections – Quad City Development Group, IA

Business Insight – Georgia Tech University, GA (inactive)

Chilliwack Business Link – Chilliwack Economic Partners Corporation, BC, Canada

<http://www.chilliwackeconomicpartners.com/business-retention-and-expansi/>



Business Resource Network – Mahoning, Trumbull, Columbiana Counties One-Stop, OH

Cabarrus Roots – Cabarrus County Chamber of Commerce, NC

<http://www.cabarrusedc.com/index.php?submenu=ExistingIndustries&src=gendocs&ref=ExistingIndustries&category=BusinessResources>



Chicago Industrial Trend Report – ComEd/Exelon, IL

Client Solutions – Greater Louisville Inc., KY

Economic Vitality Group – Colorado Springs, CO

First Focus – Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, FL



BizPaL – Ajax, Ontario, Canada

<http://www.ajaxfirstforbusiness.ca>



High Impact Program – Greater Louisville Inc., KY

<http://www.greaterlouisville.com/EnterpriseCORP/Services/HighImpactProgram/>

Home Field Advantage -Springfield Business Development Corp., MA

http://www.westernmassedc.com/advantages_of_western_mass/homefieldadvantage/

Info Action – Greater Dubuque Development Corporation, IA

<http://www.greaterdubuque.org/businesses.cfm>

Listening to Business Initiative – a Morris County Economic Development Corp., NJ

<http://www.morriscountyedc.org/document.asp?id=59>

Longmont Existing Industry – Longmont Area Economic Council, CO

Minding Our Own Business – Iowa City Area Development Group, IA

Montgomery EDGE (Economic Development Growing Economy), IL

Nashville Area Existing Business Team – Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, TN

Opportunity Austin – Austin Area Chamber of Commerce, TX

Valued Industry Program (VIP) – Lee's Summit Economic Development Council, MO

Voice of the Customer – Rockford Area Economic Development Council, IL

<http://www.rockfordil.com/workforce/voice-of-the-customer-surveys>

Home Field Advantage



Acronyms: Right or Wrong

As soon as the brand name is selected, a critical decision must be made. What will the common reference be? It seems everyone is looking for a shortcut. When we asked Synchronist users and economic development professionals about their program names (brands), many responded with an acronym. There is no right or wrong answer to the debate on the use of an acronym. The decision should be about added value.

Acronyms are abbreviations that are pronounced as a word or string of letters.

- BEAR (Business Expansion And Retention)
- BREV (Business Retention Expansion Visitation)
- BR&E (Business Retention and Expansion)
- VIP (Valued Industry Program)

Acronyms originated as a convenience to typist. It is easier to type four letters than 29. (BR&E vs business retention and expansion). Acronyms are closely associated with government because of the proliferation in government agencies. As a result, acronyms can have an “air” of bureaucracy. Also, the verbal use of acronyms creates an environment of “insider” speak. This can make those who do not recognize the acronym feel like an outsider. Habitual use often makes it difficult to draw in outsiders. Without a definition, listeners will “gather” a definition from the conversation. This could lead to an inaccurate definition of the desired program.

If the acronym is an awkward combination of letters, too cute, or is close to a word or acronym which has negative baggage, don't go there. Find a different, better common reference for your brand. Backing into a brand by starting with an acronym is not a great idea either. Some development organizations have used this approach and then played with words to fit the acronym to build a brand. Generally, these names are not very satisfactory. Creating an acronym that is a word is also dangerous. BEAR (above) fits in this category. All words have associations – positive and negative. While your association might be positive, others could react differently. Before deciding on an acronym, do some online searching. For example, a quick search for the acronym BEAR produced at least 15 definitions besides business retention and expansion.

Don't let a brand be diminished by use as an acronym without a decision. Using an acronym can dilute a brand. Investing the time, effort, and resources to create a brand like Springfield, MA's Home Field Advantage, should not be undermined for convenience. Do not use HFA or allow others to use it. Gently correct improper use to stress the brand: Home Field Advantage. An alternative to an acronym is to decide on an acceptable short form during the brand building process: Home Field. Used consistently, an alternative can eliminate slipping into the habit of an acronym. To successfully avoid an unintended

acronym, this decision must be made before going public or there is a high probability an acronym will evolve, potentially displacing the desired brand.

Imagery for Business Retention

Economic developers have struggled for years to find images that communicate elements of business retention with less than satisfactory results. The classic image is two or three people meeting and/or two executive types shaking hands. Another example recently offered was the well-worn puzzle metaphor with one piece disconnected or missing.

Conducting an online image search with your favorite browser for “business retention”, will generate some examples of the images associated with BR|E. A general search also produces hits on customer and employee retention. A specific search will produce pictures from web sites of economic developers and others involved in business retention. Unfortunately, there is little to inspire.

To push the creative button, we offer the following thoughts...

- In abstract, the process is much like that of the honey bee. Visit flowers here and there, picking up bits and pieces here and dropping it elsewhere to the benefit of all. Connecting lines, but no straight path. One lone bee looking out at a field of KS sunflowers then, buzzing in...
- Maybe a suspension bridge, “bridging gaps in uncertain environments”.
- The tent fold on a desk, I “heart” (love) our businesses...
- Sign hanging along Main Street, “Solutions Here!”
- Imagine a blank billboard, what would you say?



One trick we use constantly is an image search on a web browser. Searching the database of image providers like, iStockPhoto.com also works. Pick a word from your concepts/ideas or related to the strategy and details. Search the word. Scan the resulting images and graphics for ideas. On a recent project, we found the prime visual element of a brand logo in a Burning Man Festival snapshot. Inspiration can come from anywhere. Another trick is to sample magazines you would normally not read. Experiment. Successfully finding images and creating logos is all about focused effort combined with new stimulation.

Program Branding Tips

- 1) Does the brand message ring true? Hype serves no function except to increase skepticism.
- 2) Does the brand capture the need and the solution? – Business Insight (GA)
- 3) Is the brand broad enough to encompass the intended program and allow for growth or adding new elements over time? – Best of Iowa
- 4) Does the branding incorporate the critical difference between this program and previous programs? – Home Field Advantage (MA)
- 5) Does it capture the essence of the program? – Business Vitality (CO)
- 6) Is it simple? Focus on the imbedded truth. – Client Solutions (KY)
- 7) Distinctive? If everyone else is using the same brand, it is not a brand. Generic phrases defined by someone else provide no leverage to move investors, leaders. – Building Bridges to Business (AZ)
- 8) What do others think about the brand? Ask your critics to shred your brand strategy and message. Tap into the experience of marketing professionals as well. Seek out business to business executives for counsel.
- 9) Can it be sold? Put the proposed brand in context when presenting it to leadership. Show how it will be used in text, print, and virtual formats. Share some of the research that led to the brand.
- 10) How will you avoid the acronym trap as it rolls out?

Final Thought

It is all perception. Day in and day out, the work will be the same. The benefits and value delivered will probably be the same. But, if people perceive the program to be new, fresh, relevant, and leading edge, the overall results for the organization change dramatically. People want to be involved in things they can relate to. Give them a brand for your existing business strategy they can relate to. Marketing is not just for business attraction! Speaking of marketing, it is OK, even important to expose your internal brands to your external investment audience. Put your existing industry brand on your web site. It is a demonstration of commitment and professionalism.

The brand is just part of a successful program. A great brand won't save a weak program or poor execution. Conversely, the lack of a brand does not doom a solid, well executed program. Many economic developers have built excellent programs and produced exemplary results using the BR|E moniker. However, it is time to move on. It is time to package and market the excellent work as more than a defensive action.

Notes:

¹ *Economic Development: Marketing for Results!* 1995, Eric P. Canada, Blane, Canada Ltd.

² Quotes: Confessions of a Big Game Hunter, Bill Sproull, President & CEO, Richardson Economic Development Partnership, TX

³ 1.6 Degrees of Separation, David Berkowitz, Social Media Insider, 6/5/2012

⁴ Source: BusinessWest (MA)

Blane, Canada Ltd.

Branding Support

Tap into Blane, Canada Ltd.'s marketing expertise to help design, build, and/or brand your organization's existing business or other economic development program.

Blane, Canada Ltd. brought business-to-business (b2b) marketing to economic development before it was fashionable. In our 1995 book, *Economic Development: Marketing for Results!* we outlined the [application](#) of b2b strategies in an economic development environment. Let us help you with results oriented branding and marketing support.

More information: www.BlaneCanada.com | 630.462.9222 | info@blanecanada.com

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Synchronist is a platform for effectively managing an organization's business relationships, conducting business assessments/executive interviews (value, growth, risk, and satisfaction), and managing service delivery. The primary modules of Synchronist Suite include:



Synchronist CRM	Client Relationship Management
Synchronist PRIME	Primary sector executive interview and analysis
Synchronist CRTS	Convention, Retail, Tourism, and local Services (main street) executive interview and analysis
Synchronist OpMgr	Prospect, Expansion, and start-up project management and reporting

Cloud based, Synchronist gives clients freedom from the office as well as the ability to collaborate across organizational boundaries and geography while maintaining complete control. Synchronist Suite is a powerful "value" added tool for economic development organizations.

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