



Tue, Sep 30, 2003

Successful state brand will tell others what we like about ourselves

Inside Wisconsin
by Tom Still

GREEN BAY - In some ways, Lambeau Field seemed an odd place for a discussion about a different "brand" for Wisconsin. After all, the home of the Green Bay Packers is the Citadel of the Cheeseheads; the epicenter of a Wisconsin brand that evokes images of football, brats, beer and frozen tundra.

Viewed another way, Lambeau was an ideal place to talk about how people beyond Wisconsin's borders perceive the state as a place to live and do business. The "new" renovated Lambeau is a year-round destination point because it's a state-of-the-art icon. It preserves tradition yet offers the latest amenities.

Speakers at the Sept. 24 "WisBusiness.com" forum on branding agreed that's how Wisconsin must present itself to the world - as a place where values and traditions are important to our lifestyle, but where innovation and a global perspective drive our commerce.

The branding forum was prompted by the introduction of a bill in the Legislature (Assembly Bill 240) that would require the state to conduct a branding study. The first question lawmakers may ask is: What is branding? Definitions vary, but here's how marketing expert Marsha Lindsay of Madison explains the concept.

"Brand marketing is all about creating and communicating a compelling, relevant point of difference. A brand is the executive summary (complete with judgments pro and con) of all the expectations, thoughts, feelings and associations that we carry in our minds. Thus, the Research Triangle is a brand, as is Silicon Valley, Hollywood, Bosnia, Britain and Wisconsin," Lindsay wrote in a paper for the Wisconsin Economic Summit.

The most effective brands are those delivered consistently over time. Fortunately or not for Wisconsin, the only consistently delivered brand is the "cheesehead" moniker, which was thrust on the state by disgruntled Chicago Bears' fans and all-too-cheerfully adopted by people in Wisconsin. Tune into a national sportscast involving the Packers or the Wisconsin Badgers and you'll invariably see someone wearing a Styrofoam cheesehead wedge, or someone else serving up cheese in one form or another. While that fits with the state's dairy tradition and even suggests a fun-loving culture, it tends to suffocate any competing Wisconsin brands.

"We're more than a cheesehead place, more than the Packers," said Kathi Seifert, a Kimberly-Clark executive who argued the right brand could "take us out of the cheesehead mold and into (another) place." In agreement was none other than John Jones, the No. 2 executive with the Packers. While the cheese, brats and fun image is a part of what Wisconsin needs to convey, Jones said, it must also tell outsiders how the state is filled with hard workers, cutting-edge researchers and globally competitive companies. "We have a story," Jones said, "that America and the rest of the world need to know about." Other panelists said Wisconsin shouldn't try to dispose of whatever brand exists today - but bend it to the state's advantage.

"Let's take the things we're given and spin them to our benefit," said Mark Schmitz, head of Z-D Studios in Madison. Schmitz and his firm led the visual imaging remake of Lambeau Field and advises other corporate and government clients.

"We have to play to our strengths," said Rep. Steve Weickert, R-Appleton, who authored AB-240 as a catalyst to force the debate about branding and to encourage political support for the concept.

Tourism Secretary Jim Holperin said he supported the bill, but cautioned that a branding study and follow-up

campaign could take time and cost money. Building a better Wisconsin "brand" probably won't make everyone happy, he said, but it's far better to try rather than let others brand the state in an accidental or anecdotal way.

Branding Wisconsin won't be a project done by committee. It will require careful research and political patience as the marketing effort unfolds. The choice is ours: Let the world believe there's nothing more to Wisconsin than cheeseheads, or tweak our image to invite the well-educated workers, cutting-edge companies and investors who are necessary to building a high-growth economy.

Still is president of the Wisconsin Technology Council and is the former associate editor of the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison.

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