

## Community Branding for Small Towns

### Idea:

Building a cohesive brand for a small town means more than simply creating a logo, slogan or website design. A community's brand encompasses everything the community represents, including all of the the collection of thoughts, feelings, perceptions and experiences community members and visitors associate with the town. The narrative that is associated with a small town — particularly in Appalachia — is often wrong, distorted or incomplete, and changing that narrative calls for a comprehensive, wholistic brand campaign.

In our two classes (Strategic Communications Campaigns and Brand Storytelling), students work over two semesters as a full-service agency to rebrand a small town. They conduct thorough primary research through community roundtables, creative visioning sessions, surveys of community members and target audiences. They build relationships with community members through constant contact and face-to-face interaction, engaging in a truly collaborative process. They then use the information gleaned from that research and relationships to drive brand strategy and create campaign goals that results in a unique brand that is authentic to the community's core values and self-image.

Students also create multiplatform brand storytelling pieces that serve the strategic goals of the campaign. Through multimedia and traditional print ads, documentary video profiles, Storycorps-style community conversation events, print ads and content created for emerging mediums like augmented and virtual reality, they present a community's unique amenities to potential visitors and community members while at the same time authentically reshaping the narrative surrounding its identity.

Community branding is an approach that values people and place over product. It recognizes that each community is unique and that, although goals and objectives for two community brands may be similar, one size does not fit all.

### Goals:

Students in our community branding classes:

- Research and examine a strategic communications (advertising and public relations) problem/opportunity in an actual, real-world situation.
- Are immersed in a small Appalachian town and develop a deep understanding of the town's needs and the community members' hopes and dreams for their town
- Execute a multi-phase branding campaign and create a plan for long-term sustainability of the brand
- Plan events in the community that serve the strategic goals of the branding campaign
- Understand how to use persuasive storytelling to drive empathy and connection
- Learn multimedia production skills using professional cameras, audio equipment and emerging storytelling tools like augmented and virtual reality

- Develop multimedia content that serves greater campaign goals and objectives, including print and digital ads targeting key audiences on television, social media, and other platforms

**How does it work:**

During registration, students apply to enroll in each course. This is to ensure that they are ready for the responsibility of an immersive, engaged semester and the logistical demands of the classes, which include a significant travel commitment. Early in the Fall semester, students visit the community and begin to develop relationships with community members. Both classes participate in an “immersion trip” which is built around a community brand kickoff event. This event introduces the students and community to each other, and serves as an opportunity to start gathering information from community members that will later serve the development of the campaign.

In the classroom, students in the strategic communications campaigns class begin on secondary research, analyzing the community’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, key competitors and target audiences. The brand storytelling class analyzes community branding approaches by small and large cities and towns, and look closely at community storytelling approaches that celebrate individuals, culture and place. They also receive training in photography, videography and audio production.

After the secondary research is completed, the strategic communications campaigns class begins primary research. They conduct surveys of key target audiences, hold community roundtable sessions that inform messaging and creative workshops where community design, color and imaging preferences are measured. These findings then drive the execution of creative strategy by the brand storytelling class team.

Throughout the semester, brand storytelling students work to gather content for multimedia pieces that serve the greater campaign goals. For example, if the community’s brand is a destination brand, the print and digital content will highlight amenities (restaurants, businesses, lodging) while also capturing the community’s unique people and places.

By the end of the first semester, students present the brand to the community advisory board and begin to plan for the brand launch in the second semester. During the second semester, the brand is officially “launched” to the entire community and strategies outlined in the branding plan are executed, such as: increasing the community’s social media presence, placing physical, print, and digital ads targeting key audiences and creating a new website for the town. They learn budgeting and ad campaign planning through these real-world interactions. At the same time, community brand storytelling continues through more conversation events and production of brand storytelling pieces that capture the town’s identity.

**Student Reaction:**

Students overwhelmingly appreciate this opportunity to give back to the community, and understand that although the work is demanding, it is some of the most rewarding work they can do as — they understand that they get back as much as they put in.

- “Traveling to [the community] was an eye opening experience. This trip made me proud of not only myself and my teammates, but proud of the entire state and the university.”
- “In PR, it's easy to get caught up in the research and strategy side of everything, but being enveloped in their culture and heritage made you take a step back and look at the differences we were making for this community.”
- “Seeing the effect our work had outside of a classroom setting was a rewarding experience not offered by any other class I've had at [the University].”
- “It feels unreal to see [the community] engage with a video that I edited and created from the authentic footage that we captured. It is eye opening looking at the amount of shares and engagement that my video has gained.”
- “This is a community almost unanimously supportive of our efforts, and there's truly a positive energy at community events.”