

# Neighborhood Branding and Marketing

A series on redefining your neighborhood's image



Deciding on the Core Elements of the New Neighborhood Brand



## **This article is part of a series of publications by the NeighborWorks America Stable Communities Initiative**

that shares key concepts, strategies and tools to assist nonprofit community developers and other community-based organizations in repositioning perceptions of their target neighborhoods. The purpose of this series is to help these groups to create community pride and attract and retain residents, businesses and investment. Visit [www.StableCommunities.org](http://www.StableCommunities.org) to download the complete series and access additional resources to inform your community stabilization efforts.

### **NEIGHBORWORKS AMERICA**

NeighborWorks America is one of the country's preeminent leaders in affordable housing and community development. We work to create opportunities for lower-income people to live in affordable homes in safe, sustainable neighborhoods that are healthy places for families to grow. NeighborWorks delivers many of its community-focused programs and services through the national NeighborWorks network – more than 240 independent, community-based nonprofit organizations serving more than 4,500 communities nationwide.

### **THE STABLE COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE**

NeighborWorks America launched the Stable Communities Initiative in 2007 to support the efforts of local nonprofit organizations to mitigate the damaging effect of vacant and abandoned foreclosed homes on their communities. The vision of the Stable Communities Initiative is to promote comprehensive community stabilization strategies that produce new homeowners, quality rental housing, and sustainable revitalized communities. This vision is accomplished by facilitating partnerships at the national and local levels and by providing a host of resources including training, technical assistance, workshops and publications on issues related to community stabilization.

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Kelsh received his Bachelor of Science degree in Transportation, Travel and Tourism at Niagara University and a Master in Business Administration at the University of Hawaii. Kelsh was the first student intern with the United States Travel Service at the U.S. Department of Commerce and was appointed by Hawaii's governor to manage that state's first comprehensive statewide tourism development plan. During this period, Kelsh also wrote Hawaii's hotel overbooking law and managed the state contract with the Hawaii Visitors Bureau.

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See page 10 for definitions of branding terms used throughout this article.

## Deciding on the Core Elements of the New Neighborhood Brand

### WHAT IS A BRAND?

All neighborhoods have a brand. Brands are simply what people think of your neighborhood, either good or bad. Anyone who is aware of your neighborhood has a brand in mind. Successful neighborhood brands offer the promise of something positive, and hopefully unique, to your target audiences. Brands are not what you say about your neighborhood, but are what others *believe* about it. In this respect, brands are more about people's experiences with the neighborhood and less about your marketing messages. A successful neighborhood brand does the following things:

- A brand promises something and delivers on the promise in a tangible way.
- A brand projects something unique within its market area.
- A brand is relevant to an audience large enough to use the brand and keep it going.
- Consumers must be aware of the brand and believe it has value.

- The brand must become popular and create demand.

A successful brand is unifying, distinctive, focused and consistent and it makes a promise to current and potential residents, homebuyers and other target audiences.

### OVERVIEW AND INITIAL STEPS

Rebuilding distressed neighborhoods to achieve community stabilization is a large task requiring a long-term, multi-disciplinary effort. In addition to the applied talents of local nonprofits, city planners, housing developers, community organizers and other professionals, participation of the neighborhood's residents is crucial to success. In particular, resident participation is needed to define the desired neighborhood image that will inspire investment by current and future homeowners, residents and stakeholders. This step discusses how to arrive at consensus on the core elements of that image, or brand.

This article describes an exercise that your branding team can use to identify the core elements of



## Tips

your brand. It involves (1) identifying neighborhood attributes, (2) surveying residents and key target markets regarding the importance and performance of those attributes, and (3) analyzing the survey results to reveal where your strengths lie. This analysis will suggest your core brand elements. The next article (*Defining the New Brand*) will discuss how to use these core elements to create a “brand statement.”

Before arriving at the point at which residents begin deciding on a neighborhood brand, it is likely that several other tasks have already been accomplished that makes the process easier.

### 1. CREATING YOUR TEAM

Make the branding process inclusive. Create a branding team that represents a variety of viewpoints and is capable of conducting community outreach. Include on the team local opinion leaders and individuals that bring helpful disciplines to the table. Team members might include a representative from the neighborhood association, a city planner, a real estate broker, a housing contractor, a local business owner, an arts advocate or a market researcher. Most of them should be neighborhood residents. Keep the size of the branding team to about seven to nine individuals, so that consensus becomes manageable. The branding team may be separate from or part of any marketing committee the neighborhood may already have. One of the first tasks of the team is to determine the best way of communicating the branding process to local residents and designing a

- Be inclusive of the neighborhood residents and stakeholders when identifying your strengths. After all, they will have to deliver on the brand promise.
- Think about tangible strengths that can be seen and heard, like cleanliness, beauty and events, as well as intangible strengths like friendliness and tolerance of diversity that offer emotional benefits.
- Don't try to include too many promises. Keep your promises to a few of the strongest simple ideas.

good methodology for receiving and gathering their input at various stages of the process.

### 2. UNDERSTANDING YOUR CURRENT BRAND

The branding team will lead the effort to reach agreement on the current neighborhood brand. For some the effort might start with gaining an accurate understanding of what a brand really is. For example, a logo by itself is not a brand. A brand is what people think about your neighborhood based on their own experiences, or what they have heard or seen. It is about the expectations of those inside and outside the community. Another way of putting it is that a brand is a promise of what the neighborhood will deliver. Understanding your current brand means understanding whether people have positive or negative expectations of or experiences with the neighborhood.

### 3. UNDERSTANDING NEIGHBORHOOD GOALS

Learning opinions about the current brand will be quite a revelation. Make sure to hear the positive

# Attributes

and negative opinions of a wide variety of people, including residents, non-residents, investors, potential homebuyers and others. This will start a wide-ranging discussion about how to fix or improve underperforming elements within the community. Try to understand neighborhood sentiment on key issues like population density, gentrification, cultural expression, physical improvements and community representation. These issues and their priorities are very important in determining the future direction of the neighborhood, and they will impact the type of brand you can project through positioning and marketing.

## 4. IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING TARGET MARKETS

Place brands are most successful when they are specific. Brands that have “something for everyone” are weak, lack credibility and fail to excite. Before identifying a new brand, identify the most important audiences – that is, those individuals who will benefit the neighborhood with new home ownership or investment – and what will excite them. Certainly, current residents are an important target market. They want to agree with how they are represented, and they need to feel comfortable with supporting and projecting the brand in many small ways. Potential residents are important too. They are looking for a neighborhood they can identify with, and one that offers something the others do not. Business owners, responsible landlords and other investors are also an important market. They want to know that the neighborhood has a healthy economic future. The branding team’s challenge is to develop a brand that will encompass all these things.

### CORE BRAND ELEMENTS

Before you can articulate the brand, you first need to identify its core elements. Deciding on the core elements of your new neighborhood brand means that your neighborhood agrees on what you are going to promise to deliver. It will be easier to deliver on your promise if you base the brand on your neighborhood strengths. It is a bonus if your strengths are unique to the area.

**Ambience** – those visual things that add to a pleasant public environment

- A good impression upon arrival
- Clean streets and sidewalks
- Interesting architecture
- Landscapes, gardens and flowers
- Public art
- Infrastructure – those things that are core to a functioning neighborhood
- Public transportation/walkability
- Parking
- Quality streets/sidewalks/lighting at night
- Good schools

**Amenities** – those things that add valuable experiences

- Cultural or historical places
- Quality parks and recreation
- Public events and entertainment

**People and Values** – resident interactions

- Friendly and helpful neighbors
- Acceptance, tolerance, diversity

**Housing** – the mix and quality of residences

- Up and coming/strong potential for equity
- More affordable houses or greater value compared to other neighborhoods
- Fixer-upper opportunities
- High-quality rental opportunities
- High-quality ownership opportunities
- Owner-occupied rental opportunities

**Proximity** – the convenience of getting around

- To downtown amenities
- To employment
- To shopping for high-quality basics
- To shopping for specialties/restaurants
- To social services

## Tip

### DETERMINING YOUR DELIVERABLE STRENGTHS AND EXPERIENCES

Coming up with a list of neighborhood strengths can be a daunting experience, especially when you involve a large number of stakeholders in the process. Make it easier to handle by putting your potential attributes into categories. Here is one way to break them down. You may want to add other attributes, or new categories to fit your own neighborhood circumstances.

The worksheet in the Appendix “Prioritizing Neighborhood Brand Elements” can be copied and used by your branding team to record the opinions of different groups you may want to survey. Identify all the attribute categories and specific attributes that you want to include in the exercise, so that your neighborhood character is well represented.

### SURVEYING RESIDENTS, STAKEHOLDERS AND TARGET MARKETS

The next step is to survey residents, stakeholders and other target markets regarding the importance and performance of neighborhood attributes. A vital piece of information in developing a brand that reflects the community and its vision is how important a particular issue is, and how the community is perceived in performing with regards to that issue. For example, if residents believe a brand for their neighborhood should emphasize the cultural diversity of the community, they would rate it as a high priority. However, if they think the neighborhood does a poor job of demonstrating its cultural diversity, then diversity is a low-performing attribute. Therefore, more tangible evidence of cultural diversity must be demonstrated before it can be the basis for a brand.

**Begin by surveying residents** – you can survey non-residents later. Identify different groups by asking survey respondents which group they belong to so that you can compare the results between different points of view. To capture multiple points of view, compare residents from different sections of the neighborhood, or residents with retail shop owners, or single-family dwellers with multi-family dwellers,

If you know of residents who moved into the neighborhood within the past year, you might ask them to complete the survey based on the factors that they considered while making the decision to move. Their answers will provide insights into the mindset of likely homebuyers.

different civic group member perspectives, or renters with homeowners.

Decide how to get the survey distributed. Distributing paper copies is the simplest way to get them out, but then they must be collected. If a significant part of your community has Internet access, you can put the survey online. One of the benefits of an online survey is that results can be automatically tabulated. There are several online survey providers than you can subscribe to on a monthly basis. Most have templates so you can build your own questionnaire. **Constantcontact.com** is one good example.

After surveying neighborhood residents, decide which other target markets should be asked to participate in identifying attributes of the neighborhood that are important to them. Here are some possible target markets:

**Real Estate Agents and Investors** – Real estate agents who sell homes in the neighborhood and investors interested in becoming landlords will offer useful perspectives on neighborhood strengths, weaknesses and market trends. If your neighborhood has a small commercial retail street, then you would include realtors who specialize in retail space and commercial building investors, as well as potential owners/operators of retail businesses. Find out which real estate agents do a lot of business in your neighborhood (or comparable neighborhoods). Likewise, identify landlords or investors who operate in your neighborhood or similar parts of town.

# Example

## Survey Results

Resident Response	Importance			Strength		
	Low	Med	High	Low	Med	High
Ambience						
A good impression upon arrival	X				X	

Potential Homeowner Response	Importance			Strength		
	Low	Med	High	Low	Med	High
Ambience						
A good impression upon arrival			X	X		

**Potential Homeowners and Renters** – Potential residents are likely to come from the larger metro area. If there is an organization in your neighborhood or city that offers classes or workshops in personal finance and mortgage applications for first-time buyers, ask them if they can provide the names of individuals to take the survey. If they cannot release the names, ask if they can connect their students with the survey’s website.

**Visitors** – If your neighborhood has a retail street, consumer retail sales are very important to maintaining the viability of existing and future retail establishments as well as animating the street life of your neighborhood. Hand out surveys in local businesses or to passersby on the commercial corridor.

## SUMMARIZING THE RESULTS

In order to summarize your results, tabulate the responses, both for the overall results and for specific subgroups.



# Tip

In order to summarize exercise responses, give a number to each response, add those numbers together and divide by the number of responses to create a mean, or average, number.

If low = 1, medium = 2 and high = 3, for 50 responses the average might look like this:

30 said medium.  $30 \times 2 = 60$

7 said high.  $7 \times 3 = 21$

13 said low.  $13 \times 1 = 13$

Total = 94 divided by 50 samples = 1.88 average or “medium”

# Example

The following table comparing the average importance and average strength of particular attributes summarizes the averaged results of a hypothetical “neighborhood strengths” survey. Resident responses are compared with those of two other target markets – potential homeowners and realtors.

Average “Strength” scores in **BLUE** are important because they perform better than their importance to the target market.

Scores in **GREEN** perform in line with their importance.

Scores in **ORANGE** perform less well than their importance.

Scores in **RED** are important but do not perform well at all.

Survey Results	Average Importance			Average Strength		
	Resident	Potential Homeowner	Real Estate Agents	Resident	Potential Homeowner	Real Estate Agents
Ambience						
A good impression upon arrival	Low	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Clean streets and sidewalks	Medium	High	High	High	Medium	Medium
Interesting architecture	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Landscapes, gardens and flowers	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
Public art	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Infrastructure						
Public transportation/walkability	High	High	High	High	Medium	Medium
Parking	Medium	High	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
Quality streets/sidewalks/lighting at night	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Low
Good schools	High	High	High	Low	Low	Low
Amenities						
Cultural or historical places	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Quality parks and recreation	High	High	High	High	High	High
Public events and entertainment	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
People and Values						
Friendly and helpful neighbors	High	High	High	High	Medium	Medium
Acceptance, tolerance, diversity	High	High	High	High	Medium	Medium
Housing						
Up and coming/strong potential for building equity	Low	High	High	Medium	Medium	Medium
More house/same money compared to other neighborhoods	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
Fixer-upper opportunities	High	High	High	High	High	High
High-quality rental opportunities	Medium	High	Low	Low	Low	Low
High-quality ownership opportunities	High	High	High	Low	Medium	Medium
Owner-occupied rental opportunities	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Proximity						
To downtown amenities	High	High	Medium	High	High	High
To employment	Medium	Low	Medium	High	High	High
To shopping for high-quality basics	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	High
To shopping for specialties/restaurants	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High
To social services	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium



## DECIDING ON CORE BRAND ELEMENTS

Now that the branding team knows how key target markets feel about the neighborhood, you know where your strengths lie – which items are performing below their expectations but might be improved in the short term and which items are performing poorly. You also know which items are of low importance and therefore are unlikely to excite the target markets even if they are performing well.

The next step is for your branding team to reach consensus on the core brand elements. These are attributes of the neighborhood that are important to key target audiences, and that are performing well. These are strengths that can become the foundation of your brand because the neighborhood can consistently deliver them through branded experiences.

To select the core brand elements, revisit your goals and decide which target markets are most important to address with the new brand. Consider questions such as: how important is it that potential homeowners have their needs met so they see themselves as part of the neighborhood? Is it important that the retail stores attract more daily visitors to shop and dine in the neighborhood? Regardless of other target markets, remember that residents are important because they need to embrace the brand and help make it a reality.

Next, look for strengths your neighborhood is already delivering (ranked medium or high), especially if your most important target markets agree that this is the case. Returning to the hypothetical example shown above, those attributes would include: interesting architecture; cultural or historic places; public events and entertainment; land-

scapes, gardens and flowers; fixer-upper opportunities and proximity to downtown amenities, employment, shopping and social services.

## PICK A BRAND DIRECTION

If you have a lot of positive elements that are similar and complementary to one another, use them as your brand promise. For example, if your neighborhood scores high in several “proximity” elements, such elements can form a natural grouping that can be easily understood and communicated. It is much more difficult to combine elements that are not similar, such as combining “interesting architecture” with “parking” and “fixer-upper opportunities.” Whatever your strengths are, try to come up with a theme that ties them together and can be easily understood. If you develop several brand directions, list and compare the strengths and weaknesses of each.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING UNIQUE

Earlier we noted that strong brands are unique. If you have something that other neighborhoods don't have but people want, that is a definite asset you might want to consider leveraging. Perhaps your neighborhood is one of the oldest in town and has the best examples of classic architecture. Maybe your neighborhood has some of the best parks with ancient and beautiful trees. Or perhaps you host the best farmer's market in town.



Take your branding team on a tour of other neighborhoods that compete with you for new residents or weekend commercial activity. Now that you know your neighborhood's strengths (and weaknesses), observe what other attributes neighborhoods have and what they are saying about themselves. Figure out what only you can offer or do better than anyone else.

### **ENDURING ELEMENTS**

Some elements are more durable than others. Enduring elements such as the presence of interesting architecture or local cultural and historic places are good bets for anchoring a brand because they will be around for a long time. On the other hand, offering more house for the same money as other locales may be true today, but not true in a few years. This element is best used in short-term positioning and marketing, but not as a brand element. Brands have to last for many years.

### **GAPS IN CORE ELEMENTS AND HOW TO FIX THEM**

If you find attributes that should be core elements of your brand, but fall short of expected performance, then improving them is a project your branding team should consider. It's likely that these situations are not surprising or new to you, and that various

organizations or government entities have been aware of them for some time. But it may also be the case that your attributes exercise has brought to your attention some deficiency that was known but not thought important. Some core element gaps are going to take a long time and lots of money to address. Others might only require organization, participation and motivation to fix.

For example, in the hypothetical survey above, clean streets and sidewalks were found to be important to potential homeowners and realtors but don't quite live up to their expectations. An organized volunteer program could be a neighborhood initiative to fix that.

Possible steps to bring quick improvement to your neighborhood include the following:

- Work with the city to promptly remove derelict cars from the curbs
- Create teams to pressure wash sidewalks that are grimy
- Turn weed-filled parking strips into seasonal flower gardens
- Get the city to repaint curbs and crosswalks
- Assign volunteers to maintain specific blocks for street sweeping or debris collection

## Tips

Whatever it is that needs fixing, some individual or group will need to take the initiative and stick with it. These “champions” instill energy into the project. Even if a solution is slow in coming, evidence of residents working on the issue is encouraging to prospective residents. Getting neighbors interested enough to participate is another job of the champion. Some residents may feel so discouraged from previous project failures that they need to see a demonstration of success. Rather than trying to tackle the neighborhood-wide problem, pick one area for a demonstration project. This often revives confidence that something can be accomplished. Take it one step at a time!

In many cases, the city government must become involved in the solution. Repairs and construction falls under their purview, and even if a volunteer group had the desire to fix public infrastructure, they would not be allowed to do so. But residents can make a better case for city action. Document the size, nature and seriousness of the issue. Make a compelling case narrative, particularly if it is a safety issue. Show widespread local support for change by gathering signatures, generating a write-in campaign and showing a large presence at official meetings. Help find financial resources for the project by contacting nonprofit foundations or state and federal representatives.

- On your walkabout through other neighborhoods, rate their attribute strengths for future comparison to your own survey results.
- Take photographs of things that you particularly like or dislike about the neighborhoods.
- Talk to a few realtors who sell in those neighborhoods. Learn what their selling points are.
- Research neighborhood public statistics to look for your neighborhood’s advantages: are your real estate taxes lower? Are your rates for crime lower? Are you closer to city attractions and parks?

### **BUILD ON YOUR STRENGTHS**

Some issues are persistent and require substantial resources and long-term effort on the part of many actors to address (e.g. improving school performance). Continue to work on them even though they are not a part of the brand, so that you can add them later as a neighborhood strength. Focus your brand promise on your strengths and on the amenities your neighborhood can deliver now.

In this article, you have learned that your brand is what others think of you. Through surveys, you have learned what they think and what your strengths and weaknesses are. In the next article (*Defining the New Brand*) we will show you how to take that knowledge and translate your strengths into a brand message that resonates with your target audiences and leaves them with a better impression of your neighborhood.

# Appendix

This appendix defines branding terms used in this document.

**Neighborhood brand** – what people think of your neighborhood.

**Brand promise** – a statement of positive neighborhood experiences that target audiences can expect to be consistently delivered. It captures the way you want customers to think and feel about you relative to competitors.

**Core brand elements** – attributes of the neighborhood that are important to target audiences and are performing well. These are strengths that can become the foundation of your brand because the neighborhood can consistently deliver them through branded experiences.

**Brand direction** – theming a brand so that its core elements are similar or complementary to one another and lend themselves to a single brand concept.

**Brand touchpoints** – media and physical points of interaction between the neighborhood brand and its residents, visitors and other target markets.

**Brand essence** – the shorthand phrase that captures the brand's core message. This is not a tag line; it is an internal compass.

**Positioning statement** – a paragraph that matches the needs of a target market with specific strengths of the neighborhood brand. Positioning makes your brand relevant to a specific market.

**Audience alignment** – another term for positioning statement. This is a customer-focused message about the brand.

**Key messages** – bullet point examples of ideas that should be integrated into advertising and marketing copy.

**Key words** – a list of words that should be included in brochures, press releases and other media because they are evocative of the brand promise. Different lists can be developed for different target audiences.

**Tangible benefits** – brand attributes that can be seen and felt.

**Emotional benefits** – internalized benefits acquired from the brand experience.



## PRIORITIZING NEIGHBORHOOD BRAND ELEMENTS

Homebuyers and other external target markets will form an impression of your neighborhood as they look for things that make your neighborhood's environment comfortable and livable.

To use the tool on the following page, first identify the external target market(s) whose impression of the neighborhood is important to achieving your goals.

Next, rate each of the attributes listed in the table to the right according to their importance to the target market.

Now, rate each of the attributes on the extent to which they are a current strength for the neighborhood.

- *Attributes that rate high for both target markets and the neighborhood's current strengths are candidates for forming the core elements of the neighborhood brand.*
- *Attributes that rate high for target markets but are not current strengths may be areas to target for new or different programming.*

Prioritizing Neighborhood Brand Elements	Importance			Strength		
	Low	Med	High	Low	Med	High
Attribute						
Ambience						
A good impression upon arrival						
Clean streets and sidewalks						
Interesting architecture						
Landscapes, gardens and flowers						
Public art						
Infrastructure						
Public transportation/walkability						
Parking						
Quality streets/sidewalks/lighting at night						
Good schools						
Amenities						
Cultural or historical places						
Quality parks and recreation						
Public events and entertainment						
People and Values						
Friendly and helpful neighbors						
Acceptance, tolerance, diversity						
Housing						
Up and coming/strong potential for equity						
More house/same money compared to other neighborhoods						
Fixer-upper opportunities						
High-quality rental opportunities						
High-quality ownership opportunities						
Owner-occupied rental opportunities						
Proximity						
To downtown amenities						
To employment						
To shopping for high-quality basics						
To shopping for specialties/restaurants						
To social services						
Other						



#### Photo Credit

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