



City of Virginia Beach Marketing Integration/Communications Analysis

A report by the City Communications Task Force

June 19, 2018

INTRODUCTION: Through Virginia Beach Vision’s annual review of the city’s budget, a bifurcation of city marketing funds was identified. It was noted that tourism marketing and economic development marketing were separately appropriated and managed. Further review found that marketing messages were created separately and that the city had no systemic process for communicating with the public.

City Council members, at their Strategic Planning Workshop held in September 2017, expressed the need to get accurate information to the citizens and to effectively debunk misleading and false information on public issues. Three marketing initiatives were identified as Council priorities.

1. Regional Branding
2. Branding: Virginia Beach Naturally
3. Conduct “research and development” to support tourism marketing efforts

BACKGROUND: Since March 2017, the Virginia Beach Vision Task Force has engaged in a series of fact-finding meetings with city administrators and communication industry experts. Participants and discussions are summarized below.

- Brad Van Dommelen and Tiffany Russell from the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau provided an in depth briefing on the sources and uses of funds for marketing tourism, their marketing strategy and branding.
- Warren Harris and David Couch from the Virginia Beach Economic Development Department, briefed the task force on the sources/uses of marketing funds and how these funds are utilized for city branding and business development outreach.
- Julie Hill, Virginia Beach Communications Manager, provided an overview of the City’s communications priorities and strategies, clarifying that each city department handles its own public communications and messaging. The Communications Department facilitates those activities with production, printing and media/video services.
- Jim Spore, CEO of Reinvent Hampton Roads and former VB City Manager, provided perspectives on how the current marketing and communications infrastructure was established and the influences that affect messaging.
- Jeff Tanner, Dean of the Strome School of Business, Dr. Ron Carlee, and Ms. Kyllie Bullion from Old Dominion University provided insights into communications practices and structure for city governments.

- Delceno Miles and Joel Rubin, owners of local public relations firms having worked with Virginia Beach City government as contracted consultants over many years, provided their perspectives on the effectiveness of the city’s marketing and communications structure, messaging and outreach.

FINDINGS: Three specific elements were identified for strengthening the city’s overall marketing and communications effectiveness:

1. Develop a common branding strategy inclusive of logos, print materials, and messaging;
2. Create economies of scale with shared marketing and branding materials/efforts and a common “look” for the City’s brand;
3. Designate an administrative leader to coordinate all aspects of city marketing and communications.

These tools are necessary to move away from having each city department operating within its own communications/messaging silo, toward creating a coordinated effort and oversight to effectively execute these initiatives.

EXPANDED FINDINGS:

1. INTEGRATION OF BRANDING/MARKETING EFFORTS

It appears that there is minimal coordination and integration of marketing efforts between city departments. The fragmentation is obvious as it relates to Brand Identification, Brand Positioning and Messaging, use of third party marketing firms as well as the budgeting process resulting in no cooperative marketing efforts.

2. BRAND IDENTIFICATION:

Throughout numerous city departments there appears no single or even dominant brand identification (logotype). There are at least six different logos being used throughout the city’s current marketing efforts. This results in a lack of compounded brand awareness by Virginia Beach’s various target audiences including citizens, tourists, professional meeting and convention planners, sporting groups and corporate prospects potentially moving to Virginia Beach. The brand identification fragmentation continues with addition of a Convention Center logo as well as individual marketing initiatives within Economic Development.

OFFICIAL CITY OF VIRGINIA BEACH LOGOTYPES





3. BRAND POSITIONING & MESSAGING:

There does not appear to be a common theme in any of the brand positioning or messaging used for marketing materials.

- The Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) utilizes the positioning line of LIVE THE LIFE consistently in all its marketing efforts, however, this positioning phrase is not used by any other city department including Economic Development. We ask, wouldn't it be feasible to include LIVE THE LIFE on city vehicles and marketing materials when communicating to citizens and other local audiences? Could LIVE THE LIFE be relevant to messaging from Economic Development in the process of luring businesses and their employees to be part of the Virginia Beach community?

4. CREATING ECONOMIES OF SCALE:

The CVB's marketing budget combined with that of the Department of Economic Development appears insufficient to market the city competitively. Having the larger of the marketing funds, the CVB logically focuses nearly all its messaging and visuals on the oceanfront area. The limited collective marketing funds might be better leveraged if focus were placed on integrating some messaging in a format that would enhance both visitor and business attraction.

- Virginia Beach is comprised of 400 square miles of enticing assets including a wide variety of dining, recreation, shopping and other activities. Yes, the oceanfront is a tremendous asset that generates millions of dollars in tourism spending and must continue to be marketed as a major tourist destination. Yet, we believe there are many other Virginia Beach amenities that make the city attractive to visitors, residents and business development professionals. Over \$10 million each year in messaging is focused solely on the oceanfront, giving some the impression that we are just a beach not unlike Ocean City, MD, Outer Banks, NC or Myrtle Beach, SC. Messaging must be able to convey to a Fortune 1000 CEO looking for a new corporate headquarters that Virginia Beach is much more than a tourist destination, but rather a city where people will want to live, work and play.
- A collaborative marketing effort between CVB and VBED might enhance both efforts in markets including Northern Virginia, New York, Pennsylvania and Ohio where the city

strongly promotes tourism. In addition to leisure travelers, the messaging is being consumed by the corporate world as well through C-suite executives, relocation professionals and small business owners.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The City should consider restructuring its communications system to establish a Chief Marketing Officer position whose responsibility it would be to coordinate the marketing and communication efforts of the City across all departments.
2. The CVB is already in the process of moving away from the use of outside marketing contracts to bringing most functions inside the department. Doing so will expand the intercity marketing and messaging expertise and better leverage the marketing budget. This direction should be considered on a citywide basis and employed where appropriate.
3. The City should consider expanding the funds available for external communications and marketing. Tourism must continue to be a high priority for market growth and development. Even so, economic development and business attraction must receive greater emphasis and resources. Currently the lion's share of ED marketing funds are used to finance marketing trips. Greater resources or piggyback strategies are needed to allow economic development messaging in key markets.
4. An expanded, continual effort is needed to communicate to all Virginia Beach citizens the many facilities, resources and activities that make Virginia Beach a great place to live using a common branding theme.
5. A comprehensive, coordinated communication plan should be developed and employed at all levels of the local government.