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Branding effort gets underway in Elk River

Elk River is beginning a process to establish the city's "brand."

by **Joni Astrup**

Associate editor

In most cases, it's not a phone call to City Hall, possible financial incentives or other factors that determine a company's decision to locate someplace.



Annie Deckert

It's the city's "brand" or image.

Seventy-one percent of site selectors — those who identify where new businesses or restaurants will locate — make decisions based on a city's brand or image, according to Annie Deckert, Elk River's marketing and business development administrator.

What is branding?

It's about determining the strong, singular, unified message that defines Elk River, Deckert said.

"A brand isn't a logo or a tagline. It's what you feel when you think about a community," she said.

Or, as Don McEachern wrote in an article in *Minnesota Cities*, a brand rests in the minds and hearts of other people.

"It is what they say about you when you're not around," he wrote.

The most successful brands establish an emotional — not just an intellectual — connection, he said.

Team will visit Elk River this month

The Elk River City Council approved a new vision and four goals in October, and has identified a branding initiative as one of the priorities.

The city has hired Tennessee-based ChandlerThinks to guide it through the branding process.

Steve Chandler and his team will visit Elk River April 27-29. During that time they will take an all-day tour of Elk River, conduct about 30 one to one stakeholder interviews and three different focus groups and do impromptu interviews with people in stores and restaurants in and around Elk River.

They will follow up with a community survey and an Elk River employee survey.

The team will also study consumer data using an in-depth demographic tool.

The timeline calls for the process to be wrapped up in mid-summer.

The city's marketing strategy will also come under scrutiny. Deckert said the city now markets itself in many ways.

She said the consultant will look at the city's existing marketing and suggest ways to refine it. That may mean discontinuing some things and using that money in other, more productive, ways.

The city's logo, however, will not change.

The Elk River Economic Development Authority (EDA) had voted in March to hire ChandlerThinks at a cost not to exceed \$37,250. Deckert said the EDA has had branding in its budget for two years. The money will come from an EDA property tax levy that is separate from the general city levy. For more information, go to www.ci.elk-river.us/image or search "Discover Elk River" on Facebook.

EDA president ready to brand

by **Joni Astrup**

Associate editor

When Ron Touchette and his family moved to Elk River from Maple Grove 10 years ago, they were lured by a piece of land where they could build a home. They found a piece of property in Elk River that had certain things they wanted and was affordable.

"The rest of it was a surprise," Touchette said of the city's other strengths like parks, the historic Kelley Farm, excellent housing stock, opportunities for business growth and vibrant non-profit and community-based organizations.



Ron Touchette

Now president of the Elk River Economic Development Authority (EDA), Touchette has become a strong advocate of city branding.

"I think the biggest thing is that we have a message that tells the story of Elk River, that tells what you can have, do, get, be — what return Elk River gives people that live here and work here," he said. Touchette believes people like Elk River and are proud to be from the city, but "we just don't tell that story very well outside of Elk River."

Touchette, who is the broker-CEO of Rock Solid Companies, said he's in a lot of different cities through his work.

While cities like Maple Grove do a good job of promotion, he believes Elk River has more to promote.

"I don't see where their quality of life is as good as Elk River," he said.

He is excited about ChandlerThinks, which will lead the city through the branding process. Two things stand out about Steve Chandler, he said.

"He tells you what he thinks. He is not bashful. Good, bad or ugly it's what it is," Touchette said. "The second thing is he comes with no baggage. None."

Touchette particularly saw the need for a strong city brand or image when he became involved in trying to bring a VA clinic to Elk River. The clinic ultimately ended up in Ramsey.

"We worked very hard for over a year to get that here, and we were not prepared to demonstrate why it should be here," Touchette said. "We had to build that."

He said they had to educate the VA about Elk River and overcome some negative outlooks. Having an already-established and ongoing brand or image of the city would have helped, he believes.

When people think of a good place to live, work and grow their family and business, he wants them to think of Elk River.

He said the most important reason the city needs to do a branding initiative now is because the world and how people communicate has changed dramatically in the last few years.

"Every message, no matter how small it is, can get out there in a large way," he said. "We want to make sure that the message that gets out there in a large way is Elk River, not one circumstance or situation or problem that may have already been solved.

"... There are lots of opportunities here. We just need to shout it from the rooftops."

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