

ONE

Selling a City

I grew up in the city of Coral Springs, Florida. If the name sounds familiar, it is because the city often is showcased in books and academic journal articles for its commitment to a corporate model of performance excellence. The business-based model earned the city two Florida Governor's Sterling Awards (the statewide award for performance excellence) and, as of this writing, standing as the only municipality to receive the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, a presidential recognition given only to the best-run organizations in the United States. Such a distinction automatically made the city an international benchmark for municipal government excellence. I started working for the city as a volunteer on several of its citizen-based committees before taking a job in the communications and marketing department as a teen intern while still in high school. After going away to, and graduating from, college, I came home and took a part-time job with the same department while finishing my doctoral studies.

Why do I mention this job? My position gave me insight into how a public organization undertakes communications duties and how prevailing organizational culture and practices shape and change those duties. The communications and marketing department in Coral Springs includes positions such as media relations coordinator, creative services director, multimedia coordinator, webmaster, and editor/videographer. With the heightened interest in social media, the city launched a Twitter feed and a Facebook page, not to mention a YouTube channel and space on Vimeo, another video-based social Web site. The city communicated with its residents in numerous ways, including the Web site, social media, a quarterly magazine, community meetings, texting, videos and TV shows, front-line

employees, city hall itself, City Hall in the Mall, countless brochures and fliers, magnets, an annual report, and much more.

My job as part of that department was to help generate public relations (PR) and marketing pieces. Considering our function as the internal creative services department, it was no surprise that we thought about crafting and shaping the city's image. What struck me as odd was hearing and seeing people from other departments wonder about how their actions and words would impact the city's overall image. Here are some stories:

- The man responsible for zoning and sign codes created a brochure regarding updates to the sign code. He compiled pictures and text, and constantly asked if the logo he was using accorded with the city's new brand images.
- The woman in charge of neighborhood programs asked how to "spin" the answer to a reporter calling about foreclosure figures.
- The city offered training for its top managers and employees who often dealt with journalists and other media.
- Every city department was required to participate in a communications audit, whereby staff sent any self-created publications and stationery, including letterhead, business cards, and envelopes, to the communications and marketing department for review. The idea was to see what city images the departments were using, if they were consistent, and how to change them to comply with new branding statement.

I realized that city staff, not just in our department, exhibited traits of a private sector PR and marketing firm's employees. In this case, city employees worked to build the image of a singular client—the city. A media relations coordinator wrote and electronically distributed press releases almost daily. Web designers constantly refined the city's online presence. The police department hosted its own press conferences for big incidents. A new branding initiative was rolled out, which removed the old logo (the Suntree logo) and replaced it, and associated images, with a new one that included the tagline "Community of Excellence," a play off the city's 2007 Baldrige Award. (It should be noted that as of this writing, Coral Springs currently is undertaking a community-based rebranding project.) Image generation became a priority in Coral Springs, and I began to wonder if this organizational change was germane only to my city or whether it was taking place in other locations as well. An initial Internet search of U.S. city Web sites revealed bright, bold colors, catchy taglines, beautiful imagery, video content, press

releases, marketing campaigns, social media links, magazines, and much more. Cities in the United States, it seemed, were beginning to resemble private sector public relations and marketing firms in scope, practice, value, and principle.

Corporate PR and marketing firms have specific goals to achieve desired results for clients. Usually, the immediate aim is to increase corporate profits, but a longer-term goal is to achieve brand loyalty—get customers, keep customers, and persuade those customers to recommend the product to friends. Campaigns are launched not only to sell products but to engender positive feelings, based on corporate citizenship, social marketing, and sustainability initiatives. Marketing campaigns hook people, while PR campaigns build upon feelings of good will to keep clients brand loyal.

In the case of cities, PR and marketing efforts do not appear to be much different. Cities brand themselves as global destinations and create labels naming themselves the Best, Cleanest, Friendliest, Wealthiest, Fittest, whatever. These accolades are used in extensive marketing and PR campaigns in the name of attracting tourists, luring residents, bringing in businesses—all stakeholder groups that generate money for the city and spend money locally. The same principle emerges—gain brand loyalty. Within U.S. cities, the trend is becoming more pronounced, and likely to grow, as business-based models of governance (i.e., New Public Management, Total Quality Management, Reinventing Government) become the norm. Businesses need promotion; cities run *like* a business promote their own attributes as well. Businesses want to make money; cities want to save money. They are the flip sides of a coin—making money requires efficiency; saving money requires efficiency. Money saved is money earned. Telling people about how efficiently the government runs, how effective it is, how the city works for “you” (the stakeholder) goes a long way toward showing value for the tax dollar. Essentially, cities are embracing the Tiebout hypothesis that when people are perfectly mobile with access to perfect information, they choose service providers with their feet (Tiebout, 1956). Though in reality people rarely are perfectly mobile, and have only limited access to information (satisficing, as Herbert Simon calls it), the principle remains the same—cities compete to get our business to increase their revenue bases.

Cities as Public Relations and Marketing Firms

Watching such a transformation take place in Coral Springs, and seeing a similar pattern develop in other cities, generated the metaphor put forth

herein: *cities as PR and marketing firms*. I include the word *cities* in the metaphor because that was the genesis for such a comparison, but it seems one can substitute almost any kind of organization—public, private, non-profit—and see similar promotional patterns to those described above developing, though adaptation of the framework might be necessary depending on the sector examined. The units under analysis might be cities, counties, states, countries, universities, school districts, hospitals, charities. The PR and marketing firm metaphor has far-reaching potential to explain how and why organizations, especially in the public sector, are turning to increased promotional activities. For the purposes of the book, I shall stick with cities for explanations and examples.

I will develop the metaphor throughout the book, but here take a moment to briefly outline the major points to be addressed. The metaphor of cities as PR and marketing firms draws attention to how organizational communications have changed in response to market models within local governments throughout the United States. Usually, except when tourism is being discussed, places that provide public services are not thought of as competitive entities. The metaphor sheds light on how *city employees themselves* are creating images about a place, rather than outsourcing the job to a convention and visitor's bureau or other external agency. City governments are taking control to shape the place narrative. This move comes not in spite of but precisely because of market interventions within the public sector. Private businesses need customers to survive; cities needs stakeholders of all types, including residents, business owners, employees, and visitors, to thrive and grow. Attracting resources within the private sector shows little difference from public sector efforts.

As I note later in the book, not all cities may be considered PR and marketing firms. The first requisite for defining a city as a PR and marketing firm, then, is a business-based model of governance. The second is evidence of changes in organizational communication strategy, to reflect the city's new values regarding selling a product. This is not to say that cities stop providing services; that is, of course, a silly claim and not one made here. Cities acting as PR and marketing firms go to great lengths to inform people just how *well and efficiently* those services (products) are being provided. Finally, cities acting as PR and marketing firms use touch points, in the form of the six selling tactics I will describe in chapter 5, to create and foster a decided-upon image and narrative: branding, media relations, in-house publications, use of volunteers and outside organizations as PR surrogates, aesthetic and affective appeal, and built environment via sustainability.

Cities that use all six meaningfully and regularly are what I call fully realized PR and marketing firms. Cities embracing one tactic or two, by contrast, are those that still lean toward simply giving out information. This is not to say that cities as PR and marketing firms do not provide information; they certainly do. In cities acting as PR and marketing firms, however, the information provided contains organizational buzzwords, branding statements and logos, city-produced stories, punchy adjectives, and personalization (“We are doing this for you, our stakeholder”). Information is present, but it is surrounded by precisely chosen organizational rhetoric. Finally, the language used within a campaign has been personalized, appealing directly to “you” for action. These features come together to form a narrative of the place (Hansen, 2010).

Why the Image?

The image of cities—or other organizations—as public relations and marketing firms might be a hard one to swallow for public administration scholars and practitioners. Promotion, they would argue, is not necessary; public information is necessary. As lines between the public and private sectors blur, not only do a government’s values change (Box, 1999) but its practices do as well (Kelly, 2005). Marketing and PR, widely accepted in private sector enterprise, emerged as a consequence of market models moving into public administration (Kavaratzis, 2004). Usually, when one thinks about government-produced PR and marketing, the connotation is government-sponsored propaganda (Harding, 1947; Heise, 1985; Moloney, 2006; Spitzer, 1947). Communications certainly can trend that way, but municipal employees recognize and appreciate the power of PR and marketing tools to effect positive social change (Kotler & Levy, 1969).

The six-point framework of selling tactics presented later sheds light on promotional activities taking place in U.S. cities. The morphing of organizational communication from information to promotion occurs specifically because of market models; cities as PR and marketing firms, indeed, embrace some kind of business-based governance structure. The related image of cities as businesses traces back to calls to reinvent government (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). The names of such revitalization movements fall into several categories, including New Public Management (NPM), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Reinventing Government (Frederickson & Smith, 2003). At the center of each reform movement are pleas

for more efficient and effective government, which usually means looking toward private sector for inspiration. A popular mantra of these movements is “doing more with less.” Their recommendations include encouraging entrepreneurial management, flattening hierarchies, and contracting out government services (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). (These movements’ effect on public administration is detailed further in chapter 3.) Market models have turned something not commonly thought of as a market commodity (government service provision) into one that is just that, in whose service market values have replaced typical humanistic, democratic values such as fairness and justice.

Why Use Metaphor?

The image of cities as PR and marketing firms is based on the tradition of using metaphors within public administration to understand praxis and theory. Metaphors help us shape, orient, and make sense of our world (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003) by linking two ideas or concepts to create “new, emergent meaning that is not compositional; instead, there is new meaning constituted in and through the metaphor” (Cornelissen, Kafouros, & Lock, 2005, p. 1548). When a city is acting *as* a PR and marketing firm, images are being generated (1) *about* the organizational behavior of individuals, and (2) about the organization as a whole based on images *the organization itself* creates.

As Morgan (1983) notes, “Metaphor creates new insights by generating images of ‘wholes’” (p. 602) and is one of the main ways researchers comprehend organizations. Metaphors are not used singularly but often pair with others to make better sense of organizational and personnel practices. Adding a PR and marketing firm image does not replace other metaphors; instead, the metaphor provides another lens through which to examine the functions of an organization via its image-generating programs. Chapter 2 covers in more detail the use of metaphors in public administration.

Why the Image, Redux?

Market models and metaphors combine (the market *is* a metaphor, but that is a topic for another discussion) to reshape and revamp the nature of public administration. Scholars have taken issue with business-minded reforms

within the public sector, especially concerning changes in public service values and the revised social construction that defines citizens as customers (Box, 1999; Box et al., 2001; Kelly, 2005; Patterson, 1998; Pierre, 1995; Ventriss, 2000; among others). What has escaped examination is the effect of market models on organizational communications, and I hope this book begins to fill that gap in the literature.

Most literature dealing with the intersection of public relations, marketing, and public administration details what makes excellent public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) in any sector. This book explores elements of place branding from a different perspective—potential end results, rather than prescriptive suggestions. While the book could be seen as a how-to guide, it also includes warnings against taking PR and marketing too far. To wit, administrators following PR and marketing tactics too closely run the risk of auto-communication (Christensen, 1995), wherein PR and marketing campaigns completely replace public information.

When public relations and marketing slogans become an organization's exclusive taglines, used in every available publication or venue, substantive public information begins to take a back seat to promotion. Meaningful two-way (Grunig & Grunig, 1991; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) organization-public discourse risks being rendered meaningless in cities that spend time producing and manufacturing, first and foremost, an image rather than supplying useful public information to citizens and journalists.

Once the reliance on imagery has been carried too far, there is the potential for a city to slip into simulation (Baudrillard, 1994), especially if the brand has been generated without key stakeholder input (Govers & Go, 2009). This proves to be the ultimate negative consequence of cities acting as PR and marketing firms. Hyperreal images and discourses are what people see most often—not policy directives or policy platforms. PR and marketing campaigns simulate genuine information. People come to believe the rhetoric rather than the (former) reality (Sementelli & Abel, 2007). The cities as PR and marketing firms metaphor is another way to view public organizations and sheds light upon an area of organizational life also affected by market models—internal and external communications.

Therefore, the purpose of this book is to: (1) propose a new metaphor of public organization theory, development, and behavior (specifically at the municipal level but applicable to other public sectors as well); (2) showcase the ways cities are acting as PR and marketing firms, by introducing a testable framework; and (3) explain the effects, both positive and negative, of this image. The crux of the argument is found within six tactics I outline

regarding how cities are selling themselves to local and global audiences alike. The list stems from my experience in Coral Springs. There, the city had at least twenty-seven ways it communicated with residents—everything from magazines to TV shows, from social media sites to print fliers, from pens to giveaways with the city logo.

Using the list, I began looking online for similarities, if any, between Coral Springs and other cities. Sure enough, what was taking place in my city seemed to be a growing trend within U.S. cities. From there, scholarly literature helped round out the framework, which led to the creation of a research protocol used to examine promotional and rhetorical practices within twenty cities throughout the country. The cities studied were: Coral Springs, Florida; Orlando, Florida; Parkland, Florida; Tamarac, Florida; Detroit, Michigan; Kingsport, Tennessee; Anaheim, California; St. Paul, Minnesota; Billings, Montana; Las Vegas, Nevada; New York, New York; Denver, Colorado; Roanoke, Virginia; Chicago, Illinois; Sunnyvale, California; Albany, New York; Charlotte, North Carolina; Phoenix, Arizona; Reno, Nevada; and Frankfort, Kentucky. As one can tell from the list, the cities differed in geographic location, socioeconomic status, and size. This was done purposely, to show the potential reach of the metaphor and the six selling tactics it embodies.

A city using all six selling tactics (as detailed in chapter 5) is considered a fully realized PR and marketing firm, as that city adopts, adapts, and executes the tactics in meaningful ways throughout its organizational operations. By meaningful, I refer to cities as PR and marketing firms using the tactics with a high degree of regularity (explained in chapter 6). As cities begin to use more promotional tactics, imparting information takes a back seat to making sure images look perfect, rhetoric accords with branding strategies, and more. Message alignment and brand awareness are typical characteristics of corporate PR and marketing firms finding their ways into the public sector. The framework is intentionally dynamic and broadly titled to showcase how cities can change organization communication strategies as they become more deeply entrenched in the market model of government. Cities can pick and choose what organization communication strategy to adopt—information versus self-promotion.