

Best Place Brand Identity

Edmonton



to implement the brand. In one of our interviews, with the historian laureate, we heard, “In Edmonton if we don’t grow it we don’t own it.” We kept this in mind as we supported and encouraged entrepreneurs, artists, and social activists to create new projects and initiatives from the ground-up. For decades Edmonton had tried to recruit global and national head offices to the city, and it never worked. We changed the focus to “turning up” what was already happening, and celebrating it internally. Initially we were discouraged by the reluctance of the City of Edmonton (the corporation) to embrace the story. They continued to speak in hopeless superlatives and to produce videos about being “world class.” But it ended up being a blessing, as the citizens owned Make Something Edmonton and launched over 1,500 projects. Our initial target was 200. They did large things, like putting decorative lights on the city’s beloved High Level Bridge, and small things, like murals, edible gardens in schoolyards, and Sunday morning snowball fights with thousands of people. The popular Mayor, Don Iveson, used the story in his speeches and in his approach to problems. Rather than use a single tagline, we built ten “statements of encouragement” that told the Edmonton story, and paired them with iconic examples of the city at its best. We created an ambassador book (“The World Needs More Edmonton”) and distributed it in late 2015. A local property development company chose one of the statements of encouragement, “Take A Risk: It’s the Most Edmonton Thing You Can Do,” and put it up on the side of one of their office towers facing City Hall and the central square.

Our goal, in this past year, was to teach the story and the brand to Edmontonians. But a brand is a lot more than marketing. It must be the foundation of everything. Edmontonians used the brand to argue against by-laws that impede entrepreneurship and new ventures. They launched winter events to encourage neighbours to “play outside.” By changing a restrictive “off-brand” by-law, Edmonton went from having 6 food trucks to 96. This year a French film crew arrived to shoot a pilot for a food series about “Canada’s best food truck culture.” We have tried to replicate this, over and over again. Rather than buying ads, we have encouraged local businesses and arts organizations to tell the story in their own way — ideally through action. Media around the world have written about the city and its new projects. City administration is now keen to implement the brand inside the corporation. Profit Guide magazine ranked Edmonton the second-best place to do business in Canada, first among the large cities. Why? “Take a risk in a city that has your back.” We’ve seen consistency and discipline replace the jargon and nonsense of the past. But there remains a lot to do. ●

For a generation Edmonton, Canada’s fifth-largest city, has had the worst reputation in the country. Others in Canada consider it to be cold and boring, if they consider it at all. Globally, it does not register. The typical ad agency response to this — a new logo, tagline, website, and media buy — had failed in the past. Yes. It fails everywhere. Despite these external image and reputation problems, market research showed Edmontonians loved their city. They simply lacked a way to express it in a powerful and authentic way. In a large economic development survey and workshop, leaders identified the city’s number one problem was its poor reputation: “We don’t have a story to tell.” Leaders said it prevented investment and talent attraction and inspired a spiritual malaise. Story Engine interviewed 150 Edmontonians — CEOs, new immigrants, students, Indigenous people, blue collar and white collar, artists and athletes — about why they had chosen the city. Why had they stayed? We forced them past slogans, past superlatives like vibrant, innovative, diverse. What could only happen in Edmonton? What are some examples from the past and present? We began to see common themes, a “master story” emerge from these interviews.

Edmonton is the most northerly major city on the continent, far from the great cultural and economic centres of America. Locals always considered it a disadvantage. Yet they had invented the North American fringe theatre movement, the Canadian Food Bank, and some of the largest and most successful

corporations on the continent from a few people, an idea, and a lot of cooperation — again and again. The master story, in brief, was: “Years ago, when this was an isolated place, we invented our own fun. We created our own solutions. That spirit remains today: Risk-takers, people with ideas, thrive in a bizarrely cooperative city. Edmonton is a place without hierarchy. Five minutes here and you’re one of us.” We could have put this up on billboards. We could have shot a television commercial. Instead, we asked Edmontonians to do what they had always done, at their best: to go out and make something beautiful, something strange, something profitable. We would help them: connect them to others and celebrate their successes. Edmonton is not for everyone. No one chooses it for the balmy weather or the elite private clubs. But it is an unusually good place for someone with an idea to take it to reality — in business, in the arts, and in social ventures. It’s a multicultural city whose residents tend to have disposable income and an openness to something new. It’s an unfinished place, a city-as-workshop. We put together a volunteer committee called “Make Something Edmonton.” It was an expression of the story, the brand, and it was a call to action. The committee operated a website, fed Make Something Edmonton projects to the media, put on events, lobbied the city administration to change “off-brand” by-laws, and helped the local tourism authority use the master story. See www.makesomethingedmonton.ca.

The volunteer committee worked with the local economic development authority