

Citizen Engagement Toolkit

2026 edition

**CITY
NATION
PLACE**

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Introduction

The Citizen Engagement Toolkit was originally born out of a common complaint we kept hearing. Place brand and marketing leaders wanted to engage their residents in their strategy, but they were often uncertain about how best to reach them. What's more impactful – a survey or an on-the-ground activation? What questions should you be asking? How can you empower your residents to act as ambassadors for their home?

When we first launched the Citizen Engagement Toolkit in 2024, it included fifteen international case studies which aimed to provide practical answers to these questions, and many more. Along with how-to advice across a range of areas, it included tools and resources to allow you to dig in and discover the engine whirring at the heart of each strategy.

We were blown away to see the positive response it received, with hundreds of people from around the world downloading the toolkit. And our favourite KPI? People keep downloading it. Time and again, you can see that people access the toolkit, and then redownload it months later. While this is one of the biggest compliments that we think a report could receive, it also prompted us to begin planning an update.

Getting citizen engagement right can be a challenge, and if there are a hundred different places engaging their residents in their strategy, there will be a hundred different approaches to making that work. So, two years after the initial launch of the Citizen Engagement Toolkit, we went back to work curating new examples of international best practice to give you a taste of how different cities, regions, and nations are approaching the challenge of connecting with their residents.

We're delighted to have been able to expand the toolkit to include nine additional case studies, and to also have been able to provide updates on a number of the strategies we originally covered. All 24 case studies are connected by the belief that a place brand or place marketing strategy is at its strongest when its built in partnership with its people. Together, we hope they provide you with the inspiration and information you need to bring your next citizen engagement strategy or initiative to life.

As mentioned, every approach to citizen engagement will be different to reflect the specific flavour of each community. To make it easier for you to find what you're looking for, we've grouped the case studies into five core areas to help you navigate this toolkit:

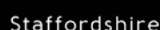
-  **Building civic pride**
-  **Citizen-centric placemaking**
-  **Community sentiment and perceptions**
-  **Empowering place ambassadors**
-  **Identifying your narrative**

You can find this index at the end of the document, alongside a breakdown of the case studies by population size.

The work for this toolkit was initially carried out over a five-month period in 2024, and has since been supplemented by a further four months of work in 2026 to refresh case studies and put the spotlight on new best practice examples. Throughout, our work has been supported by our City Nation Place Champions and guided by the City Nation Place Advisory Group. We'd like to thank them for their support, as well as to thank all of the places who connected with us over email or a Zoom call, to share their experience and help us bring this toolkit to life.

City Nation Place Champions

This work would not be possible without the financial support of our City Nation Place Champions:



Citizen engagement: Five ingredients for success

There are many reasons that you might be developing a new approach to engage your citizens. You might be looking to understand what your residents feel about your place or to get input into your tourism or economic development strategy. Maybe you want to unearth the DNA of your place in order to tell a better, more authentic story. Or perhaps you're hoping to encourage your residents to champion their home or to build civic pride. Quite probably you're looking to achieve several of these objectives.

If there was one thing that became clear in the creation of this toolkit, it's that your citizen engagement process has to be defined by your residents. What works in one area won't necessarily work for another – in the case study from the City of Tampere, the team were quick to highlight that the reason they had so much success with their 'Home of Hockey' engagement strategy was precisely because it was about Ice Hockey. An approach that heroed another sport wouldn't necessarily have had the same response. Now scale that out to different cities or different countries even, and it quickly becomes clear why every strategy has its own unique flavour.

However, when viewed at the macro-level, it's also clear that there are a number of learnings uniting these best practice case studies.

1

You need buy-in from the top, but don't forget to think more broadly about who can push your strategy to new heights.

There are a few reasons why it's important to have buy-in from your political leadership – not least because the chances are that they hold the purse strings determining your budget. The relationship with the top tiers of your government also lends weight to your strategy. The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, Investments, and Aviation flagged that one crucial factor for the success of their People-to-People Ambassador programme was the early buy-in from the Minister of Tourism: having a high-profile advocate goes a long way to demonstrating the validity of your programme.

However, this isn't necessarily a guaranteed win, with some of our conversations indicating that partnership with government could lose you your audience. Burnley Borough Council in the UK highlighted that local councils can be viewed with distrust and this can create barriers to engagement if it looks like a political initiative. Instead, they found success by leaning into trusted private sector names within the region and tapped into their strength to help promote their message to their citizens.

The teams at Brand Tasmania, Brand Lithuania, and the City of Williamsburg also stressed the importance of working with your partners to extend your reach. Oftentimes your partners can offer you easy access to channels that will put your message directly in front of your citizens; since any citizen engagement strategy will likely have knock-on benefits for their own work, this partnership can be mutually beneficial and allow you to do more with your resources.

Go Vilnius, for example, launched an event around their celebrated cold beetroot soup. But to create a true festival experience, they needed buy-in from local businesses who could help them pain the city pink. From special pink soup menus to themed offers in the month ahead of Pink Soup Fest, local businesses help to amplify the reach of the festival and create more touchpoints for residents to interact organically with the event.

It can be a bit of a chicken-and-egg scenario. Working with trusted community organisations – whether local government or public and private sector organisations – can give your approach the stamp of approval that will encourage your residents to engage with you. But equally, a strong citizen engagement approach also incentivises government and public or private sector organisations to engage with you too. It's far easier to get these key stakeholders behind your approach if you can confidently demonstrate that you're acting on the will of the wider community.

2

You have to be in this for the long run.

Done correctly, citizen engagement is not a quick tick box exercise. It requires time, effort, and resources to get meaningful insights from your community. As we heard in an insightful comment from the team pioneering co-design in Rochester, streamlining is just shorthand for not involving community. Don't fall into this trap.

Place branding by its very nature is distinct from more 'traditional' branding. Unlike Coca Cola, Apple, or any other commercial brand, cities, regions, and nations don't have direct control over what they're promoting. Your residents are re-inventing your place every single day, so your strategies should start and end with your community to ensure that you're telling an accurate story of your place.

As verified by many of these case studies, from Chile to Waikirikir Selwyn, the key to this is listening and being receptive to what your residents are telling you. A survey that sits in a box once it's been completed is wasted, as is a survey that informs one campaign and is never consulted or re-run again.

However, in order to deliver truly long-term citizen engagement, you also need to make sure that your team are prepared for what this will entail. The team at Brand Lithuania talked about the importance of maintaining a team spirit during their initial citizen engagement to develop their nation brand strategy. Having a long-term vision that the team could rally behind was essential to growing momentum behind the programme and building trust with their stakeholders. On the other end of the spectrum, the City of Williamsburg's Future Festivals required additional commitment from their team to bring the festivals to life, including support running the events outside of usual work hours. However, since everyone believed in what the Festivals could achieve for the city, they were able to successfully navigate the challenge.

3

Trust your residents, and they'll trust you back.

No one sees through marketing hype faster than your residents. They know their home better than anyone, and that's an invaluable resource when you're looking to develop a strategy or initiative that will stand the test of time. Your community are the authentic identity of your place: very few places have assets that they can claim are completely unique, but every community is individual to that place.

Opening the door to citizen feedback means opening the door to criticism as well, but that too is an essential part of connecting with your residents. Firstly, any strategy that doesn't acknowledge the hardships your residents face will inevitably be met with distrust. And secondly, if you don't acknowledge the challenges, you can't address them. The team at Destin Fort-Walton Beach stressed that you shouldn't underestimate the goodwill of your community when they can see that you're acting in their best interests. If you're transparent about what's driven both your successes and your failures, your community are much more likely to support your activities.

When looking to get citizen input into the new tourism development plan for the Faroe Islands, the team put out an open call to residents to tell them what they really felt about tourism. The promotional video that launched the campaign saw the team taking to the streets to ask residents for their candid opinion and showed an honest representation of the different perspectives held by residents – both positive and negative. As a result, the new tourism development strategy has been shaped by the concerns and hopes of the residents.

That's not to say that you need to be entirely reflective of what your residents tell you. After all, a place brand is in many ways aspirational; a good place narrative, acknowledges where you've come from, where you are going, and what the collective hopes are of your community for the future. The team at North Dakota Department of Commerce flagged in one conversation that we risk being our own worst critics. Yes, we need to recognise the challenges we face, but we also need to be working to remind our residents

about all the great opportunities that are on their doorsteps as well. It can be easy to get blasé about what is always at your fingertips.

One recent initiative from Destination Cleveland was the launch of the 'Brag Movement,' which aims to convert local pride into powerful recommendations. A large-scale, interactive experience called 'The Brag Button' tours resident-focused events, where locals are challenged to brag for Cleveland for 30-seconds. Beyond that, the new 'Brag Coach' tool has been created to generate content that will help residents showcase their pride, whether they need help with an Instagram caption or writing a text to convince someone to visit.

essential COSTA RICA's citizen engagement strategies are also based around re-igniting local pride and giving residents the tools and assets they needed to amplify their love of the country. In the last edition of the Citizen Engagement Toolkit, we shared several of the team's initiatives, including the redesign of Costa Rica's passport to give residents a tangible asset that celebrated their home, a TikTok series targeted towards a Costa Rican audience, and the development of custom WhatsApp stickers that could be used in everyday messaging. This case study can still be found in the attachments, but since then the team have continued their efforts to ensure that all their citizens are empowered to celebrate their homeland. The strategy is rooted in tangible moments that allow residents to express their national identity in their own terms, including welcoming unique interpretations of the phrase 'Pura Vida' and working with an urban music artist to create a song that would discourage littering.

Many of your residents will have a deep emotional connection to their home. Being able to give them a platform to express that is a powerful asset for your place. The Selwyn District Council team have pioneered a new tool that allows local businesses and residents to re-imagine the place brand logo to suit their own requirements. Likewise, in Eindhoven, the place brand identity is open source and can be used by anyone – but because it belongs to and has been embraced by the community, they have become a vital component of preventing misuse of the brand. As the team at Eindhoven365 told us, every strategy is only as strong as the people defending it.

4

Citizen engagement has to be inclusive.

Reaching your whole community is a challenge, and it only becomes more challenging the larger the place is that you represent. However, it is essential that you're listening to as wider cross-section of your community as you can. Traditional citizen engagement tactics like focus groups can bias your findings towards the demographics who have time on their hands, such as retirees. On the other hand, disenfranchised community groups might not be overly keen to share their perspective with you.

Each individual community will need approaching considerably. Rochester, Minnesota, have been pioneering an approach to co-design that breaks down barriers to participation in order to deliver equitable development for the destination. Individual members of key communities that will be impacted by a development are invited to join the project as co-designers and to serve as liaisons with the communities they represent. On top of this, compensation is available for time, travel, and childcare to ensure that participation isn't limited to those with the resources to do so.

The work spearheaded by Brand South Africa is another example of how citizen engagement can be delivered inclusively. The Play Your Part programme aims to build civic pride in the country and to encourage active citizenship. An initiative within this broader strategy is designed to give young people a chance to hone their entrepreneurial skills and develop a pitch that could win them investment in their small business idea. As well as providing vital skills to their young people, the programme connects winners to Brand South Africa's citizen ambassadors with skills in the relevant areas to continue growing their talents.

Another group that is often glossed over is our youngest residents. But engaging them in your strategy allows you to create a pipeline of future ambassadors for your place and to start growing civic pride from an early age. Destin Fort-Walton Beach, for example, are investing in their young people by employing a number of 16 – 18-year-olds to help visiting children get out on the water and discover their adventurous spirit.

Several places are also weaving their place brand strategy into the classroom itself. We Are Staffordshire launched a competition to encourage children to design a plate that celebrated the region's long ceramics history. As part of this, the team created a lesson plan that was shared with schools across the county to teach them about Staffordshire's pottery heritage and encourage them to be prouder of their home. *essential* COSTA RICA have also embedded their citizen engagement strategy into the national curriculum by working alongside the Ministry of Education to create education materials that would strengthen both ocean literacy and nation brand values alike.

Finally, Brand Tasmania's 'Little Tasmanian' book series is translating the place brand values into a children's storybook, simultaneously working to build pride from their very first days, whilst also tackling illiteracy within the region.

In many of the case studies we saw, the key to reaching broader communities is to think hyper local, and to work with trusted figures in those areas. If you can connect with schools and colleges, you'll have an easier route to talk to your young people. If you can build strong relationships with community associations or neighbourhood groups, you can disseminate your message through a voice piece that can place the importance of your work into a context that will resonate with a local group. Building relationships in the areas you're weaker is essential to delivering inclusive citizen engagement.

5

Keep it simple, keep it fun

This is almost a no brainer, but it can be easy to drop when you're busy trying to get a hundred other details right. Engagement should be engaging. At the end of the day, you're asking your local to give up their time. Whether that's five minutes to answer a survey, an hour to participate in a one-to-one meeting, or a full day event, you're still asking them to pick your activity out of a myriad of things competing for their attention. Successful citizen engagement has to be built on something more than the goodwill of those contributing.

There are a few ways that we saw people approaching this within these case studies. The first is to meet people where they're already spending time. After receiving proposals from just eight residents in the previous city planning process, the team at the City of Tartu knew they needed to rethink the traditional consultation process. Instead, they took the consultation to the streets, working in partnership with a local theatre troupe to create fictional characters who humorously embodied different perspectives for the city's future. After all, the residents were already spending time in the city centre – what the team needed to do was capture their imaginations whilst they were there.

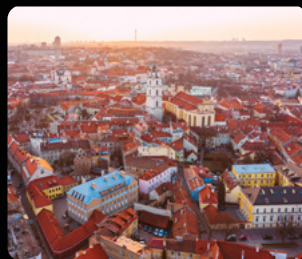
The second is to make it fun, or to do something different. Destination Cleveland's Brag Button challenge is a great example of this, and it will continue to generate new content that the team can use to promote the city in the years to come. The Friendship Heights Alliance also used event programming as an opportunity to create informal engagement sessions to understand how residents wished to see their hometown develop.

The success of Williamsburg's Future Festivals hinged on the same premise. The events were bright, interesting, and unique. Positioning the public engagement as a family day out naturally generated traction within the community, and each event gave them an opportunity to refine their games and ensure that they would catch the attention of more passers-by next time.

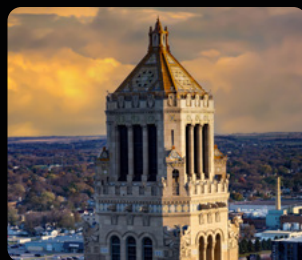
It's worth it.

Citizen engagement can seem like a daunting task, but there are hundreds of ways you can break down what you're looking to achieve into manageable chunks of work that can be achieved within the means you have available to you – particularly if you're tapping into the resources of your partners. And the reality is that a project built on citizen engagement is one that is built to last. We need to stop building for our communities, and instead, start building with our communities.

We hope that you find the resources and inspiration in this toolkit you need to make your next citizen engagement strategy a success.



Case Studies



The Bahamas



Location

The Bahamas / Latin America & Caribbean

Population

400,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Empowering place ambassadors

Challenge

The Bahamas Ministry of Tourism, Investments, and Aviation (BMOTIA) were facing a challenge. On the one hand, the islands were facing a decline in service excellence, and many residents felt disconnected from the tourist experience. On the other, travellers are increasingly seeking more fulfilling holiday experiences beyond the confines of their resort and to form an authentic connection with their host community.

The team at BMOTIA needed a solution that would provide visitors with the immersive cultural experiences they desired, whilst also working in tandem with Bahamian residents to create a more sustainable and meaningful tourism economy.

Strategy

BMOTIA found their solution in the revitalisation of the People-to-People program. Originally launched in 1975 for a total of fifteen months, the campaign aimed to connect residents and tourists together to foster a sense of kinship between the two groups. The Minister of Tourism at the time, Sir Clement T. Maynard, believed that tourism in The Bahamas should be everybody's business – and that Bahamians should play a more active role in the visitor experience to create an opportunity for visitors to experience the authenticity of the destination.

When it came to rejuvenating The Bahamas' tourism economy in the wake of the pandemic, it was clear that the principles that Sir Clement T. Maynard advocated for mirrored what the team hoped to achieve, and BMOTIA decide to re-activate the People-to-People programme.

The core of the programme is simple – no one knows your place as well as the residents do. The team reached out to the local community to volunteer as ambassadors for The Bahamas and to share their love for The Bahamas with tourists looking for more authentic experiences.

A national recruitment drive was held to encourage residents to sign-up for the People-to-People ambassador training. Ad campaigns featured residents from all walks of life working directly in the tourism industry, as well as industry stakeholders and private organisations, to encourage residential engagement with the programme.



Once residents have applied and passed a vetting process, they are invited to join a two-day training workshop. This training consists of six modules:

- Becoming a People-to-People ambassador
- My Bahamas
- The Business of Tourism
- Service Excellence
- The Art of Hosting
- The Art of Entertaining

This training aims to accomplish a number of things. Firstly, it ensures a consistent standard of knowledge and excellence across all the People-to-People ambassadors. Secondly, it provides a space to discuss ideas and explore how residents can create successful and meaningful experiences for a wide-range of travellers. And finally, it provides the team at BMOTIA an opportunity to update residents on recent developments in tourism and hospitality, and how they can respond to the new needs and desires of visitors to the islands. Participation in the programme is voluntary, although there is a small stipend to assist with the costs of the hosting experience.



Additional materials to explore...

[People-to-People Programme: Ambassador Volunteer registration](#)

[People-to-People: Visitor landing page](#)



Impact

The response was overwhelming. To date, there are more than 300 active ambassadors for the programme, representing a cross section of Bahamians. The programme provided the opportunity for Bahamians to open their homes and their hearts to perform one of the most meaningful jobs in tourism, and in doing so, contributed to the kind of image building for the islands that no advertising campaign could have accomplished.

The programme has forged friendships between people from around the world through customised experiences, and on returning home, travellers often share their experience with friends and family, prompting future trips to the islands of The Bahamas!

Learnings

1. Lean into the love that your residents have for their homeland. Many enjoy showing off their country to others and were delighted to have the opportunity to contribute to this unique programme when they were invited.
2. You need support from the very top. Having buy-in from the key decision-makers in government increased the confidence of residents to participate in the programme and was vital to getting people to engage.
3. To that end, find opportunities to connect potential volunteers with the most senior advocates for the programme. If you can create a chance for volunteers to engage and ask questions of the Minister and the leadership team, you can demonstrate the validity of the programme and get a chance to hear the concerns of residents that can then feed back into how you communicate the programme.

Burnley



Location

Burnley / UK / Europe

Population

95,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Challenge

In the early 2000s, Burnley was faced with 'race riots,' the election of the far-right British National Party to the local council, a declining population, empty schools, and a struggling private sector. Burnley's population had declined by 5.8% and the prevailing feeling from young people was that they had to find their education and future work prospects outside of the borough. Burnley Council knew it had to raise the ambitions of young people and improve its external perception to raise the profile of the borough and retain talent for their private sector partners.

In 2009, Burnley's place brand strategy was launched to try and overcome these issues and to instil pride internally first, before becoming a platform to attract external investment.

Strategy

Burnley's place brand strategy was developed as a public-private partnership. Local businesses were invited to become Burnley Bondholders, who contributed finances alongside the council towards getting the strategy started. This 'skin in the game' approach meant that the private sector were already supporting the place brand and were prepared to work alongside the team to change perceptions, fight for more government investment to the North, and to develop homegrown talent and attract new residents from surrounding areas.

However, more work needed to be done to bridge the disconnect between some of the young people and their borough. In 2024, nearly 2000 young people in Burnley received welfare benefit and 18% of those leaving school had no clear route to work or further education. However, feedback from the businesses in Burnley made it clear that as the workforce ages, it's important to have the next generation waiting in the wings to fill the gaps.

A sister brand was launched in 2019 to the overarching Burnley place brand – Burnley.social. This channel was specifically designed to have a more engaging tone of voice for young people that would help to raise awareness of the opportunities available in Burnley. As well as raising aspirations for those growing up in Burnley, it also aims to re-attract those who relocated to places like Manchester and showcase the amazing career opportunities, affordable lifestyle and housing, and the work-life balance you can have in the borough.

The social channels for the sister brand prioritise information that will interest a younger demographic, including reporting from music festivals, covering film and pop culture with ties to Burnley, and spotlighting interesting places to eat and spend time with friends.

Alongside this, the Burnley Place Brand team have been going into schools to talk to students. These talks cover what they expect from future employers, the variety of careers and employers available in the borough, and the cost-of-living benefits of buying property in the UK's most affordable location, combined with being 80% rural but also being located just off the M65 with three international airports within an hour's drive.

All secondary schools now receive complimentary Bondholder membership to ensure that the team are well-informed of the challenges that the schools – and their students – are facing. From quarterly conversations with the school career leads, it became clear that there was a need for a dedicated Burnley careers fair to showcase local apprenticeships and career opportunities for 15-16 year olds. The first 'Find Your Future' event was held in October 2024, and has become an annual addition to the team's calendar. 50 Bondholders and other partners including universities and armed forces exhibit at the event and feedback is positive, with students sharing that it has opened their eyes to the opportunities that are available and that they don't need to leave Burnley to pursue their career goals.

At the next level, Burnley.social has created spin-off bondholder events for those under the age of 30. Bondholder events are an opportunity to bring together the private sector leaders from across the borough to network, brainstorm through peer-to-peer support, and to enjoy exclusive business tours and updates from the council's chief executive. The team also bring in inspirational young guest speakers, such as candidates from BBC's The Apprentice. However, feedback from the people coming up through these organisations was that these could be intimidating to participate in as a young professional. This spin-off event series was geared towards the younger audience by keeping numbers around 50 delegates aged 30 and under, and a more informal setting, such as held at a café or a leisure facility.

This youth engagement strategy culminates in the Future Leaders initiative. Under 30s who work at a Burnley Bondholder organisation can apply to join a 12-month personal and professional development programme.



Additional materials to explore...

[Burnley.co.uk](https://www.burnley.co.uk) YouTube videos are played in school assemblies

[InBusiness Burnley](#) and [Burnley Lifestyle Magazine](#), with print copies distributed in schools and across the UK

[Burnley.social](#) | [Facebook](#), [X](#), [Instagram](#), & [TikTok](#)

[Burnley Future Leaders](#) | [Landing page](#)

Funded by the Bondholders, the initiative aims to instil passion and pride in Burnley's future leaders about the opportunities available in Burnley.

Finally, the team publish a biannual Burnley Lifestyle magazine, which showcases local opportunities and success stories. Comprising primarily of editorial coverage from the Burnley place brand team, this helps to instil pride of place within residents, as well as encouraging visitation by distributing the magazine through airports and service stations across the UK.

Impact

Between these initiatives, Burnley Place Brand team have established touch points with their youngest resident from school-age all the way through to those about to take their first step into leadership positions in their careers.

The latest census figures show that Burnley's population has grown for the first time in ten years. Young people are staying and returning in such high numbers that the council has established a local goal of 3,880 new homes by 2032.

Fifteen applications were received for the inaugural Future Leaders programme in 2023, jumping to 40 applications for the second and third year following a positive reception. The application process for the fourth cohort is currently underway.

Although the Future Leaders programme was originally free to attend, a small cost has now been added to ensure ongoing engagement from the participant. Businesses now pay £500 to cover the cost of an employee accepted on to the training, and this has also ensured a more sustainable funding stream to support operational costs of the programme, rather than relying purely on Bondholder funding.

Above all else, it's a feeling in Burnley that you just can't put into figures. You can sense it when you look at social media, see the buzz at events, or walk by our busy college or around the borough. There's growing energy and excitement around the opportunity available in Burnley and the team will continue to foster this civic pride in the coming years.

Learnings

1. Don't let your local authority or council lead on an initiative unless the resource is full-time and ring-fenced for use by the place brand alone. People are also more critical about councils, whereas partnering with your private sector often lends more gravitas to your project.
2. You can't wait around for someone to make a decision. It's often better to operate to the mantra of 'act first, ask forgiveness later' in the absence of feedback from your private or public sector stakeholders. Just get started and don't stop!
3. You need to make sure ALL your stakeholders – including residents – see what you're doing, not just the few who follow you on social or attend events. Video content has been particularly effective for the Burnley Place Brand team as it allows people to see first-hand the real impact that is being made.
4. In an ideal world, you need someone in your target demographic running social media comms for that audience. For example, the Burnley Place Brand team hired a digital marketing student as an apprentice to look after their socials, and then took him on full time once he'd graduated, to ensure that their comms lead would understand the challenges and interests of their younger residents. As he moved on to new opportunities, they have restarted the process by hiring another new apprentice, ensuring that they're well-versed in the challenges facing young people – and that they're putting their money where their mouth is and acting as a springboard to train young professionals within Burnley.

Canberra



Location

Canberra / Australia / Australasia

Population

470,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative

Challenge

For many years, Canberra had been seeking an identity: a way of describing what is uniquely 'Canberran'. Previous efforts were trying too hard to say what people thought Canberra 'should' be saying, with words like 'confident, innovative, and bold' rising to the surface. However, these were words that any city would claim, and they didn't embody who Canberrans were at their best and what they had to offer the world. So many other places are forged in harsh environments and deep adversity. In contrast, what do you say about a city that has been given so much, and yet until recently has not been sure of itself?

Canberra's privilege needed to be acknowledged head-on. A new narrative was needed that Canberrans could see themselves reflected in, and that would inform the future development of the city.

Strategy

In June 2021, Brand Canberra began the procurement process, with two Canberran businesses teaming up to deliver the new narrative for the city – True North Content and Cre8ive. After a brief pause to account for a COVID-19 lockdown, the team began the research in earnest in November 2021.

They started by listening. This approach was guided by learnings from Brand Tasmania. Content writers with interviewing experience were engaged to speak with 65 Canberrans from all walks of life. Each in-depth discussion lasted about an hour, drawing out the interviewee's experience of being Canberran: what they loved and – just as importantly – how they came to find a place in the city and what they struggled with.

The team spoke with newcomers – students and 'tree-changers' (those who have moved from big cities to more regional areas) – and born-and-bred Canberrans. They spoke with people who lived in the suburbs and those in the heart of the city, with First Nations people and people with white European roots. They spoke to entrepreneurs, journalists, public servants, teachers, sportspeople, and tradespeople.



As they listened, the team looked for common threads: moments of truth that could be woven together into one master story. In particular, they looked for what was already true and what was becoming true – rather than what outsiders were saying about the city or what they wanted to believe.

The team also read through histories of Canberra which had been written by others, and designed a quantitative survey to run alongside the interviews. This ten-minute online survey was delivered to a representative sample of adults living in Canberra, with a total of 649 people completing the survey, and it identified which aspects of the team's insights resonated most with a wider pool of Canberrans.

Through this research, the team at Brand Canberra searched for a pattern in the way that people described finding a place in the city – and in Canberra, it was clear that was a story of rebirth. Of people coming to the city with unrealised potential, struggling to make sense of the place, before finding a new way to come to life.



Additional materials to explore...

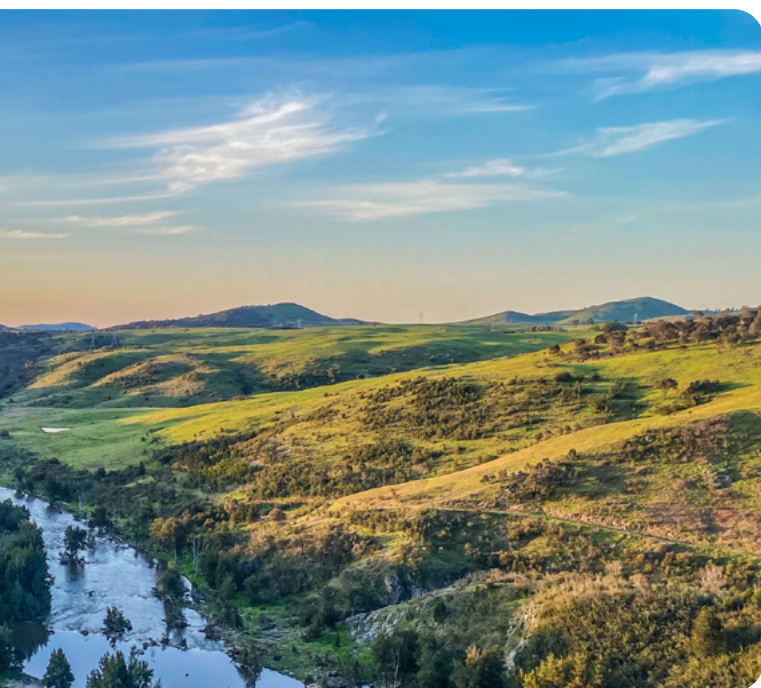
[Being Canberran | Web landing page](#)

[The Canberra Story: Narrative outline](#)

[Overview of bodies of research](#)

[Results from The Canberra Story quantitative survey](#)

[Questions for ACT Government Policy and Programmes](#)



Impact

The comprehensive citizen engagement has led to the development of a story that residents see the best of themselves reflected in. It provides a unifying north star to support thinking across ACT [Australian Capital Territory] Government work more broadly. The underlying foundation of citizen engagement ensures that the place brand narrative can be used as a touchstone for decisions; for example, would this direction, development, or statement bring Canberra closer to their best, or further away? Understanding which direction will take the city closer to realising their potential as expressed in The Canberra Story is a valuable resource for Brand Canberra and their stakeholders.

The story gives a deep shared source of truth to inform what the city creates and the direction that they take – and it has spawned new stories for tourism and workforce attraction. Now the team is sharing the story, and continuing to explore new ways to make it known, useful, and owned by all Canberrans.

Learnings

- ▶ **1. Trust:** Residents know the city better than anyone else. Trust that their thoughts, feelings and opinions are valuable. In return, they will be more trusting of your own work and will want to be more engaged in future projects that you're running.

- ▶ **2. Selection:** Who gets interviewed is important – you want and need people willing to have a conversation that could go deep – but it's how they were selected that people are most interested in afterwards.

- ▶ **3. The good, the bad, the ugly:** Knowing the problem areas is as valuable as articulating your value. This information gives the work depth and informs the places and projects that you pursue next.

Chile



Location

Chile / South America

Population

20,000,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative

Challenge

Chile has a long history of nation branding efforts. However, these strategies were largely led by institution, rather than being shaped by how citizens experienced and valued their own country. Overtime, this top-down approach was creating a gap between the Chile that was projected externally, and the Chile that residents lived and experienced every day. Fundación Imagen de Chile, the Chilean nation branding team, needed to adopt a new approach that would close this gap and ensure that the citizen voice was a genuine input, rather than an afterthought.

However, although Chile featured in a various international reputation indices, these tools capture external perception, rather than internal pride. Building a mechanism that would track domestic identity over time was both a methodological necessity and a strategic opportunity.

Strategy

The Chilean National Pride Study was developed to incorporate citizen engagement within the broader nation branding strategy. Launched in 2019, the study aimed to understand how Chilean citizens perceived their own national identity, which attributes of Chile generated the strongest sense of pride, and which cultural, historical, and social elements were most significant in constructing their sense of belonging.

The fieldwork was conducted through an online panel managed via a mobile application, through which participants receive invitations to complete the survey. Panel members voluntarily register in advance, and the panel currently includes more than 120,000 registered individuals. For each study, a specific selection of participants is carried out prior to sending the invitations. The final sample was constructed using segmentation criteria and sociodemographic quotas, with the aim of ensuring diversity and consistency with the profile defined for the study.

This study has run annually since its inception, with plans to maintain this cadence until at least 2030 – although the study has evolved in scope since 2019.



In the early editions, the study focused on mapping identity attributes across demographic group and understanding how pride differs by age, region, and socioeconomic background. Overtime, however, the analytical scope of the study has been deliberately expanded to explore how domestic perceptions connect – or diverge – from how Chile is perceived internationally. This increased scope ensures the study serves not just as a mirror of public sentiment, but as a strategic bridge between citizen identity and the nation brand strategy.

The 2024-2025 edition, co-executed with Ipsos, introduced an additional qualitative component, allowing the team to explore not just what generates pride, but why it does. This new dimension is allowing the team to make a meaningful distinction between 'pride in Chile as a country' and 'pride in being Chilean as an identity.' This is allowing the team to examine how factors such as resilience, solidarity, the perception of stability, and cultural identity shape the symbolic connection that citizens have with their homeland.

The results of this study are shared with institutional stakeholders to enable conversations about how citizens perceive Chile's identity and which elements generate greater levels of pride and belonging. The findings are also being used to conceptualise future communication and content initiatives targeting different international markets. By identifying shared attributes between Chile and specific priority countries, the team are advancing towards a more segmented and culturally contextualised communication approaches.



Additional materials to explore...

[Chilean Pride Study - 2026](#)

Impact

This study has ensured that citizen perceptions are integrated throughout strategic discussions about nation branding, international reputation, and Chile's global positioning. Since 2019, the study has generated systematic evidence regarding attributes, dimensions, and identity elements that generate the greatest levels of pride and belonging among Chileans, as well as understanding how those perceptions vary across demographic groups.

This research is the initial work needed to underpin an ongoing workflow of nation branding activity:

Phase 0: Identify gap in domestic and international perceptions

Phase 1: Create actions with direct and indirect impact

Phase 2: Conduct annual measurements and identify perceived changes

Phase 3: Generate coherence between national identity and the external promotion of Chile

Phase 4: Improve domestic and international perception of the country

The team is currently at Phase 0 of this strategy, but KPIs have been identified across all stages of the workflow. At Phase 0, these include number of publications in national press, estimated editorial reach, and advertising value equivalent. During Phase 1, the team will begin measuring press and social media campaigns, with the intention of reaching all citizens. Phase 2 onwards will see the measurement of Chilean pride as a key measurement, and the team will adjust the campaign based on national pride results for the remaining phases of activity.

This citizen engagement-led approach is already driving a more segmented and contextualised understanding of the relationship between national identity and international positioning. More than that, it's also establishing that citizen engagement is a vital input within discussions about reputation and nation branding, strengthening the connection between domestic perception and international positioning.

Learnings

1. Nation branding strategies that don't listen to and understand citizens' perceptions of their country risk communicating an image that feels inauthentic to those who live it, and unconvincing to those who encounter it abroad.
2. What resonates most strongly in terms of identity and connection varies strongly by generation, region, gender, and socioeconomic background, and national and global events impact this too. You need diverse information sources to develop segmented and market-relevant communications, rather than generic projections which are applied uniformly.
3. Nuance isn't the obstacle to communication; it's the foundation. Resist the temptation to simplify complex perceptions into a single narrative or only focus on findings that confirm your pre-existing strategy. Research needs repeating regularly and interpreting within the context of its specific moment, and strategies should be flexible enough to accommodate that variation.
4. You need broad commitment and cross-sector collaboration to bring a research study like this to life. The study's influence depends not only on the quality of the research, but on a deliberate effort to share the findings more widely with stakeholders and to create genuine spaces for dialogue around what the findings mean for future strategies. Building the feedback loops between evidence and action and sustaining them year after year has been – and remains – the central challenge and ambition of this project.

Cleveland



Location

Cleveland, Ohio / USA / North America

Population

370,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Building civic pride

Empowering place ambassadors

Challenge

A research study in 2012 revealed three business problems for the DMMO to address. The primary problem was / still is that the city has a perception issue; consumers either felt negatively or neutral about Cleveland as a destination. Second, Cleveland doesn't have a product gap, it has a communication gap. Consumers don't know what there is to do in the city. And finally, the residents themselves had a poor perception of the city. Just three in ten residents would recommend the city as a place to live, work, or invest – which is a challenge when residents were also shown to be one of the top three sources referenced when planning a trip.

The team at Destination Cleveland embarked on a comprehensive strategy to build civic pride in 2014, and paired with the momentum generated by destination development, the city has seen a remarkable turnaround, with 92% of residents now sharing that they would recommend the city to an outsider.

However, now that the foundational work had been completed, the team asked themselves a question: people said that they would recommend Cleveland to potential residents, tourists, or investors – but were they? With civic pride newly reinvigorated, the team at Destination Cleveland needed to move on to the next phase: empowering residents to be ambassadors for their city....

Strategy

In 2022, Destination Cleveland began to develop a comprehensive strategy to weave community engagement and collaboration through all their core work verticals. The pandemic had exposed a tendency to operate in silos; while teams often think that they are working towards a common goal, there's often a lack in alignment and actual collaboration driving towards that goal. However, to achieve the success that Destination Cleveland were seeking, they needed resident buy-in, civic organisation and participation, and private sector coordination.

A three-pronged engagement strategy was developed, with each piece led by the most relevant vertical in Destination Cleveland, but with clear alignment around what the team wanted to achieve. 'Meetings Impact' aims to connect the dots to help meetings deliver more through community engagement – both in terms of leaving a lasting legacy,

and in working with business leaders to identify new opportunities to bring events to the city. The Cleveland Travel + Tourism Collaborative is bringing together key players from the travel and tourism industry to collectively advance the sector and create a longer-term vision for success that stakeholders are aligned behind. And the third prong focuses on giving residents the tools they need to champion their hometown.

This new strategy is working to empower residents across both tourism and talent attraction. A project called 'Local Advocates' is developing a committed group of passionate locals who can connect visitors to aspects of Cleveland – whether community, residents, networks, experiences, or attractions – that will encourage them to visit the city or extend their stay.

Initially launched in 2023, this brings passionate Clevelanders together with the new tools they can use to share their love of Cleveland, including the hashtag #TheLandForLife, custom Instagram stickers and filters, postcards and more. Alongside of this, Destination Cleveland try and provide new – sometimes exclusive – events and opportunities to explore the city's hidden gems and get the inside scoop on development projects.

Through this approach, Destination Cleveland are giving residents a platform to authentically, and personally endorse the region as a place to visit through their networks, whilst also ensuring that they can feel the impact that the travel and tourism industry has on their community. This has stretched into Destination Cleveland's own campaigns, as the team continue to help residents take ownership of the Cleveland story. As well as a podcast and a series spotlighting the creative industry in Cleveland, the video series "The Land For Life" invites two unsuspecting Clevelanders to sit on 'The Land Love Seat' and meet another Clevelanders they've never met, live on screen. This series provides another platform to amplify what it is that people love best about Cleveland, and to showcase the everyday people that make Cleveland the place it is today.

In spring 2026, the Destination Cleveland team launched the 'Brag Movement' which aims to convert local pride into powerful recommendations. At the heart of the campaign is the Brag Button – a large scale interactive experience that encourages residents to share what they love most about their city. The Brag Button is being taken to events where residents will be challenged to brag for 30-seconds about Cleveland and in return, they'll receive Cleveland-branded



Additional materials to explore...

- [Resident research study summary](#)
- [Supporting tools for Local Advocates](#)
- [Video series | The Land For Life](#)
- [Cleveland Ambassadors | Landing page](#)
- [The Brag Hub](#)
- [Chat with the Cleveland Brag Coach](#)

merchandise so they can carry that pride with them into the rest of their life. Beyond this, the team have also developed the Brag Coach, a digital tool that generates ready-to-use content based on user prompts.

In line with this, on July 22nd 2026 (Cleveland's birthday) the Local Advocate Group will be relaunched as the CLE Brag Crew to continue fuelling the Brag Movement and ensure that the stars of the show are the residents themselves.

Alongside this tourism-centric ambassador strategy, Destination Cleveland are now working with the agency RoleCall to develop a Resident Ambassador program to support the city's talent attraction strategy. Destination Cleveland are key partners in the Cleveland Talent Alliance, a collaboration between public private, and non-profit organisations focused on talent attraction and retention. Partner organisations of the Alliance recommended qualified and knowledgeable volunteers for the initial launch of the program, but a press release about the talent alliance also sparked city-wide interest and there are now individuals reaching out independently to volunteer with the effort. These community volunteers are matched with people looking to move to Cleveland and can provide a more personal and authentic response to those wanting to know what makes Cleveland such a special place to live.

An informal in-person training session is hosted for the newly recruited Resident Ambassadors to give them a chance to connect with one another, and to share what they love about Cleveland and what they can do to help interested talent decide to move to the city. The team also gave a 'Cleveland 101' presentation containing facts, figures, and resources for ambassadors and incoming talent.

Impact

At this time, approximately 2000 residents are signed up for the Local Advocate programme, with around 50-100 of those having signed up to attend in-person events. The team's goal is to re-engage those advocates with the relaunch of the CLE Brag Crew and create a stronger, more direct connection to The Land.

Since its launch in late 2023, the Resident Ambassador programme supporting Cleveland's talent attraction efforts has double in size, now comprising 31 active ambassadors. To date, the programme has facilitated more than 230

connection requests from individuals considering relocation to Cleveland. And 70 prospective residents have engaged directly with Resident Ambassadors to receive authentic, peer-to-peer insights about living and working in the region. As a direct result of these connections, five individuals have relocated to Cleveland, leveraging ambassador support to streamline their move. Impressively, this success has also been achieved with minimal formal marketing; many participants discover and opt into the programme organically, demonstrating a strong demand for personalised, community-led support in the relocation journey.

Learnings

1. Stop building things for your community – instead, build with your community. Community collaboration is a necessity for impactful change and forward momentum.
2. You need to take the long approach when it comes to collaboration at this strategic, city-wide level. You have to ensure that people feel engaged at a deep level and have shared ownership and responsibility – this takes time, trust, and consensus to achieve.
3. If you're gearing your strategy toward resident engagement, you need to keep it simple, easy, and engaging. Residents are eager to engage with you, but you have to meet them where they're willing to take action.

Costa Rica

Location

Costa Rica / Latin America & Caribbean

Population

5,200,000

Focus

Building civic pride



Challenge

Costa Rica enjoys one of the world's strongest reputations in sustainability and environmental leadership. However, at a local level, that reputation does not always translate into everyday awareness or behaviour. Citizens feel proud of their country, but pride can become passive—more symbolic than actionable—especially when national values are not consistently experienced through daily culture, stories, and shared norms.

In 2024, the *essential* Costa Rica country brand team updated us on how they reawakened the love of their citizens for their homeland. This included three initiatives that were designed to remind Costa Ricans of their civic pride, including redesigning the Costa Rican passport, embedding their brand in WhatsApp, and creating a TikTok series targeting residents. You can find the 2024 case study in the list of supporting material accompanying this case study.

However, in 2025, the team took their activities to the next level. Rather than relying on single initiatives to engage their citizens, they developed a continuous sequence of complementary interventions, each one addressing a different dimension of citizen engagement while reinforcing the same overarching goal: to make the country brand more visible, relatable, and actionable in everyday life.

Strategy

The strategy was grounded in a clear principle: national identity is not built through a single message, but through repeated experiences that create emotional connection, influence everyday behaviour, and deepen public understanding over time. This action plan was designed to activate different layers of citizen engagement: identity, behaviour, knowledge, and education. Rather than asking citizens to “care more” in abstract terms, the programme created tangible moments where identity could be expressed, behaviours recognised, and national stories experienced in everyday life.

IDENTITY

The first intervention focused on identity through culture. By using ‘Pura Vida’ as a hook – a phrase deeply embedded in Costa Rican everyday life – the team created a citizen-centric campaign that invited Costa Ricans to share

their own interpretations of the phrase. This participatory approach strengthened emotional connection and generated a sense of ownership over the national narrative.

The team also partnered with Costa Rican creators and brand ambassadors to spread the message through trusted voices that citizens already trusted and engaged with, combining credibility with cultural relevance at scale. Rather than defining identity from the top-down, this initiative used curiosity-driven and data-informed storytelling to spark reflection and participation, transforming a common expression into a broader conversation about meaning, belonging, and national values.

BEHAVIOUR

The next intervention focused on promoting everyday environmental responsibility through the campaign “Si se bota, se nota” (“If you litter, it shows.”) The initiative encouraged citizens not to throw waste in public spaces by framing littering as a visible social behaviour that directly impacts shared environments.

Instead of relying on traditional instructional messaging, the campaign approached behaviour change through entertainment and culture. As part of the strategy, *essential* Costa Rica partnered with DEEIKEL, a famous urban music artist, to create the song “Esencial.” By using music as a central storytelling tool, this approach allowed the message to connect with younger audiences through short-form video formats and organic social sharing.

KNOWLEDGE

‘Hidden Giants’ was designed to bring Costa Rican heritage and scientific discovery closer to citizens. When a rare Ice Age fossil was discovered in Cartago, the team used the opportunity to bring scientific and ancestral content closer to the public. As a discovery of this nature is particularly uncommon in a geologically young country like Costa Rica, the novelty and excitement around the discovery were foundational to launching this initiative.

Rather than being bogged down in technical explanations, the campaign adopted an accessible storytelling approach designed for social media-first audiences. The content was reinforced through an interview-style format featuring the Director of *essential* COSTA RICA, Adriana Acosta, as a spokesperson, combining credibility with proximity, clarity, and public engagement. The impact of this initiative extended beyond digital platforms, as national media outlets replicated and expanded upon *essential* COSTA RICA's content.



Additional materials to explore...

[2024 case study: Costa Rica](#)

[Pura Vida Campaign - Example Instagram reel](#)

[Song: Esencial - Deeikel \(Si Se Bota Se Nota\)](#)

[Fossil Discovery](#)

[Costa Rica Blue](#)

EDUCATION

The fourth intervention focused on creating long-term cultural impact through education. Developed in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Costa Rica Blue is an interactive platform and set of education materials designed to strengthen ocean literacy. The initiative included curriculum-aligned multimedia resources and didactic materials on topics such as marine ecosystems, waste management, biodiversity, and sustainability.

Educational content for students from 7th to 11th grade was incorporated into the national curriculum, ensuring that more citizens will recognise that Costa Rica is more than its landmass and that its marine life should be celebrated and protected. The platform was also recently included as an official resource for the UNESCO Blue Schools Program through Misión Tiburón and the Ministry of Environment and Energy. This allowed the initiative's impact to extend beyond classrooms into families and communities over time.

Impact

Together, the four initiatives transformed national identity, sustainability, heritage, and education into participatory cultural experiences. In total, the initiatives generated more than 26 million impressions and over 20 million video views across platforms.

The "Pura Vida" initiative turned a common national expression into a participatory cultural movement, reaching more than 2 million people and generating strong engagement through identity-led storytelling.

"Si se bota, se nota" became the programme's largest behaviour-change campaign, generating more than 22.4 million impressions and 12.7 million video plays across all platforms. Its original song further amplified cultural reach, achieving more than 40K Spotify streams.

The "Hidden Giants" fossil storytelling initiative reached more than 950K people and generated approximately 3.9 million video plays, proving that accessible heritage and science storytelling can spark national curiosity and pride.

Meanwhile, Costa Rica Blue created long-term educational impact by reaching more than 500K students nationwide through curriculum integration and generating 181 press mentions, more than USD 1.6M in earned media value, and 3.7 million video plays.

Learnings

1. Translate national identities into formats that encourage interactions. Making identity participatory, culturally relevant, and experience-driven is significantly more effective than prioritising static messaging alone.
2. Contemporary formats – such as emerging music genres, creator-led content, and social-first storytelling – can strengthen emotional connection with younger audiences and increase message adoption organically.
3. Collaborating with creators and brand ambassadors is key to amplifying your message and securing cultural credibility, embedding the nation brand in everyday, online conversations.
4. Designing the strategy as an integrated ecosystem that combines identity, behaviour, knowledge, and education proved to be far more impactful than isolated campaigns and enabled both immediate engagement and long-term continuity.

Destin-Fort Walton Beach



Location

Destin-Fort Walton Beach / USA / North

Population

220,000

Focus

Empowering place ambassadors

Challenge

Prior to a rebrand in 2019, Destin-Fort Walton Beach had a challenge. The destination was overcrowded, traffic was a nightmare, and residents had lost faith that tourism could be a positive impact on their hometown. Since then, the destination's tourism organisation created a mission statement that simply stated the following: "to make time spent here, whether visiting, living or working, more valuable to all." However, they needed to do more than just be hospitable. As a coastal destination in Florida, it wasn't enough to be just another pretty beach. Instead, the Destin-Fort Walton Beach team wanted to champion the importance of getting kids outside and giving their adventurous side room to grow. To do this effectively, the team would need to create an easy mechanism to help young families push past their comfort zones, and they would need to embed place stewardship throughout their approach to ensure the long-term support of their residents.

Both ambitions required a strong citizen engagement approach in order to understand how residents perceived the impact of tourism on the community, for better or worse, and to create a platform that would allow residents to shape and influence how tourism operated within the destination.

Strategy

Community engagement needed to be at the core of their approach, and the team developed a number of initiatives that would strengthen the connection between residents, businesses, and visitors, to ensure that these voices were heard and integrated within their strategy.

Destin-Fort Walton Beach's reputation is built around the importance of getting kids outside, on the water, and guiding families towards their next adventure. First the destination needed to identify what made adventures in Destin-Fort Walton distinct, ultimately leading to the creation of the Little Adventures platform. Defined as a new, bite-sized challenge for families that makes it easy to get outside and get out of their comfort zones, Little Adventures would serve as a foundation from which additional initiatives would be built. This was realised in the team's first initiative, Little Adventure Packs, which brought together local restaurants with local businesses and challenged each pair to create an offering that paired great food with a Little Adventure.

But how would families know about packs and receive the codes to book them through the respective businesses? The answer? Local mothers in Destin-Fort Walton Beach, who were uniquely placed to understand the best that the destination has to offer and also have experience of supporting children through these activities.

The team quickly identified that these locals were much more than a salesforce. They were bridging the disconnect between those who were already keen to try adventurous activities, and the families who live in or visit Destin-Fort Walton Beach. They needed an avenue to encourage parents to take their children out on the water and experience the benefits of snorkelling, diving, paddleboarding, and more – and who would understand the unique challenges and concerns that parents have when introducing their children to new activities.

Initially, the team worked with a small group of mums who could help visitors step outside of their comfort zone and share the tips and tricks that would make an adventure as frictionless as possible. Today, there are ten women working with them in this capacity, some who have been on board for more than five years. These women have been recruited through word-of-mouth and through local connections, including the destination's large military population. They were then taken through a training programme to fill in any gaps in their knowledge and to ensure they understand Destin-Fort Walton Beach's brand positioning. For example, each Scout is taken on a 'Destination Ride Along', where a team member drives the new recruit across the destination, introducing them to the partners they'll be working with and the brand language they should be reflecting.

However, the team is very mindful not to provide strict restrictions that would reduce the authenticity of the suggestions that their 'Online Scouts' are providing. The real value lies in feeling like you're speaking to a local mum just like yourself, and not to someone who's simply parroting corporate speak. Instead, the focus is on ensuring they have the nitty-gritty education needed to help people navigate from A to B during peak traffic or when the best time is to head to a hidden gem.

Overtime, these 'Scouts' have evolved to become destination experts who can answer visitor questions such as: where's the best location for snorkeling? Should I pack a raincoat? And where is best to take an active three-year-old? This approach moves beyond relying on broad stroke recommendations to giving tailored and welcoming advice.



Additional materials to explore...

[Little Adventures Beach Scout – job description](#)

[Beach Scout welcome packet](#)

[Little Adventure Class - Flyer provided in accommodation](#)

[Little Adventure Class - Testimonials](#)

From this initiative, the team developed a new programme that connected local high school and college-aged kids, ensuring that their youngest residents can benefit from the activities and resources on their doorstep. 'Little Adventure Classes' offer free, one-hour workshops, where the Destin-Fort Walton Beach team partner with and pay local businesses to help both visiting and local children to take their first step into the water. From this, the team have worked to employ 50 young people, most of whom were currently enrolled in high school or university. These young people take an active role in sharing recommendations and acting as a bridge for children between the scary adventure and the cool activity they're going to experience.

Impact

By putting the lived experience of residents at the centre of the strategy, the Destin-Fort Walton Beach team have done more than provide a valuable resource for visitors; they're showing – loud and clear – that they're attuned to resident concerns and worries. Where previously there had been complaints that tourism was creating traffic congestion on the main road, there is now visible evidence of the team's commitment to working with locals to direct tourists to off-the-beaten-path locations and hidden gems.

The young people working with the Little Adventure Classes are often really passionate, and the team has a 50% return rate, with individuals continuing to participate year after year until they eventually leave the nest. It has redefined the role a tourism organisation plays for many of these residents who previously had little to no knowledge of what a destination marketing organisation does beyond printing visitor's guides.

The programme has also become an important point of pride for the Scouts, and small businesses of Destin-Fort Walton Beach, giving residents a new lens through which to see their hometown and a platform through which they can champion businesses run by neighbours and friends.

Surveys show that 94% of those who took a 'Little Adventure Class' would try another adventure, whilst 100% of those who interacted with a Scout said they felt more welcome in the destination – a huge increase from the initially low hospitality scores the destination had before the new strategy came into effect.

To further understand how this strategy is delivering against the team's ambition to deliver a resident-centric, family-friendly tourism strategy, the team will be launching a local sentiment survey in the summer of 2026.

Learnings

1. Pay your resident ambassadors. Their expertise is invaluable, and they should be fairly compensated for their time and experience..
2. Give your residents and local businesses ownership in how the programme develops and listen to their perspective. While Destin-Fort Walton Beach had some criteria to guide the development of these initiatives, local small business partners were equally committed, ensuring that the Scouts and adventure experts were passionate about working with children.
3. Listen to the negative voices. If you fill the room with people who support you wholeheartedly, it can be hard to understand the potential problems that might arise – sometimes the naysayers have the biggest impact on the development of a programme.
4. When you're operating with the community's wellbeing in mind and demonstrating that commitment at every opportunity, it creates a lot of good will and generosity. People are willing to forgive mistakes and failed projects if they can see that the intentions were authentic, so don't be afraid to try new ideas and be transparent on reasons behind both the wins and missteps as you go.

Eindhoven



Location

Eindhoven / The Netherlands / Europe

Population

245,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative

Building civic pride

Citizen-centric placemaking

Challenge

Having been established in 2011, Eindhoven's brand has undergone numerous developments as the Eindhoven365 team continually work to update and refine their strategy in response to the city's needs. However, at the core of it all is a solid focus on citizen engagement and fostering community pride.

According to the Eindhoven365 City Marketing strategy document, 2011-2015 was the period for brand development, 2016-2021 focused on brand activation, and 2022-2025 is using the brand as a connector.

How is their decade-long focus on citizen engagement providing a foundation for the current and future evolution of their strategy?

Strategy

Eindhoven's place branding journey began in 2010 with a resident survey to gauge how residents perceived their city. A digital panel of 6000 Eindhoven residents were presented with a number of typical attributes for a city and asked to rank Eindhoven against those from 0-10 in three areas: Identity (what they considered to be the everyday reality of the city); Image (how external audiences view the city); and Ambition (what they aspired to be as a city).

The results showed that while Identity and Image tracked quite closely, there were a number of notable areas where the Ambition score far outstripped that of Identity or Image. These areas – top technology and innovative city, knowledge city, and design city - became the foundation of Eindhoven's place brand strategy.

Historically, Eindhoven had been home to the HQ for Philips Electronics. However, Philips laid off 45,000 people in the early 90s, throwing the city in to crisis. The legacy this left in the city was clear though – the city was filled with people with a background in technology and design who were itching to make a difference. It is perhaps not a surprise, then, that citizens ranked Technology, Design, and Knowledge so highly as an ambition for the city, but it certainly surprised politicians who thought that residents would align with more typical buzz words such as being 'inclusive' or 'sustainable'.



The resulting single brand was developed in collaboration between a selection of local designers and has subsequently been made open source so that it can be used without permission. This has been a hugely important factor in ensuring that the brand is adopted by residents and businesses within the city. Restaurants use the brand to create puddings or to dust patterns on coffee. There are residents who have used the brand design in stained glass windows or got it tattooed on themselves to show their pride. And while Eindhoven365 make merchandise with the brand, local residents are also making and selling merchandise featuring the brand. This approach deliberately removed barriers to participation and adoption of the brand spread like wildfire.

Moving forwards, the team are continuing to find opportunities to involve their residents in their strategy. 'The Sound of Eindhoven' campaign, for example, challenged residents to record an anthem for the city. Two of the new strategic pillars are also heavily citizen centric. 'Mobilising citizens' aims to give citizens a say in greening their living environment by 2030. And 'Integrating newcomers' looks to welcome internationals to the city by connecting them to local communities through meet-ups and exchange programmes.



Additional materials to explore...

[Eindhoven's brand development process](#)

[Bringing the brand to life – examples of the brand in action](#)

[Eindhoven's City Marketing Strategy 2022-2030](#)



Impact

Following this initial strategy development, the team pivoted to a net promoter score. Every year, the team ask their residents to what extent they would recommend Eindhoven as a city to work in, to live in, and to visit. This score is also used to measure how happy citizens are with the city.

On top of this, every four years, the team use a citizen panel called Digipanel to generate qualitative feedback on how citizens perceive their city, in order to provide more depth to the insights generated by the net promoter score.

This strategy has allowed Eindhoven to turn its fortunes around, as evidenced by local companies who are now requesting that Eindhoven365 turn their efforts from talent attraction to talent retention. Co-creating the brand with the citizens has led to a strategy that has been successfully delivering for the city for well over a decade and Eindhoven is leading the way with an approach that prioritises purpose and mission-oriented values that will continue to pave a path to success over the coming years. And most importantly of all, the brand has reinvigorated civic pride within the community.

Learnings

1. When your strategy is rooted in citizen engagement, it creates a powerful tool to sway politicians to your side. It's much harder to argue against a campaign if you can defined it by saying that 'it is the citizens' choice.'
2. Don't offer open choices on a survey, because it's much harder to convert the responses into actionable insights. If residents can only select from a pool of options that you already know are achievable, you can be far more targeted with your following strategies, as opposed to finding out that residents want to have a new McDonalds in the town centre.
3. Every strategy is only as strong as the people defending and guarding it. By building your brand strategy in tandem with your citizens and then giving that brand back to your residents for their use, you can create a strong emotional connection with your brand that ensures your residents will safeguard your brand against misuse on your behalf.

The Faroe Islands



Location

The Faroe Islands / Europe

Population

55,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Empowering place ambassadors

Challenge

Visit Faroe Islands have a long history of success in great place marketing using their citizens as a focal point. In 2017, for example, Visit Faroe Islands petitioned Google to include Faroese on Google Translate by launching their own service where Faroese residents volunteered to translate phrases for people around the world who were curious to learn more about this unusual language.

However, once famous for the remote nature of the islands, there was growing concern amongst the Faroese that tourism was becoming too much for the Islands – too big, too unregulated, too divisive.

Visit Faroe Islands knew that they needed to address these concerns, whilst also reminding residents of how much positive benefit they receive from the growth in tourism to the Islands. To do this, they needed to encourage residents to engage more deeply with their work and to develop a tourism development strategy that ensures that residents benefit from the tourism that the team were driving to the islands.

Strategy

The Visit Faroe Islands team asked all 54,000 residents to dig in and have their input into the Tourism Strategy 2030. The question they asked residents was simple: what would you like tourism in the Faroe Islands to look like in 2030?

A website was launched that invited residents to 'have their say', the team embarked on a communications campaign to ensure that residents were aware of the opportunity. To build awareness, the team hit the streets to record honest responses from the residents they encountered. These unfiltered replies were then used to create a video with direct residents to share their own perspective. Critically, this video features a full spectrum of responses, from those who think that tourism brings money, jobs, and opportunity to the islands, to those who worry that they are being pushed out of their homes by the influx of tourism.

This campaign was broadcast across local news TV stations and Facebook to reach as many residents as possible, and members of the team also featured as guests on popular radio shows to call the Faroese community to action.



In total, the team got more than 500 answers to their open question, the equivalent of roughly 1% of the population. It was important to the team to ensure that they were really listening to residents and ensuring that the new strategy addressed their concerns and hopes; while the team also ran focus groups and discussions with key political parties, guests, tourism industry stakeholders as well as other opinion builders and people from other industries, the feedback from residents formed a critical part of the development of their 2030 strategy.

Impact

The new tourism development strategy was launched in 2023, centring on 'Heim' (Faroese for 'home') – a concept that stemmed from residential input. 'Home' represents the many people and animals who live on the Islands, but also includes a sense of pride, the need for conservation, and ensuring that when people are invited into your home that they are made welcome there.

Alongside this focal point to the strategy, the citizens made it clear that they wanted to be a more prominent aspect of the international presentation of the Faroe Islands. This led to the development of a new strategy that puts local residents front and centre in Visit Faroe Islands' marketing.



Additional materials to explore...

[Developing a citizen-centric strategy](#)

[Heim | Tourism Development Strategy 2030](#)

[Meet the Faroencers](#)



'Faroencers' – a play on Faroe and influencers – invites a select group of residents to share their stories. Putting the spotlight on these colourful individuals invites an international audience to get a snippet of the every day life of the Faroese, from book clubs to knitting parties, and from chasing in the sheep to leading the service for a congregation. On top of that, it ensures that residents see themselves represented in Visit Faroe Islands' storytelling and even encourages them to try new things available to them. The Faroencers were also able to participate in an exclusive social media promotion course to help them build their own audiences.

This strategy is the latest step in a long-running approach from Visit Faroe Islands to bring their residents and their tourists together harmoniously. Small and cosy is the trademark of the Islands, and for several years, the team have been running a Living Room festival that welcomes people into the homes of residents for intimate gigs. Alongside this, the team have been pioneering the 'Closed For Maintenance, Open For Voluntourism' project. Begun in 2019, the project sees destinations on the Islands closed to tourists apart from a small number of 'voluntourists' who work alongside – and are hosted by – local residents to conduct essential maintenance across the Islands and to ensure that tourism is delivering back to the broader community. Several years on, the 2025 edition of the project received over 15,000 applications and continues to provide a vital touchpoint between residents and tourists.

Learnings

1. People want to get engaged, the trick is in developing an idea that catches their imagination and excites them; your residents are far more likely to share their time or their thoughts with you if they're interested in what you're doing. The locals are an important part of the value chain in tourism and hence important to integrate into your work.
2. There can be clashes between tourism and residents. You need to acknowledge that some people will be upset about some of your work in order to develop strategies to address their concerns effectively, or it will look like you're white-washing over the challenges.
3. Embed your own DNA in everything you do, product development, marketing etc. It makes your destination more authentic and makes it stand out from the crowd, especially in small places where tourism otherwise easily can dilute the original culture.

Friendship Heights



Location

Friendship Heights / USA / North America

Population

11,000

Focus

Citizen-centric placemaking

Challenge

Friendship Heights neighbourhood had a crisis of identity. Spanning the border between Washington, DC and Maryland, the area was hard hit by stores closures and non-resident friendly public spaces. Residents described the neighbourhood as 'empty' or 'boring'.

It was clear that work needed to be done to revitalise the area, but more than that, they also needed to foster emotional and social re-engagement. Without strong citizen engagement, there was a risk that redevelopment efforts would remain disconnected from the people who called the district home.

Rather than treating engagement as a one-time consultation effort, the Friendship Heights Alliance was established in 2022 to ensure that business, resident, and stakeholder voices were at the centre of all plans for the neighbourhood – both now and in the future.

Strategy

The strategy adopted by the Friendship Heights Alliance was grounded in inclusivity, consistency, and highly visible community participation to ensure residents could see that their voice was being heard. As the neighbourhood spans two jurisdictions, particular care was needed to ensure that these efforts were able to span geographic, demographic, and political boundaries to create a shared sense of identity and community.

Before the organisation was founded, the two-person consultant team of place management professionals convinced the founding board that a comprehensive citizen engagement strategy was paramount before any programming was launched. The team personally held 50 individual interviews with stakeholders; organised four focus groups; held two placemaking workshops; presented at two civic association meetings; and launched a lengthy digital survey that received 1,154 responses. The team conducted a lot of grassroots-style outreach to find diverse voices, leaning on residents, business owners, and property owners to recommend the best people to interview and connect with. The interviews, focus groups, and surveys all asked questions that touched on brand identity, placemaking needs, public realm focus areas, events and programming, and economic development. The entire process took four

months, and results in a deep understanding of the love that people have for the neighbourhood, and the hopes they have for it to grow in the future. All of this feedback was built directly into the Alliance's programs and work plan.

A new consistent, tulip-themed visual identity was introduced, symbolising rebirth and renewal. The Alliance also developed "both-and" messaging that celebrated Friendship Heights as a place that uniquely connected to both Washington, DC and Maryland. This brand was embedded across a multi-channel communication strategy, that combined email, social media, postcards, posters, and in-person events. This holistic approach was integral in ensuring accessibility for all audiences, particularly for older residents.

In-person events were particularly important to the strategy, as they allowed the team at the Alliance to show community spirit in action. These public-facing initiatives included Makers Markets, gallery pop-ups, seasonal festivals, seed swaps, and far more. Together, these events activated empty storefronts and unused public spaces, whilst also creating opportunities for residents to provide feedback, contribute ideas, and meet their neighbours.

To ensure that citizen voices remained central to decision-making, a cross-jurisdictional Advisory Group was established. Comprised of residents and business owners, this group meets quarterly to provide guidance and serve as community ambassadors. In addition to this, a Youth Advisory Council was also set up to engage high school students in placemaking and marketing projects, ensuring that younger residents also had a clear voice in the future of their neighbourhood. For example, following the creation of a new mural, the Youth Council organised a concert of teen musicians to inject life and vitality into the area.

Both the Advisory Group and the youth council are vital to creating ongoing dialogue with residents and emphasising citizen leadership. But you can't manage what you're not measuring, and to that end, the Alliance established more than 65 KPIs to measure citizen engagement. These include event participation, media mentions, social media growth, volunteer participation, and resident perception data.

Citizens aren't simply audiences to the revitalisation efforts; they're active collaborators in creating Friendship Heights' new identity, shaping its future, and fostering a stronger sense of community.



Additional materials to explore...

[Business plan](#)

[Launching the Friendship Heights BID](#)

[Postcard introducing Friendship Heights](#)

[Outreach marketing survey questionnaire](#)

[Friendship Heights: FAQ](#)

Impact

Public events quickly became one of the Friendship Heights Alliance's most successful engagement tools. Between April 2024 and July 2025, the Alliance organised or promoted 95 free community events, bringing thousands of people into under-used public spaces and vacant storefronts. A lively Makers Market sidewalk festival attracted between 2,000 and 3,000 attendees, whilst supporting more than 40 local small businesses.

These events provide residents with an opportunity to see their neighbourhood in a new light. Temporary placemaking interventions such as murals, colourful seating, and volunteer-run pollinator gardens have been crucial in providing visible evidence of change and care now being injected into the community.

In total, more than 1,500 residents directly participated in Alliance outreach efforts and programmes, with thousands more attending markets, festivals, and pop-up events. Survey participation tripled in comparison to 2023 and the team has seen strong digital growth as well: website traffic increased 250% year-on-year, with Instagram followers increasing by 24% in just a year and newsletter rates consistently exceeding 50%.

Media mentions have also increased 30% year-on-year, and citizen feedback reflects improved perceptions around safety, mobility, and neighbourhood vibrancy. The changes are also tangibly felt in Friendship Height's public spaces; previously empty shops now host festivals, art exhibitions, swap events, and entertainment programming throughout the year.

This energy is translating into long-term momentum as well. In 2025, the first new apartment building in fifteen years opened in Friendship Heights, with additional retailers preparing to enter the neighbourhood.

Learnings

1. When you ask for input, you have to deliver on it. Turning your stakeholders desires into reality proves that you're listening and demonstrates your commitment to driving long-term change.
2. Don't underestimate the value of small but highly visible improvements, particularly early on. Murals, planters, and events all helped overcome initial scepticism and residents were more willing to participate when they could see immediate evidence of progress.
3. Multi-channel communication is essential. Relying solely on digital outreach would have excluded key resident demographics and prevented them from participating in the development of their hometown.

Lithuania

Location

Lithuania / Europe

Population

2,800,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative



Challenge

Lithuania has previously made several attempts to build a country brand, but those projects have often fallen short in various areas – and citizen engagement was one of those shortcomings. There was no consensus between the general public and experts on what the core values and features should be of Lithuania's nation brand.

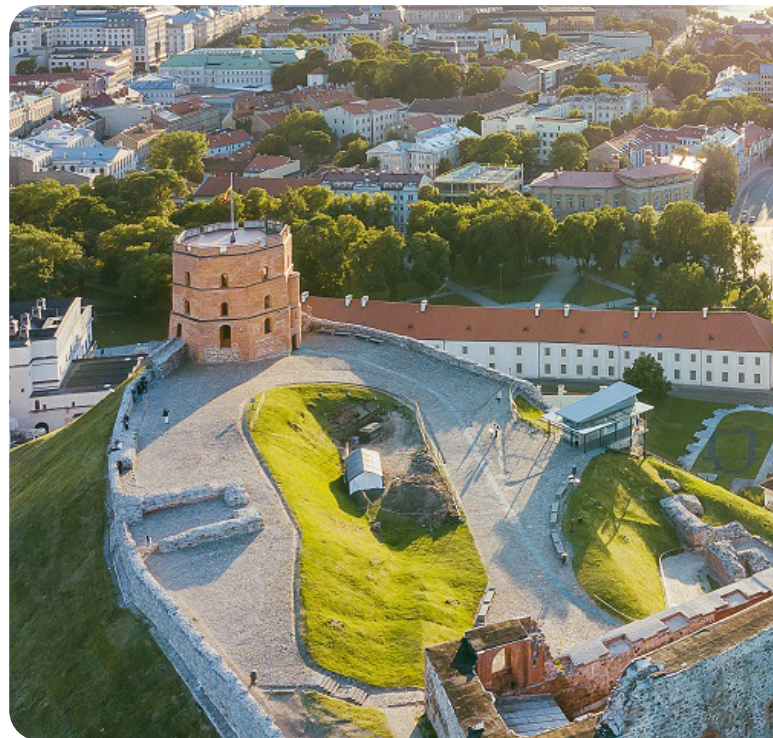
A new approach was needed to address the gaps in previous nation branding attempts, with a focus on building trust, informing society, and actively engaging citizens in discussions about Lithuania's image abroad. By fostering open dialogue and actively involving citizens in shaping Lithuania's brand narrative, the team at Brand Lithuania wanted to create a stronger sense of ownership and pride in their nation's image domestically.

Strategy

The 'Lithuania's DNA' project was designed to involve the general public in how Lithuania should be presented abroad. Parallel to this citizen engagement strategy, the Office of the Government of the Republic of Lithuania initiated a large-scale project to analyse Lithuania's image and awareness abroad and domestically. These two projects gathered information on how both foreigners and Lithuanians themselves see Lithuania.

An online survey was launched in which Lithuanians were informed about the new attempt to build a nation brand and to provide the opportunity for citizens to contribute their views and feedback in the development of strategy. Questions included what attributes they thought were Lithuania's greatest strengths, what they thought should be part of Lithuania's international positioning, and whether they considered Lithuania to be in Northern, Central, or Eastern Europe.

In total, around 6,000 residents shared their views on how Lithuania should be presented abroad through the survey, with another 2000 involved in the discussion through large-scale events. Ministries and public authorities also invited their staff to complete the questionnaire, and were pivotal in spreading information related to the Lithuania's DNA project through their websites and social networks.



To continue building awareness behind the new project, the Brand Lithuania Unit participated in six large-scale public events with the Lithuanian DNA stand – including the Summer Youth Festival, Education Fair, and Tourism Fair. On top of this, a media campaign was developed for national television, national radio, and out-of-home advertising in five major Lithuanian cities. There was a weekly lottery on social media to win Lithuanian DNA Project merchandise, such as pens, bags, and more.

Impact

The project lasted eight months from January 2019 to September 2019, with the active campaign taking place over one month, and over 400,00 individuals were reached during the one-month Lithuania's DNA campaign.

Critically, the Lithuanian DNA project helped to better canvas overall opinion on how Lithuanians see their homeland and what should be highlighted in international



Additional materials to explore...

[Citizen perception survey](#)

[Lithuania's DNA – Post-campaign report](#)



communications. This feedback has since been used to guide the presentation of Lithuania abroad, grounded in what Lithuanians themselves want to be known for. From this, the team have worked to continue to raise awareness of the Lithuania and to unite key stakeholders behind a common story for the country.

The strategy has also helped to restore faith in the general public about the validity of nation branding. At the beginning of the project, the team encountered some reluctance from older generations who still remembered past failed projects and initially struggled to trust that this time, the nation brand strategy would be different. Grounding this approach with a solid citizen engagement strategy and continuing to communicate with the public throughout the development of the nation brand building strategy was essential to its success.

Learnings

1. Maintaining a high team spirit was a primary challenge given the demanding nature of the project. Having a long-term vision that everyone could get behind, transparent processes, and thorough planning is key to overcoming those obstacles and gaining trust from your stakeholders.
2. Engaging younger generations is essential, and having a stand at large events can help you to reach these audiences. Having the stand at events encourages people to engage with you and is a relatively inexpensive but highly effective tool to gauge their opinions and plan other activities.
3. TV and radio channels can be highly effective in reaching your audience, and thanks to Brand Lithuania's partners, this was a free platform for the team to use. Reach out to your partners to understand how they can help amplify your outreach.
4. Build prestige around your project. Publishing opinions from influencers helped create credibility for residents, whilst conference are crucial for ensuring stakeholders are engaged in your project

North Dakota

Location

North Dakota / USA / North America

Population

780,000

Focus

Empowering place ambassadors

NORTH
Dakota Be Legendary.

Challenge

North Dakota is in joint first position out of 50 states for lowest unemployment rate. They have more open jobs than individuals to fill the positions. On top of amazing job opportunities, North Dakota also has a great quality of life, lower cost of living, safe and vibrant communities, and a wealth of things to do. However, while it was clear that more needed to be done to promote the state to talent, it was also important to remind residents about the opportunities they have within their state. The team at North Dakota Department of Commerce saw an opportunity to tackle both challenges with one strategy that would reenergise residents' love for their community and recruit new talent to the state at the same time.

Strategy

In 2021, the North Dakota Department of Commerce team engaged talent attraction consultant group, Role Call, to help them track their talent attraction marketing and strategy efforts, leading to the development of a new community champion programme that launched in June 2022. The team decided to lean into the naturally welcoming nature of their community to involve their citizens in their talent attraction strategy.

North Dakota residents were engaged as champions for their community to be matched to prospective residents. This would allow the champions to give them an understanding of what it's really like to live and work in the state, and to connect them with relevant employers and job opportunities.

At the campaign kick-off, the new local champions were invited to in-person training where the team explained in detail what they were looking to achieve with the talent recruitment strategy and to outline "The Path to Yes" process. This process goes through the stages of awareness about a place that someone goes thorough before they ultimately decide to move to a new location. Champions were also provided with tools to support them in their outreach, including email templates about how to respond to the leads they were matched with. As part of the lead, champions are also given specific information about the individual including where they currently live, where they're considering relocating to in North Dakota, what industry they are looking to work in, and their hobbies and interests.



This comprehensive overview, in tandem with the assets provided by the North Dakota Department of Commerce, give the champions the information they need to make a personal connection to the prospective residents.

It was also important to the team that the Champions were evenly dispersed across the state, allowing them to be more localised in their responses and to also act as change agents within their communities to remind residents what they have access to already. This localised approach is also applied to the resources supplied to champions: after all, every community is unique, and what is an effective story to tell about one town might not be relevant from one side of the state to the other. A year and a half into the programme, the team are in the process of revitalising these materials to make the process simpler and more cohesive for champions to engage with.

Impact

The programme so far has been very successful – after all, who better to explain why you should live in North Dakota than someone who has lived the experience? Inevitably, not everyone who says they want to be connected with a champion actually goes on to respond to the outreach.



Additional materials to explore...

[Relocation Help Desk | Landing page](#)

[Template for initial outreach by Champions](#)

[Champion Recruitment](#)

[Example of resources provided to Champions in Fargo](#)

[Recruitment sheet for Employers](#)

[Find the Good Life Fact Sheet](#)



However, the ones that do engage with champions have shown strong results. Of just over 30 movers since the beginning of the programme, 84% have been connected to a champion.

During the trial phase of the first year of the programme, 1,500 individuals entered the pipeline and 20 people made the decision to move. Following that trial phase, the team have been awarded additional funding and set new KPIs to track progress, including:

- 200 leads per month to their relocation help desk, up 60 leads per month from the baseline average.
- 80 leads per month requesting to connect to champions, up 10% from the current average.
- 96 total movers over the course of the year.

So far, with the new marketing in place and the support of their community ambassadors in the form of champions, they are on track to hit these numbers in the first month of the renewed campaign.

Learnings

1. Local buy in is crucial to success when you're organising a statewide campaign. What works for one community will be different than what works for another, so the local champions are key to making this work successfully.
2. Really focus on how your citizens talk about where they live and work. Sometimes we are our own worst problem and can be overcritical of the places we live in: once you realise that, you can reframe how residents look at their community and allow them to be the best possible advocates for their places.
3. Listen to those who are engaging directly with your leads, and be prepared to pivot if need to help your champions achieve a better end result.

Philadelphia

Location

Philadelphia / USA / North America

Population

6,300,000

Focus

Building civic pride



VISIT
PHILADELPHIA

Challenge

In a sports-obsessed city like Philadelphia, few things united residents more than a championship run – as proved when the Philadelphia Eagle's won the 2025 Super Bowl, creating a powerful sense of shared pride. But Visit Philadelphia recognised a larger challenge: How could that pride of place be sustained after the celebrations ended?

Research consistently shows that positive word-of-mouth from friends and family is one of the top reasons people visit Philadelphia, and the team saw an opportunity to re-think destination marketing by focusing on activating their residents. After all, if Philadelphians felt more connected to their city, they would naturally act as authentic ambassadors for their home city.

The challenge, however, is that Ipsos research showed that only 50% of Philadelphians felt emotionally invested in the city, and just 35% believed the city reciprocated that investment. Compounding this difficulty is the fact that the city is deeply neighbourhood-driven, with strong local identities that often outweigh city-wide affiliation. A single civic pride wouldn't resonate equally across all communities and, in some cases, risked feeling disconnected or inauthentic.

To address this, Visit Philadelphia needed a nuanced, data-led approach that could identify where civic pride was strongest, where it needed support, and how messaging should differ neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

Strategy

Baseline Ipsos research revealed a significant emotional disconnect between residents and the city. To understand where civic engagement gaps existed geographically, the team turned to the City of Philadelphia's Open Data Stress Index, which measures neighbourhood-level stress indicators, including poverty, crime, income, and health outcomes.

Using academic research showing an inverse relationship between stress and civic engagement, the team then mapped stress data block by block and rolled it up into neighbourhood level insights. Using this, they could then group all 158 Philadelphia neighbourhoods into a five-point civic engagement scale:

- Highly connected (27%)
- Moderately connected (31%)
- Partially connected (18%)
- Disconnected (21%)
- Actively disconnected (3%)

The team then partnered with consumer insights firm StratLab to conduct qualitative focus groups across multiple engagement tiers. The team developed a discussion guide to ensure they covered specific topics. For example, they asked an open-ended question like "How did Philly feel after the Eagle's latest Super Bowl victory? Describe this for me." This would then lead to follow up questions, including "Besides a Super Bowl win, what makes this city erupt with excitement, pride, and joy?" and then "What's holding you back from feeling like this all year long."

This approach allowed the Visit Philadelphia team to see differences between the three engagement levels based on their answers to the same questions, and these conversations uncovered important behavioural distinctions: Highly connected residents identified strongly with Philadelphia as a whole, whilst moderately connected residents connected most deeply with their neighbourhood identity, and partially connected residents focused primarily on their own block or immediate surroundings.

Together, these findings underpin a detailed messaging matrix that allows the team to tailor messaging and imagery to reflect how residents at each level already experience connection and pride. The media strategy included local radio and TV spots featuring trusted Philadelphia sports personalities, community newspaper advertising, civic pride billboards celebrating local achievements and far more. And all of the creative was varied depending on audience segment.

In highly connected neighbourhoods, messaging emphasised national recognition for Philadelphia from organisations like The New York Times, AFAR, and the James Beard Foundation. Moderately connected neighbourhoods received hyper-local creative tied to neighbourhood landmarks and cultural identity. And in partially connected neighbourhoods, the team highlighted trusted community figures, including block captains, artists, and local changemakers to create grassroots resonance.

The strategy also relied heavily on collaboration with neighbourhood partners and community stakeholders. Because Philadelphia neighbourhood boundaries and identities are deeply personal and often fluid, continual



Additional materials to explore...

Example print ads for:

[Highly connected communities](#)

[Moderately connected communities](#)

[Partially connected communities](#)

[It's a Philly Thing – YouTube ads](#)

[OpenDataPhilly](#)

feedback from local voices helped ensure messaging felt respectful, authentic, and relevant at the block level.

Importantly, this initiative remains iterative and measurement driven. Ongoing Ipsos check-ins and engagement analysis allow the team to refine the campaign and neighbourhood outreach strategies. Citizens are also integral to refining the campaign. Neighbourhood leaders and community stakeholders provide ongoing feedback to help ensure messaging felt locally accurate and culturally appropriate – something that was especially important in a city where neighbourhood identities are deeply personal and often debated block by block.

Impact

These conversations helped the team to identify not only how residents felt about Philadelphia, but also what stories, language, and community references resonated most authentically with them. The campaign met residents where they already were – emotionally, geographically, and through their everyday media habits.

This approach is helping residents to see themselves as part of Philadelphia's story. Rather than promoting tourism directly, the campaign instead highlights community achievements, neighbourhood pride, and local changemakers to reinforce positive connections.

Early public response suggests that this approach is resonating. Residents and local organisations have organically engaged with the initiative, particularly around the evolving civic pride billboard installations which celebrate city achievements ranging from the Eagle's Super Bowl victory to the Wilma Theatre's Tony Award recognition.

The initiative also aligns with broader shifts in resident sentiment. According to a 2025 Pew study, 59% of Philadelphians said the city is headed in the right direction – a post-pandemic high, and a significant increase in optimism.

Primary KPIs focused on improvements in resident sentiment and civic pride; increased neighbourhood engagement; positive community feedback and earned media attention; and movement of neighbourhoods between civic engagement tiers over time. An ongoing measurement framework – anchored by Ipsos research – has been established to track progress, and a first-round

'civic pride check-in' conducted with Ipsos in late 2025 showed:

- An improvement in residents' emotional investment (+6 points)
- An increase in residents' perception that the city is performing for them (+8 points)
- Growth in the share of residents who say they have a good or excellent quality of life in Philadelphia (+7 points)

Further evaluations are scheduled in May and September 2026 to measure sentiment shifts and determine whether neighbourhoods are moving toward stronger engagement categories. And while long-term behavioural impacts are still developing, early indicators suggest that the strategy is successfully generating recognition, conversation, and renewed civic optimism across Philadelphian communities.

Learnings

1. Hyper-local messaging matters more than broad, citywide campaigns. Your residents likely connect differently to your city depending on stress levels and lived experience – tailoring your messaging creates stronger resonance and authenticity.
2. Quantitative mapping identifies where engagement gaps exist but focus groups and resident conversations reveal how to communicate to each audience. You need both types of data paired together to be truly effective.
3. Execution at the neighbourhood level requires ongoing collaboration and flexibility. Continual feedback from community members and local partners is essential to ensuring your messaging feels accurate and respectful.

Pittsburgh



Location

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania / USA /
North America

Population

300,000 (City)
1.2M (County)

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Challenge

Just prior to COVID, Pittsburgh had launched a resident sentiment survey to understand how residents felt about the city they called home, and this showed that seven in ten residents agree that tourism generates positive economic returns for the city. During COVID, it was clear that a new tourism development strategy would be needed to shape recovery in the city and to plan for new challenges and opportunities that would come about as a result of a changed tourism economy. The team at VisitPITTSBURGH embarked on a new engagement strategy to get residential input into the new ten-year strategic plan for Pittsburgh.

Strategy

Pittsburgh, like many destinations, had to re-evaluate its priorities following COVID. As tourism ground to a halt worldwide, two things became clear. One, that engaging your residents in your strategy should be a priority for destination marketing organisations. And two, that they needed to re-think how tourism could deliver better for a destination.

Historically, tourism development had always been looked at from a sales and marketing approach, but as stewards of the tourism experience in Pittsburgh, a new approach was needed to ensure a sustainable, competitive growth strategy for the city. COVID had led many tourism assets in Pittsburgh to close their doors for good, and while other new entities had emerged, VisitPITTSBURGH wanted to understand what tourism recovery looked like from a local standpoint. After all, the attractions that appeal to tourists are usually those that appeal to residents as well.

As part of a broader tourism development effort, a survey was created on SurveyMonkey to identify what residents thought of Pittsburgh as a tourism destination, which assets they valued most, which they used most regularly, and which they thought would be of interest to visitors as well. This survey generated quantitative data that allowed the team at VisitPITTSBURGH to understand what residents saw as their local strengths, and to identify gaps where they needed to be prioritising development to ensure a positive experience for residents and tourists alike.



While the survey delivered fairly against VisitPITTSBURGH's expectations, it was noted that a hyper-local approach could have increased their reach and engagement, and that moving forward, they must work with Community Associations to engage with local neighbourhoods, businesses, and create hyper local travel opportunities.

The survey was shared primarily through VisitPITTSBURGH's own channels, with additional support from their partners to extend the reach of the survey. A visitor edition of the survey was also created to complement the resident engagement and create a comprehensive overview of perceptions of Pittsburgh's tourism assets.



Additional materials to explore...

[Pittsburgh's Tourism Development Plan](#)

[Example questions from the resident survey](#)



Impact

Alongside comprehensive engagement with tourism stakeholders, the community survey helped to identify and define general attitudes towards living in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, as well as the impact that tourism has on residential quality of life. This research was then fed into the Tourism Development Plan, ensuring that the resident voice was a critical component in shaping the future of tourism in Pittsburgh.

Building on these citizen engagement perception studies, VisitPITTSBURGH is now in the process of defining a resident-centric strategy that will empower residents to be ambassadors for the destination.

Learnings

- 1. Drill down to the hyper local. Residents are far more connected with their neighbourhoods than they are at a city or county level, so lean in to partners that already have trusted relationships with those communities.
- 2. To that end, fostering and maintaining a strong relationship with Community Associations is invaluable and should be a priority for destinations looking to drive engagement in their strategies.
- 3. Visitors and residents prefer unique, localised experiences. Focusing on the hyper local allows for a natural form of differentiation when it comes to sales and marketing against competitive set destinations. This creates a more authentic feel to marketing and aligns with residential views, driving pride and ambassadorship.

Rochester

Location

City of Rochester, Minnesota / USA
/ North America

Population

122,000

Focus

Citizen-centric placemaking



Challenge

When you're reaching out to your community for feedback, it's all too easy to find that you're talking to the same group of people. There is a demographic bias in those who have both the time and the means to attend focus groups and share their feedback – and even for those who do attend, that feedback isn't necessarily processed in a meaningful way.

Often when one embarks on a project to improve a community, you fail to deliver opportunities for those most impacted to have genuine, authentic opportunities to influence the decision-making process. The City of Rochester knew they wanted to develop a new approach, one that put the community at the heart of the project and that broke down barriers to participation in order to deliver truly equitable development.

Strategy

In 2019, Destination Medical City [the destination marketing organisation for the City of Rochester] led a steering committee called the City For Health group, which ultimately became the foundation of what is now called Community Co-Design. The steering committee undertook a community health assessment which noted that to become a healthier city, they would need more democratic involvement in decision-making. With a new park development coming up, the decision was made to use the project as a pilot to test the impact of community co-design.

In community co-design, individual members of key communities are identified to participate in the project as co-designers. This select group are then invited to participate in facilitated meetings, through which these co-designers participate in discussions that range from design ideas to policy suggestions to event programming. These discussions also surface questions that each co-designer can take back to the communities they represent so that a broader perspective can be fed into the development process. These meetings inform a set of guiding principles that the design team can utilise in order to ensure a more equitable, community-centric outcome.

The process allows you to reach individual who have limited (or non-existent) engagement opportunities, and the focus at a city-wide level is now on fostering unique engagements rather than focusing on quantity at the expense of diversity.



A Community Co-design Toolkit was developed to help organisations within the city lead successful co-design projects. In particular, a training programme has been developed to train co-design Facilitators, which includes compensation for time, travel, food, and childcare needs as part of the team's commitment to removing barriers to engagement. This comprehensive training is provided for free, then allowing facilitators to lead a project for their own institution or to facilitate a co-design project for any other organisation and receive a fee for that project. It is the responsibility of the organisation leading the project to ensure the budget includes compensation for participating co-designers and facilitators.

In addition to this, a shorter training series has been created to train community. This training outlines the process and purpose behind community co-design, helps leaders to identify suitable projects for co-design, and explains how to ensure a project is set up for success. A number of leaders from key institutions within the city have undergone training to date, including the Mayor which has been key in demonstrating the city's commitment to more equitable development.

Impact

Community co-design shifts the focus away from designing for stakeholders to designing with your stakeholders, by prioritising underserved and underrepresented populations.

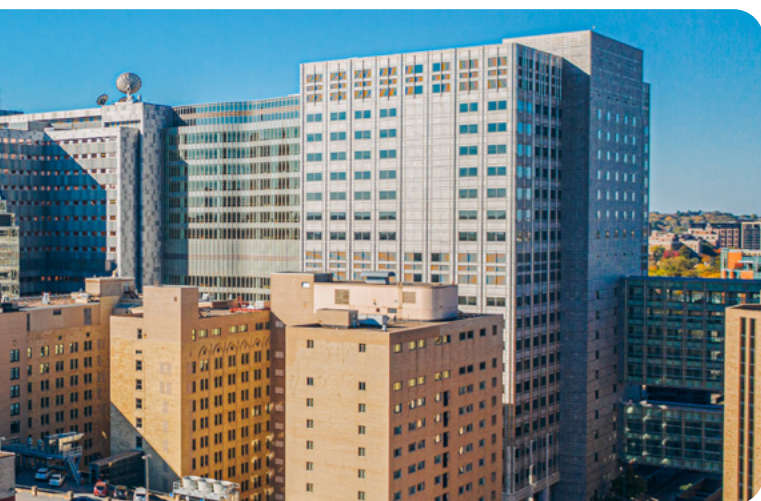


Additional materials to explore...

[What is Community Co-design?](#)

[The Destination Medical Centre Community Co-design Toolkit](#)

[Discovery Walk Co-Design Pilot Project](#)



Several years into implementation, it is now an expected consideration in all projects undertaken by the city and has changed the way that city leaders think about decision-making and the voice of the community.

A number of successful community co-design projects have now been undertaken across Rochester. For example, during the co-design of a new park, co-designers were identified who had access to diverse communities including communities of colour, elderly, young people, accessibility, and other targeted populations. And through this feedback loop, a broad range of perspectives and lived experience are brought into the project ideation and development phases that ensure the park would service the needs of all its communities. In order to optimise accessibility for mobility impaired individuals, park designers installed a snow melting system for the length of the park, following a recommendation from a co-designer who represented the mobility impaired that even ploughed paths can be treacherous for people in wheelchairs or with walkers, crutches, or canes.

As well as giving a platform for underrepresented communities, there is also continued involvement with co-designers outside the scope of the project. For one, it has also given several individual opportunities to demonstrate their skills and step into more comprehensive, full-time roles within Destination Medical City and the City of Rochester.

Learnings

1. You need time and investment from leadership to make this work. This is non-negotiable.
2. "Streamlining" is shorthand for "don't involve community members because it gets messy and will take more time." Take the time – it's worth it in the end.
3. You need to establish consistent communication with key organisations and leadership in the city to build awareness about the expectations and the process. Once they understand more about what community co-design can achieve, they're better able to identify suitable projects.
4. Not all projects are suitable for co-design. Trusted relationship networks, a diversity of lived experiences, impactful projects, and a commitment to sharing financial resources and decision-making power are good indicators that a co-design project will be successful.

South Africa

Location

South Africa / Africa

Population

60,000,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Empowering place ambassadors



Challenge

Around 30% of South Africa's labour force is currently unemployed – and their young people are particularly at risk of turning to alternate methods of earning an income. To tackle this, the team at Brand South Africa needed to equip South African youth and aspiring entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and resources to become financially independent and with a means to contributing to the country's economy.

'Play Your Part' is a nationwide initiative designed to celebrate active citizenship in South Africa, and in doing so, inspire all South Africans to contribute to a positive change within the country. This initiative is aimed at all South Africans, from residents to businesses to government. As an existing framework that had already proven successful, this was the perfect platform to inspire South African young people.

Strategy

The 'Play Your Part Ignite' campaign began development in March 2022, and was live in market from June to November that year. The core concept was to give young people an opportunity to flex their entrepreneurial muscles and to reward the best ideas with investment.

The Brand South Africa team worked with a variety of TVET colleges (Technical & Vocational Education & Training) and the International Youth Foundation to reach a wide pool of eligible candidates for the Ignite programmes. Mentorship and development were a core part of the programme. All participants were invited to join a pitching masterclass led by a Play Your Part Ambassador or industry leader to give them the skills needed to successfully communicate and promote their business idea. Students then had an opportunity to brainstorm and refine their small business idea before they pitched it to a panel of judges.

The top three business pitches from students were rewarded with cash prizes to help them get their idea off the ground. However, just as important were the networking opportunities the programme created. By bringing together Play Your Part Ambassadors and industry leaders with the up-and-coming minds of the younger generation, the program provided access to funding and business development advice which is so direly lacking in many communities.



This incentive for economic and entrepreneurial growth was the cornerstone of the programme. While the gamification of the pitching panel meant that the cash prizes did function as a basic incentive, the main drawcard for students was the opportunity for knowledge enrichment and business development. The promotion of the programme hinged on these tenets. While engagement with young people was initially a challenge, once it was in market and there were success stories to talk about, the events naturally began to draw in more and more budding entrepreneurs. In total, the team held six different pitching events for young entrepreneurs, spread across South Africa to ensure that as many people as possible were offered the opportunity to attend.

Impact

'Play Your Part Ignite' has acted as a propellant to the entrepreneurial spirit of budding young business owners, and has created the industry connections needed to bring their ideas to life. In doing so, the programme is creating real-world impact. Many candidates have received money to assist with getting their business off the ground, and many more have received vital mentorship and guidance to develop their ideas.

The programme partnered with several stakeholders including NYDA (National Youth Development Agency),



Additional materials to explore...

[Play Your Part Ignite: Programme 2022 Q4 Report](#)

[Play Your Part Ignite: Durban Report November 2023](#)



Learnings

1. Start small and build as you grow. Your previous events are the biggest asset you have in promoting your next one, so lean into those and showcase the best of what you have to offer.
2. Focus on where you can make the most impact. The Brand South Africa team identified the skills gaps in various small communities, and developed a programme that would help close those gaps and provide support to those who needed it most – South African youths.
3. Tap into the strengths you have in your community. South Africa has a large, active entrepreneurial base, so creating opportunities, networking events, and youth accelerators was a priority for the Brand South Africa team in order to connect young people with this expertise to grow their ideas and their businesses.

Harambee, IYF (International Youth Foundation) and SETA (Sector Education Training Authority), in order to provide market access to those who pitched. Many Ignite participants were adopted and mentored by representatives from the support agencies through the connections acquired during the on-the-ground sessions.

The programme's biggest success story to date was the mentorship of Portia Mavhungu; Portia received R500 000 (~US\$26,900) to support the development of a unique product, the Para Tube. This invention features a built-in toilet with biodegradable bags that can be retrofitted to a wheelchair to allow individuals to go to the toilet without having to leave their wheelchair. As well as the cash injection into the business, the program also provided Portia with a mentorship with Elaine Brass, the CEO of the Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority, who could provide specific guidance, advice, and support to Portia as she launched her company.

Another finalist, Mandla Magwaza, was mentioned in President Cyril Ramaphosa's budget speech as an example of companies that are changing South African communities. Mandla founded Entertainment Analytics, an extended reality company offering augmented and virtual reality solutions; his pitch came in the top three for the Ignite pitch session and earned him the mentorship of Papama Mtwisha, Play Your Part ambassador and founder of Africa Your Time Is Now.

Staffordshire



Staffordshire

Location

Staffordshire / United Kingdom / Europe

Population

900,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Challenge

Staffordshire Day is an annual celebration of the British county held on 1st May. And as well as providing an opportunity to shout about what makes the county a great place to visit, live, and invest, it also created an opportunity for the county's place brand, We Are Staffordshire, to raise civic pride – particularly amongst their youngest residents.

Late in 2024, research was undertaken with young people aged 16-20 to better understand their perceptions of Staffordshire. One key finding was a sense of disconnection from the county as a whole, reflecting the fact that Staffordshire is made up of eight districts and boroughs in addition to the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

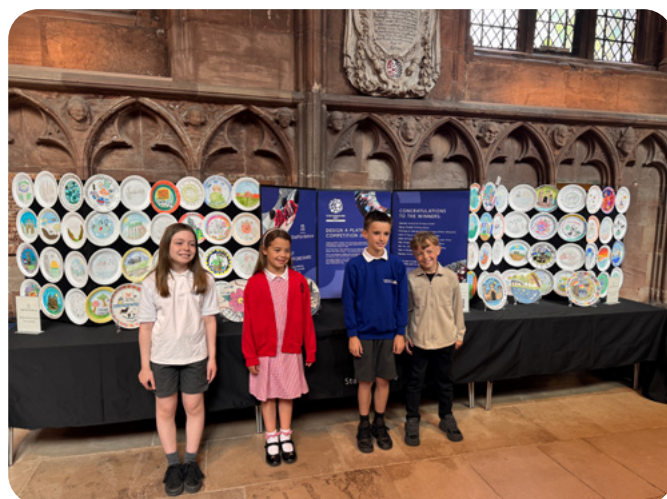
Staffordshire's young people will be the future custodians of the county; engaging them in the community spirit and what makes Staffordshire unique is vital to showing them the opportunities available to them and creating a pipeline of future ambassadors.

Strategy

In 2023, the team launched a pilot programme that engaged a small group of young people in Staffordshire Day activities. Following this initial success, a larger-scale programme was developed the following year. This initiative sought to inspire, educate, and instil pride in young people across Staffordshire through the medium of art, reflecting the country's nationally recognised reputation as the Creative County.

Over the course of a month, creative workshops took place across Staffordshire, ranging from dance to needlework to painting. 11 schools engaged with programmes led by six Staffordshire-based artists, with more than 240 young people participating. In total, more than 180 pieces of artwork were created through the initiative, which were then showcased across two public displays which recorded over 5000 visitors during Staffordshire Day week.

Following the 2024 research that showed a disconnect between young people and their county, the We Are Staffordshire team intensified their efforts for 2025 to reach more young people and engage them in the county-wide identity.



A competition was launched inviting pupils to design a commemorative plate for Staffordshire Day to put the spotlight on Staffordshire's pottery heritage. All primary schools were invited to participate, with schools supported through the provision of a clear lesson plan and plate template to ensure consistent access and engagement.

Winners were selected through a public vote to encourage wider participation, with the top five entries from each district and borough showcased on the We Are Staffordshire website to enable residents to engage with and celebrate their young people's creativity. Nine winners were selected – one representing each area of the county – and these designs were professionally reproduced onto plates by Duchess China 1888, a renowned Stoke-on-Trent manufacturer, further reinforcing Staffordshire's global reputation for ceramics and creative excellence.

The winners were also invited to Gladstone Pottery Museum, the historic home of award-winning TV production, The Great Pottery Throw Down. During this visit, the winners could view their finished plates, receive a prize, and take part in an immersive activity that strengthened their personal connection to Staffordshire's cultural heritage.

The plates were then displayed prominently at visitor attractions across the county, with a strong geographic spread enabling residents and visitors across Staffordshire to engage with Staffordshire Day in meaningful ways whilst also driving footfall to key county assets and attractions.



Additional materials to explore...

Lesson plan: Design a plate

Winners' visit to Gladstone Pottery Museum

Impact

Engagement with the strategy was deliberately designed to be inclusive, accessible, and participatory. For school pupils, engagement was embedded directly into their classrooms. By inviting all primary schools to take part and providing ready-to-use lesson plans and resources, participation was made easy and equitable – regardless of a school's size, location, or capacity. Pupils were able to explore Staffordshire's identity in a way that was enjoyable, age-appropriate, and meaningful, whilst encouraging discussion about local heritage, place, and pride.

In total, 20 schools engaged with the initiative, with over 500 plates designed and submitted to the competition. 300 votes were cast to determine the winning design, and five pieces of local media coverage were generated surrounding the activity, further promoting Staffordshire Day.

Although perception-based outcomes like pride and sense of belonging are challenging to measure in the short-term, clear KPIs were established to evaluate the impact of the programme. Feedback surveys were used to capture qualitative insight into the young people's experiences, including what they learned about Staffordshire and how they felt about participating in the project and Staffordshire Day itself.

Their feedback offers valuable insight into how the activity delivered for Staffordshire's youngest residents:

"I drew this to show the amazing things about Staffordshire. Drawing this was fun to do and I enjoyed creating a design for a plate to show the beauty of Staffordshire.

"I never knew about the Staffordshire knot, so I learned something about it."

"I have drawn Victoria Park because it is a very beautiful place, and I love doing it."

"I have learned lots of facts about Staffordshire and that it is a wonderful place".

Now, the We Are Staffordshire team are harnessing the collective energy that the competition has ignited as they plan further activities, including to develop their Young Ambassador Network and Advisory Group, whilst launching new collaborations with the county's schools, colleges, and universities.

Learnings

1. Simplicity is key. Make it easy for people to engage and provide the tools they need to lower the barrier to participation as much as possible.
2. Collaboration is key when working with tight budgets.
3. More work could have been done to measure the impact of the displays at visitor attractions in order to understand how the project impacted people and develop new ideas for citizen engagement moving forward.

Tampere

TAMPERE. FINLAND

Location

Tampere / Finland / Europe

Population

250,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Citizen-centric placemaking

Challenge

COVID-19 left residents isolated from one another. As the lockdowns lifted, Tampere needed a way to revitalise their city and re-connect their community with one another. With the International Ice Hockey Federation 2022 World Championship returning to the city for the first time since the inaugural IIHF Championship in 1965, the event promised to be an chance to unite their community once more – but they needed to do so in a way that is authentic to Tampere.

Strategy

The team's goal was to create a credible marketing concept and campaign that genuinely engaged citizens, and that would provide opportunities for locals to actively participate in the event. On top of this, it had to follow the guidelines of the official IIHF 2022 World Championship marketing theme. A new campaign, 'The Home of Hockey,' was developed to celebrate Tampere's strong ice hockey heritage, to get citizens, local actors, and businesses to participate in the atmosphere, and to increase the sustainability of the event by ensuring the comfort of the residents during the championship.

Positioning the City of Tampere as the home of ice hockey was a natural development of the city's long history with the sport, but that message needed to be embraced by citizens to land authentically. The city's social media channels and outdoor advertising sites were pivotal in reaching a large number of citizens to achieve this, and The Home of Hockey website was created under the city's own website to provide a home for the campaign. Citizens were also provided with their own marketing material that they could print out to be part of something bigger and feel included in the campaign.

Citizen engagement was a core consideration throughout the Championship, and another top priority for the team was developing practical touchpoints for residents to interact with the Championship. For example, the city created hockey hype in the city centre with different hockey-themed decorations, events, and activities to give residents a tangible reason to be excited during the build-up to the Championship.

The city organised two major celebrations, one of the eve of the championship, and the second the day after the Finnish



national ice hockey team won the world championship. The city also opened a summer terrace in the city centre. The terrace had a screen showing the games and a family-friendly activity zone right next to it. This zone also showed the games and offered hockey-related activities for children.

Citizens were also encouraged to create and share their own hockey-related content using the campaign hashtags of #Kiekonkoti and #TampereHomeOfHockey (the English language variant). Local businesses, communities, and associations were also encouraged to help create hockey hype in the city by decorating their premises and organising side events.

Continuing the theme of bringing the event to life in the city centre, a number of placemaking activations were developed to create natural occasions for citizens to amplify the Home of Hockey campaign through their own channels. These included dressing the statues of Hämeensilta bridge in the Finnish hockey jersey and the addition of a bench with 'Tampere.Finland' behind it as photo opportunities in the city centre.

Finally, the team also knew they had an important role to play in ensuring that the Championship was accessible to as much of their community as possible. During the 2022 World Championship, the City of Tampere offered 6700 match tickets to target groups who otherwise would have found it difficult to attend. This included school children



Additional materials to explore...

[Home of Hockey campaign: On the streets of Tampere](#)

[Home of Hockey | Landing page](#)



and young people, social and health care clients, and elderly residents through the city's various services and programmes.

Impact

The Home of Hockey concept was well-received by citizens and local stakeholders. A number of organisations and businesses reported hosting hockey-related events on the Home of Hockey website, and nearly 300 marketing materials were ordered by organisations and citizens looking to share in the excitement.

There was also active participation from citizens across the full spectrum of activations organised by the city. Around 7000 people attended the Home of Hockey opening ceremony in the main square and the themed activity area had between 200-750 visitors a day. Engagement were also present on social media, with over 1500 posts being made by residents using the campaign hashtags.

Ultimately, the campaign delivered exposure for the city, reaching almost 1.5 million users and generating 70,000 engagements through social media alone. Most importantly though, the slogan 'Home of Hockey' was often used by citizens and local media, and by May 2022, both national and international media were also telling the story of Tampere as the home of Finnish ice hockey.

Learnings

1. Working with an official partner like a large sporting organisation can create additional hurdles in developing the campaign. 'Home of Hockey' had to be recognisable in itself, but it also had to fit the official marketing theme of the IIHF 2022 World Championship. Getting approval for the campaign visuals therefore took longer than expected, but it is worth the effort to be able to tap into the excitement generated by a large-scale event.
2. You need to create a positive for all citizens – including those who are not interested in the event. Inevitably, a major event will impact on the city, including traffic management, cleanliness, and a sense of safety among other things. Make sure you're planning with this in mind from the outset of your campaign.
3. As with any campaign, it has to be credible. This campaign worked because Tampere really is an ice hockey city – residents recognise this as part of the DNA of their community, making it easy to create hype during the campaign. As the City of Tampere team noted, a similar campaign focused on basketball wouldn't have landed as well.

Tartu

TARTU

Location

Tartu / Estonia / Europe

Population

97,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Challenge

Traditional participation methods weren't working for Tartu. During the previous development planning process, the city had only received 45 proposals from just eight residents. Conventional tools such as formal hearings and written consultations weren't resonating with the wider community.

At the same time, Tartu saw an opportunity. As Estonia's second-largest city and European Capital of Culture 2024, it has a strong identity rooted in creativity, openness, and innovation. So as they approached the creation of a new City Development Plan for 2025-2035, the city took the opportunity to reimagine how residents could help shape the city's future. Tartu wanted to create meaningful, diverse, and inclusive dialogue with its residents, but the challenge was to make complex planning topics relevant and engaging for people of different backgrounds, ages, and locations – including both urban and rural communities.

To do this, the City of Tartu needed to demonstrate that every voice matters and to shift from passive consultation to active, human-centred participation that turned the planning process into something that people would genuinely want to be a part of.

Strategy

In order to increase participation and engagement, the city developed a multi-layered consultation approach that combined storytelling, theatre, public space activation, and digital content.

In collaboration with Must Kast Theatre, the team created a series of humorous social media visitors that introduced fictional characters such as the 'Spirit of Tartu,' a sanitation worker, and the 'Mayor of the Future.' These characters represented different perspectives on the city, inviting residents to reflect on its future in a relatable and entertaining way.

These same characters were also brought to life in physical spaces and live events, creating a coherent narrative experience. This helped people to recognise the campaign and feel part of a larger story rather than a one-off consultation. This activity culminated on 13th June 2024, when the city introduced five themed engagement points across Tartu, each linked to a core topic on the development plan (such as wellbeing, environment, and innovation).



At each of these locations, actors in character facilitated conversations, asked questions, and collected feedback from residents in an informal and approachable way. The city also organised shuttle buses from these touchpoints to the main venue. During these rides, actors performed short monologues to reinforce key themes and set the scene for deeper engagement at Alexa Creative Hall where the theatrical performance 'Visions in the Spotlight' was staged three times. This play presented the development plan in a humorous and thought-provoking format, translating complex strategic ideas into accessible narratives.

Beyond the main event, the strategy extended into public debates and rural outreach. A high-level discussion at Car-Free Avenue brought together experts and opinion leaders, while the Rahinge Village Gathering ensured that residents from rural areas were also included in the conversation.

The initiative was delivered with a modest budget (€19,000), relying heavily on partnerships with local cultural actors and community organisations. This collaborative model allowed the city to create a high-impact campaign with limited resources while strengthening ties with local stakeholders.



Additional materials to explore...

[Photos from the engagement day](#)

[Social media videos](#)



Impact

This approach proved highly effective. The number of proposals and participants increased significantly, but equally important was the qualitative feedback. Participants described the experience as engaging, inspiring, and meaningful. The campaign demonstrates that playful and creative methods can be powerful tools for serious civic engagement, whilst strengthening trust between the municipality and its residents.

The performance of Tartu's citizen engagement strategy was measured through a combination of KPIs that focused on reach, participation, and diversity of engagement. These were tracked through proposal submissions during the public consultation period, attendance at engagement events, and social media analytics.

The results significantly exceeded expectations. Compared to the previous development plan which received only 45 proposals from eight residents, the new process generated 212 proposals from 87 residents. Beyond that, participation extended beyond the formal submissions: hundreds of residents engaged at the themed engagement points, with around 150 people attending the theatre performance. The campaign videos also reached wide audiences online, sparking discussion and positive reactions.

Learnings

1. Creative and playful approaches work: complex and "dry" topics can be made engaging through humour, theatre, and storytelling, leading to higher and more meaningful participation.
2. Face-to-face interaction has the greatest impact: while social media drives awareness, the most meaningful discussions and feedback emerged through direct, in-person engagement.
3. Take the risk. Initially strange and bold ideas need to be implemented and you have to stay true to them to see their true impact.

Tasmania

TASMANIAN

Location

Tasmania / Australia / Australasia

Population

570,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative

Building civic pride

Challenge

There was a time when Tasmanians were silent in an increasingly loud world, and hiring people to boast that Tasmania was the best never delivered for the region. Instead, they needed a story that came from Tasmanians themselves, that spoke to the everyday experience of living in Tasmania. They needed a story that residents would embrace and that could be used to make better decisions for the region and improve local communities.

This couldn't be a short-term campaign: Brand Tasmania needed to unearth something deeper that would pay long-term dividends and bring trade, tourism, investment, talent, and student attraction strategies together – all underpinned by community action. Previous attempts to showcase Tasmania had been hampered by short-term thinking, a hamster wheel of campaigns and unaligned strategies delivered by competing consultants and agencies. There was an untapped opportunity to build a brand from the inside-out, by first understanding what Tasmanians' ambitions were.

And as the place brand strategy developed, it became more than the sum of its parts, creating a platform through which the region could begin to address its most pressing challenges.

Strategy

The team in Tasmania wanted citizens to be a meaningful part of building their 'master story' at the heart of the place brand strategy. To achieve this, they used a story-based, conversational interview style to connect with Tasmanians. In 2018, a total 200 one-on-one interviews were conducted with residents from across the state – a representative yet random sample based on age, gender, geography, and socio-economic background. There was a consistent pattern to the stories and the team checked them against a further 200 interviews in the greater Hobart area, for the Hobart City Council's 'Hobart City Vision'. The team introduced and tested the story with stakeholders in the Tourism sector through a further 25 individual interviews and stakeholder workshop sessions with over 80 participants.

Through these interviews, eerily consistent and powerful themes began to emerge: Tasmanians are Cinderellas – hidden, misunderstood, beautiful but overlooked. Success

is about realising individual and community potential rather than about earning money. It is with hard work, passion, and obsession that Tasmanians pursue the special, the strange, and the artisanal.

The results of those interviews were then distilled into the Tasmanian story, ultimately leading to a single phrase: the quiet pursuit of the extraordinary. The team at Brand Tasmania then started telling this story back to the community. Importantly, the team elected not to launch the brand at all. A quiet pursuit should reflect a quiet pursuit, after all. Brand Tasmania simply presented to their partners and offered to help build their own brands inside the Tasmanian brand – an approach that resonated with locals and other government agencies.

In 2023, the team conducted another round of interviews to track how things have changed since the development of the strategy. Since the place brand narrative sought to understand the story of the region to create a 'unifying cultural expression and strategy,' little has changed – even after the disruptions of COVID-19 and a global inflation crisis.

The team also undertook an initiative to understand the perspective of their young people as well. With only 53% of young Tasmanians graduating from grade 12 in 2022 (far below the national average), residents commonly cite concern for the future prospects of the next generation.

In partnership with the Youth Network of Tasmania, Brand Tasmania interviewed 98 18–24-year-olds, from every community across the state to understand the unique experiences of what it is like being a young person living in Tasmania – the good and the bad. The team trained young people to conduct one-on-one interviews with their peers to identify what made these individuals proud and where and why Tasmania was letting them down.

The results reflected the overall brand story, but with a nuance; these may be the first generation to come of age with pride and confidence. But they want changes and they want key roles in developing solutions to challenges like housing and mental health support. These findings led to the creation of the Youth Voice Network, a panel of young Tasmanians that government and other organisations can tap into to co-design policy changes and pilot new solutions for and with their young people.



Additional materials to explore...

[Brand Tasmania Toolkit](#)

[Be Tasmanian | Podcast](#)

[Little Tasmanian | Children's storybook](#)

Impact

Since the initial development work in 2018 and 2019, this place brand narrative has been the basis of everything Brand Tasmania has done. Along with more traditional communications activities and campaigns, Brand Tasmania launched unifying projects to continue building momentum behind the Tasmanian story. The team launched a podcast called 'Be Tasmanian' to share how the Tasmanian place brand strategy had been developed, to help the community understand and invite them to be a part of it. Episodes looked at what place branding is, the importance of not trying to appeal to everyone and diluting your appeal in the process, and how the place brand creates the foundation for the region's economic development strategy.

The story of Tasmania has also been brought into the lives of Tasmanian children through the Little Tasmanian project. Using a message of 'someone like you did it, and you can do it too', Little Tasmanian encourages aspiration, confidence, and pride in children and their trusted adults from the very beginning. A central part of this project is a storybook given to every baby born in Tasmania. Now on its third version, the book was developed in response to feedback from Tasmanians to help them understand the specialness of Tasmania as early in their lives as possible. Each book in the Little Tasmanian series tells the story of four different Tasmanians who pursued their passion, overcoming adversity along the way. Through this, Little Tasmanian encourages aspiration, confidence, and pride in children and their guardians. Little Tasmanian is currently being evaluated as part of a PhD project. Early feedback from the survey shows positive results: approximately half of respondents reported they started reading earlier to their baby because they received the Little Tasmanian book, and of those who reported reading a Little Tasmanian story, the most common reactions were 'feeling part of a bigger community of Tasmanians' and 'feeling inspired'.

Outside of their own initiatives, Brand Tasmania's role is to inspire and encourage others, building the brand in a bottom-up way. By helping partners to be more successful in their use of the brand, they have helped to spread it. In particular, the team try not to be 'the brand police' and don't deliver design guidelines to partners. Instead, it is a more bespoke, spiritual collaboration that allows others to connect with the Tasmanian brand in a way that resonates for them.

A free digital toolkit has also been created to help people promote their own Tasmanian story, including a brand book, a story work book, and insights from their place brand research. And the youth story research has been pivotal in guiding investment into public transportation and other placemaking activities across Hobart and Launceston.

Learnings

- **1.** Citizen engagement isn't something you do once and forget about. It's all you do, all the time. After all, your people are your brand.
- **2.** Done right, by working with your partners and ensuring your priorities align with their own, you can fund most of your citizen engagement through their existing budgets.
- **3.** Projects that are based on citizen needs are more powerful than communication campaigns.
- **4.** Bottom-up activities, built with citizen participation, endure.

Venlo

Location

Venlo / The Netherlands / Europe

Population

103,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Identifying your narrative



Challenge

Venlo, a city in the south of the Netherlands, was grappling with the same challenge facing many cities and nations – a fragmented identity with competing messages and no shared voice. More urgently, they were losing young, educated residents to larger cities, and this challenge demanded more than just a marketing campaign.

The ambition was clear from the start: to build a brand that belonged to everyone, rather than existing solely as a municipal asset. It had to be something that residents, entrepreneurs, students, and businesses would feel proud to call their own – and would want to carry forward themselves.

Venlo's place brand strategy unfolded across four phases: insight, positioning, brand strategy, and creative execution. But more than that, it was a philosophy – a brand built *with* the community, not *for* it.

Strategy

From the very start, the team knew that broad participation would be essential. Over the course of the project, more than 2,000 people contributed their views through interviews, surveys, workshops, and open conversations.

One challenge surfaced early: young people were almost entirely absent from the initial workshops and panels. The participants who showed up were predominantly older residents, and the team risked missing the very demographic it needed to understand the most. To tackle this, the team visited schools, sports clubs, and other spaces where young people naturally spent time. The shift was simple but significant, and it unlocked a perspective that was proved central to the entire strategy.

This commitment to reaching beyond the usual participants became a defining feature of the Venlo approach. The team engaged with residents in the city and in the surrounding villages, with people from across the socioeconomic spectrum, and with a group often overlooked in place branding processes: those who had left.

Eleven former residents were invited to participate in in-depth conversations about their relationship with the city. What had drawn them away? What kept them connected?

What might bring them back? Their stories were rich with contrast. Many had left for education, opportunity, or the allure of the bigger city life. Yet the emotional ties remained, from the warmth of the community, to Carnival (Vastelaovend), to the memory of growing up near the Maas.

Following this research phase, the team brought together fifteen local marketing and communications professionals from across Venlo's sectors — from logistics and technology to education, culture, and hospitality.

Over two intensive sessions, this group worked together on the central question: how can Venlo retain, attract back, and draw in young, educated people? The combination of sectors and perspectives generated insights that no single organisation or agency could have produced alone. Crucially, co-creation generated something that no external brief could deliver: genuine ownership. Participants did not just validate the strategy — they carried it forward. Many immediately took steps to adopt and communicate the brand from within their own organisations, turning the strategy into something alive from day one.

The creative phase was no less participatory. A collective of eight local creative professionals — De Verbeelders — were recruited via a social media campaign and spent three intensive days in a creative pressure cooker. When two Venlo-based agencies, Luidspreker and Studio Denk, took over to develop the final brand, they made the deliberate choice to reach out to nearly 100 young people via sports clubs, schools, and more to ask them to evaluate the design.

Reflecting different concepts back to young residents, they asked: does this feel like Venlo? Would you wear this on a cap, a bag, or even as a tattoo?

The result was a simple but meaningful symbol. A V for Venlo, formed by two elements touching — a mark for connection. Inspired by two confetti pieces meeting, it represents celebration, encounter, and the city's spirit of togetherness. And it was made open source. Residents, businesses, associations, and clubs were invited to adopt and adapt the mark — using their own colours, patterns, and images. More unusually still, the municipality itself adopted the new place brand as its official logo. A move that is rare in Dutch city branding, it sent a clear signal: "This is not a marketing campaign. It is who we are."



Additional materials to explore...

[Brand guide and toolkit](#)

[City Branding Persona Poster](#)

[Results from the Citizen Engagement Survey](#)



Impact

Venlo's new place brand was launched in 2025, and within the first week, organisations and businesses had already begun adapting the open brand for their own use. Flags were flying. Merchandise was appearing. The brand was showing up at events, on social media, and in the communications of local initiatives.

The most important KPI in the early phase of the strategy is whether residents see themselves in the brand. Following that, they'll focus on driving stakeholder adoption and measuring how widely the brand is used across partners to ensure the story is carried broadly. From an operational perspective, this will include tracking usage of the open mark, number of adopters, visibility across touchpoints, and basic engagement signals.

The process itself left a lasting infrastructure: a community of residents, local businessowners and marketers who had built the strategy together and were already deploying it and a generation of young people who had shaped the visual identity and saw themselves in it.

Learnings

1. Be proactive with your outreach. Identify who's missing from a demographic, geographic, or psychographic perspective, and then take active steps to interact with those individuals in spaces they already inhabit.
2. Co-creation creates ambassadors, not just advisors. Local marketers who helped shape the strategy became its most committed carriers.
3. An open-source brand is an act of trust — and communities repay it.

Vilnius

VILNIUS

Location

Vilnius / Lithuania / Europe

Population

640,000

Focus

Building civic pride

Citizen-centric placemaking

Challenge

Go Vilnius wanted to do more than just increase global awareness of Vilnius: they also wanted to create a unifying city experience that residents, businesses, and institutions could actively own and shape together. The challenge was to move beyond a traditional marketing campaign and create a platform where the whole city could participate creatively, emotionally, and socially – turning citizens into ambassadors of Vilnius.

Enter the Vilnius Pink Soup Fest, an initiative born in 2023 that centred around Lithuania's cold pink soup (šaltibarščiai) to create a colourful, unconventional campaign that engaged visitors and residents alike.

Since the first festival in 2023, Vilnius Pink Soup Fest has become an annual nation-wide event that continues growing through strong community and partner involvement. By celebrating Lithuania's iconic soup, the event blends gastronomy, culture, and creativity into a global story that gave residents a chance to demonstrate that Vilnius is indeed 'unexpectedly amazing.'

Strategy

It was key that Vilnius Pink Soup Fest was a co-created city movement, rather than a centrally organised event. Citizens were invited to become active participants by creating costumes, attending events, sharing content online, and turning the festival into a shared city celebration. In 2026 alone, the festival attracted nearly 177,000 participants, with the majority coming from Vilnius residents themselves.

Around 300 tourism ecosystem businesses officially participate each year, while many more join organically. Restaurants and cafés create special pink soup menus and themed offers throughout the month, whilst hotels decorate their spaces and businesses across the city turn their branding pink. Public spaces hosted a pink parade, a giant slide, concerts, and comedy shows. This visual transformation of the city is a key engagement tool, creating an immersive experience and painting the city pink.

The strategy positioned Vilnius Pink Soup Fest as a large-scale, attention-generation platform that generated increased visibility for the city through both traditional and unconventional marketing and PR tools. At the same time,



the festival platform is increasingly being used for broader city positioning goals beyond tourism, including integrating the festival into investor relations and international conference attraction activities.

This strategic expansion became especially visible in 2026, when the festival evolved from a tourism-focused initiative into a wider city platform targeting tourism, business, talent, and international conference audiences simultaneously — using the festival's unique energy, creativity, and strong community engagement as a competitive advantage for Vilnius internationally. However, citizen engagement remains a core pillar of the initiative. The communication strategy surrounding the event relies heavily on social media, user-generated content and playful visual communication that encourages participation and sharing so that residents themselves organically interact with and amplify the city marketing efforts.

Impact

One of the strongest impacts of Vilnius Pink Soup Fest was the sense of unity the festival created. For a few days each year, the whole city embraces the same playful identity, creating a rare feeling of togetherness and collective pride around Vilnius.



Additional materials to explore...

[Go Vilnius Pink Soup Fest: Case Study Video](#)

[Brand kit](#)

[Vilnius Pink Soup Fest 2026 recap](#)



Learnings

1. The strongest engagement happens when people feel they are co-creating the initiative rather than simply attending an event. Giving citizens, businesses, and organisations freedom to participate creatively generates far more emotional ownership and organic visibility.
2. Social media and user-generated content can be significantly more powerful than traditional advertising alone. Creating highly visual, playful, and easy-to-share experiences encourages residents themselves to become the main ambassadors of the festival and the city.
3. Strong community involvement can transform a marketing campaign into a self-sustaining cultural movement.

Key KPIs for the festival included participant numbers, citizen and business involvement, social media engagement, international media visibility, and overall organic reach generated by the initiative. Citizen engagement was tracked through festival attendance, social media activity, user-generated content volume, media monitoring and more. Business engagement was measured through the number of participating organisations joining the initiative officially and organically, as well as through the value created via other contributions supporting the festival.

The festival exceeds expectations every year, growing from 15,000 attendees in 2023 to 43,000 in 2024 to 93,000 in 2025 - to a staggering 176,650 participants in 2026. Citizens, companies, and institutions increasingly participate without direct invitations, adapting their own communication, spaces, and activities to the festival theme: the initiative has successfully evolved beyond a marketing campaign into a city-wide cultural movement owned collectively by the community and driven by collective enthusiasm, creativity, and community ownership.

More than that, it continues to remind residents to be proud of their culture and gastronomy, by showing them that it's something to be celebrated worldwide.

Waikirikiri Selwyn



Location

Waikiri Selwyn / New Zealand / Australasia

Population

87,000

Focus

Identifying your narrative

Building civic pride

Challenge

Selwyn is a predominately rural region in the South Island of New Zealand. And though they're the country's fastest growing district, residents, local government, and businesses leaders alike realised they were facing a barrier: without a clear place brand strategy, their ability to attract investment, talent, and customers were limited.

This realisation kickstarted the development of a community-led place brand that would encapsulate the district's people, businesses, and future ambitions.

Strategy

The place brand didn't start with a logo or a design brief – it started with listening. Building on previous consultation to avoid asking residents the same questions, Selwyn District Council went out to the community to capture stories, textures, and lived experiences that would help shape the brand. This was done through a hiko (communal walk) across the district, co-design workshops, and real conversations with community residents and businesses.

The team have been led by the principle of meeting people where they are – that is, going out to their homes, places of work, and community centres. This means the team have conducted conversations at cafes, annual AGM meetings, kitchen tables, and even a wool shed! By providing multiple ways of engaging – including face-to-face and digital channels – the team were able to meet the needs of a diversity of community members.

One theme that continually emerged was of abundance: an abundance of nature, opportunity, creativity, and manaaki (caring for and nurturing the 'mana' or power of others). As well as shaping the five pillars that reflected Selwyn's identity, it also inspired their new flexible design identity.

The whata, a traditional Māori storehouse, symbolises abundance. But more than that, it also signals a place to stop, to rest, and to share kai, the traditional Māori food. This history has been translated into Selwyn's own modern whata form, an icon that reflects strength, stability, and abundance while harking back to the traditional shape of the whata.

Rather than presenting a finished brand, the team invited people to be part of the process from the beginning. This



ensured that Waikirikiri Selwyn's place brand identity was shaped by the voices, experiences, and aspirations of the district. But the team wanted the identity to be far more than a "new logo for the council" – it needed to be an identity that the community themselves embraced.

To activate the brand, the team launched the Selwyn.nz platform. Alongside creating a central resource for visitors, investors, and prospective residents, it also provided detailed information to support residents looking to be a part of Selwyn's story. As well as outlining the how and the why of their place brand strategy, the site provides a toolkit that ensure everyone can lend their voice to strengthening Selwyn's story. For example, by uploading photos to this digital platform, residents can generate customised versions of the new Selwyn mark, putting their own unique spin on how the place brand identity is used and shared.

This enables the community to actively champion and share the place brand, creating a self-sustaining model of participation and ownership where Council acts as steward rather than owner.

Impact

Many people involved in the early engagement for the place brand strategy have continued to champion the place brand, sharing the Waikirikiri Selwyn story through their businesses, networks, and community initiative. And a number of place brand activations have provided new opportunities for community participation.

Additional materials to explore...

[Be a part of the Selwyn Story](#)

[Make Your Mark tool](#)

[Waikirikiri Selwyn visual toolkit](#)

[Creating a place-based brand identity for Waikirikiri Selwyn](#)

[Presentation on the place brand for the Hikoi workshop](#)

[Email invitation to participate in the Hikoi](#)

[Social media templates](#)

[Summer passport](#)



For example, the Summer Passport campaign that ran in January 2026 saw fourteen local businesses and attractions coming together to form an inaugural “hidden gems” trail that encouraged residents and visitors to rediscover what makes Selwyn special. These businesses actively participated in the development and promotion of the campaign, and it was a vital opportunity to help residents – especially those new to the district – feel more connected to the place they call home.

Most importantly, community ownership of the brand is already strong. Within the first six weeks of launch, the community brand toolkit and logo builder were used more than 400 times by people creating their own place-brand assets. This level of voluntary participation reflects something important. The brand is not seen as a council initiative, but as a shared identity the community feels proud to use.

The project has also transformed Selwyn’s digital presence. What was once primarily a static directory is now a living platform for storytelling, discovery, and connection. It allows residents, visitors, and businesses to share in the same narrative and participate in the district’s future.

Most importantly, the project demonstrates that when councils invite their communities into the process and provide the right tools and platforms, people will step forward to help carry the story themselves.

Learnings

1. Authentic community co-creation builds trust and ownership. Listening deeply, sharing power, and working alongside your communities is what allows you to create change.
2. Activation campaigns are essential for translating engagement into meaningful outcomes. A brand alone does not create impact. It must be experienced through events, initiatives and activities that invite people to participate.
3. Digital platforms must empower people to contribute and discover, rather than simply providing information. Tools such as brand builders and AI-enabled recommendations allow communities and businesses to actively participate in the place brand.
4. Evidence-led rollout helps build confidence and manage risk. By testing the brand through pilot activations and measuring results before wider promotion, the project was able to demonstrate real value to stakeholders and the community.

Williamsburg



Location

Williamsburg, Virginia / USA / North America

Population

15,000

Focus

Community sentiment & perceptions

Challenge

Every two years, the City of Williamsburg, Virginia, gathered public input from the community as part of its strategic planning process. Historically, this would be achieved through public meetings or focus groups, but typically these only attracted a few dozen participants. A new approach was needed in 2022 to exponentially grow attendance at the City's input events and attract a more diverse audience.

Strategy

The mission to revitalize their strategic planning process was relatively simple: create a fun and surprising engagement tool that encourages the community to be curious – and bring it to them. The City of Williamsburg brought this new vision to life through their Future Festivals, which used larger-than-life and interactive games to create measurable data.

The team modelled their engagement tool around popular game shows like 'Jeopardy!' and 'Price is Right.' As well as being a format that was easily recognisable for residents, modelling their engagement around these game shows allowed the City of Williamsburg to ask specific questions on topics they wanted feedback on. By virtue of prioritising multiple-choice answers, these games also created largely quantitative data. A few carefully selected open-ended questions also created space for good, innovative data, but the overall game-show format allowed the team to efficiently collect, analyse, and present data in a way that is digestible and actionable.

The games were also mobile, allowing for an event that can travel around the city and maximise the likelihood that most, if not all, residential corridors were represented in the results. For example, two of the Future Festival events were held on the William & Mary university campus – after all, those students call Williamsburg home for nine months of the year. Attendance to events was rewarded with a good time: larger-than-life games, free food, lawn games, and, yes, actual rewards. City swag was offered to anyone who completed all six of the strategic planning games.

The lawn games were an important addition to the events. The fact that the events were built out to include games that were purely for fun with no agenda encouraged participants to stay longer, engage with their neighbours and City staff,



and, most importantly, spread the word for the upcoming future events.

Alongside the in-person events, the team ran an online survey which posed different, but often related, questions to those being posed to attendees of the Future Festival. Combined, these approaches reached even more people and enhanced the data that the team had to work with.

To spread the word about the event, the team posted about the Festivals everywhere they could. New releases, website landing page, email listservs, every social media channel, public access television, fliers in all public buildings – all of it. By asking local partners to do the same, they were able to broaden their reach. Besides ink and paper to print fliers for the event, the City of Williamsburg didn't spend any money on advertising the Future Festivals.

It's also worth thinking outside the box about which resources are available to you. By far the most effective communication tool to spread word about the City of Williamsburg's Future Festivals was their police officers. In the days ahead of any one event, police officers would hand-deliver fliers to homes in nearby neighbourhoods. This was particularly effective because community policing is at the heart of the Williamsburg Police Department's mission, and their years of hard work has fostered a culture that makes their visits welcome and their invitations appealing.



Additional materials to explore...

[City of Williamsburg's Strategic Planning Roadmap](#)

[Breakdown of the Future Festivals Games](#)

[Future Festivals Games Results](#)

[Future Festivals Punch Cards to track participation in events](#)

[Future Festivals in action | YouTube](#)



Finally, once the events were live, the team used photos and videos from each event to promote the next one. Once residents were able to see how much fun others had, they wanted to experience it for themselves, and attendees also spread the word on their behalf.

Impact

In a community with a population of around 15,000, the Future Festivals attracted more than 900 participants across the eight events. In comparison to the previous approach of running public meetings, this was around 75x times more effective in reaching residents. By virtue of the format shift to larger-than-life games as well, it also generated vast amounts of quantitative data, which is simpler to analyse. Those insights were then fed into the strategic plan for the City, ensuring that the community's voice was well-and-truly integrated into the process.

Finally, the Future Festivals were far more than just forums for public input. They were a highly visible touchpoint within the City of Williamsburg and fostered a real sense of community between residents and the City officials.

Learnings

1. Being mobile means you can reach all areas of your community, but you need to have a well-thought-out plan for the setup and breakdown of each event, as well as storage in between.
2. Be mindful of morale. Creating an entirely new engagement tool means staff will have to take on the task of developing the content and, in this specific instance, constructing the actual games. This requires a lot of labour and time from your team, even before they then staff the events themselves. Before beginning on this, consider whether you have already fostered a work culture that so desires innovation that staff are willing to dedicate the necessary time outside of the daily work.
3. Be fun and create a spectacle. People will naturally be attracted by bright colours, clear signage, and interesting-looking stations / games.
4. Use every possible channel to spread awareness about the event, and don't be afraid to reach out to your partners. Public input will likely affect libraries, public transportation, educational institutions, etc. Work with those organisations to promote the event because they'll likely want to see the events succeed as well.
5. Test and learn throughout the process and make any necessary adjustments along the way. If you can use the early events to learn what residents find the most engaging, you'll be able to enhance your next event and get more participation from local neighbourhoods.

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Thank you

The case studies in this toolkit have been compiled with the support of the respective organisation. Candidates to be included in the case study were selected chosen on varying criteria, including where City Nation Place was aware of a strong or innovative approach to citizen engagement and to ensure a good coverage of geography and organisation type.

We know that there has been a lot of work behind the scenes to compile the resources and case studies compiled in this toolkit, and this time and support has been invaluable.

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