

What is Place Branding

Place branding and marketing allows a location, in this case, the town of Neston, to be given a recognisable identity and to promote itself and its assets. "Places are, indeed, products whose identities and values must be designed and marketed" (Kotler.1993, P11).

The LGA state that 'a place brand should be a shared understanding and expression of place to enable a full range of consistent and coherent communication activities'. As recommended in the Neston Communications & Marketing Policy, the place branding is considered as a fundamental part of the marketing plan.

Why is Place Branding important?

Places are constantly evolving and identity is not just based on the past and a place's heritage but rather it's about what it stands for in the present time and what it hopes to be in the future.

Place branding is different to the council brand:

- Council brand- is that of your organisation and services it provides including partners and business.
- Place Brand – is about the place the council serves.

Keeping these separate is vital but the two can complement each other and work together as long as it's clear they are two different things, telling different stories but with a common ground.

Involving the Community

Places are where people live, their economies and importantly the centre of their identity and pride. It's the views and perceptions of the community and people who live in a place that really shape it and therefore only through listening to the views of the people who live and work in a place can it be truly defined.

It is essential to recognise that it is the diversity of a place that really shapes it and therefore listening to the views of as many different parts of the community is essential when planning the place branding approach.

Building on work from 2011

In 2011 CWaC / Neston council ran a workshop with 18 people from the local community to look at place branding for the town. This approach worked well as it included members of the community seeking views and engaging them in shaping the thinking. A number of useful findings and approaches came from this work and it is recommended that this is built upon and updated for the future. This said, although some areas of this work are still relevant, much has also changed and this work now needs updating and relaunching with a more modern approach.

It's worth noting also that this work focussed heavily on attracting visitors and had a clear tourism approach to the thinking however it is important to firstly build a brand identity that

appeals to the residents and businesses and secondly to the tourists. If the community buy in to the positioning of a place, then the visitors will naturally follow.

Defining the approach

It is recommended that a Place Branding Immersion Day is run in the summer of 2022. This will be run by the council and facilitated by either a council employee or an external facilitator with relevant experience.

At the 2011 workshop there was a big focus on inviting business leaders, councillors and other professionals to take part. We recommend including some of these individuals to an immersion session but to also include a wider range of individuals who interact with the town in different ways.

It is essential that the community help shape the approach and therefore a cross section of people from Neston should be invited as follows:

- Representatives from minority groups (including the elderly, young people, ethnic groups etc).
- Business owners.
- Community group leaders.
- Residents.

By inviting as much diversity within the community in to this session will drive a deeper level of discussion. It may be worth considering getting sixth form students from the local high school involved in this workshop alongside a teacher. Ensuring we listen to the younger generation and our communities is essential for future success.

The objective of the session will be to identify areas of uniqueness that make Neston distinctive. It may be that 4-5 key areas are identified and then can be developed as themes. Focus should be on the town of Neston and the surrounding villages. There are so many areas in and around the town that make Neston unique including Ness Garden, the Wetlands, the markets, the Collieries Walk, Parkgate and much more. It's no wonder that in 2021 Cheshire Life referred to Neston as the 'County's best kept secret'!

Developing the assets already in place is a much more efficient use of time then developing new ones and there are so many stories that can be told about the people who live and work in the areas of interest already in Neston.

It is not the objective of the session to produce outputs that lead to a large report on Neston's heritage as this is likely not to be actionable in the long term. The session shouldn't focus primarily on the past in terms of history and heritage as although these elements are important, it's crucial to identify areas of uniqueness from the present that make Neston what it is today.

Areas to be focussed on are:

- Local people/ faces & their stories
- Local culture and diversity
- Anything that make Neston unique
- Local occupations/ specialist businesses

Primary focus areas

- Leisure and recreation
- Landscape and natural environment
- Heritage

Secondary focus area

It is recommended that Neston focus on the many diverse faces of the town, the people and what they stand for and to tell stories about these. Both visitors and residents can relate to real stories.

Capturing the findings

It is important that capturing the outputs from the workshop is done in a way that makes creating the place branding easy. So, for instance having pages and pages of notes to type up and interpret afterwards is not always useful. Some current tools could be adapted, but new approaches to research that are more qualitative are required.

Some approaches to capture the feedback on the day to be considered:

- Artists to visually capture what they hear in the workshops.
- Writers to capture key words and sentences that may be turned in to straplines and text.
- Videoing the session to watch back.
- Capture stories, quotes and testimonials that can be used in social and other communications.

Further Research

Further research in to resident/ visitor views of the town and surrounding area can be carried out by using additional research methods:

- A 5-minute Facebook questionnaire on Neston Life site.
- Questionnaire on the Council website.
- Face to face interviews in the town centre (for shoppers and visitors).
- Questionnaire sent to local high school (sixth form only).
- 5 min questionnaire sent to local business contacts (i.e., Sainsbury's Manager).

This data offers further qualitative and quantitative data in order to shape the branding and the council's longer-term plans.

Logos and symbols

The use of logos in place branding is important as they communicate concepts and are easily recognisable. The Neston knot may well be established and recognised by the community and this will need to be researched. Its application based on the branding work for 2012 is effective however it is important to question if it says everything about the town and its villages that it should?

What unique and symbolic areas around the town would better represent the area? The bridge or the Laburnum Arch in Ness Gardens? The birds found in the Wetlands, the estuary? These may be the icons that add depth and portray the real personality of the area.

It is worth considering the distinctive elements of the town and only then settling on a logo or symbol to bring Neston to life.

Next Steps

Once the 4-5 areas of uniqueness have been identified in the session and captured in different ways suggested above, the Council should have a number of quotes, testimonials and images that they can use to start to create a communications/branding plan.

It will be crucial to get photography and potentially videos to bring the information to life and to support all communications.

This can then form part of the on-going marketing plan but will save time and make sign off swifter as the tone of voice, look and feel and imagery used will not have to be decided each time a piece of marketing communications is sent out.

This should be reviewed on an annual basis going forward.