

HFA: Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA)
Category: Communications
Subcategory: Promotional Materials and Newsletters
Entry Title: The MSHDA Story: Building a New Michigan-Director's Guide

Chapter I: The Situation – Defining the Story Plot

It is no secret that Michigan is experiencing an acute economic crisis.

Unemployment, downsizing, decreasing property values and extremely high foreclosure rates are all contributors. What many don't realize is that the crisis in Michigan started early, long before the rest of the nation really began to feel the impact of the subsequent recession. The reason: deep losses in the automotive manufacturing industry upon which the majority of Michigan's economy was based. The result: an unusually high interest in Michigan and our economic troubles and heightened attention from the national media. As the negativity spread, the situation worsened. Communities suffered and the vibrancy of our main streets and neighborhoods waned. Urban centers declined. Michigan's rural landscapes lost their rustic appeal, and the hopes and dreams of our citizens were becoming nothing more than memories of the past.

Chapter II: The Strategy – Turning a Negative into a Positive

You can't tell a story unless you have something upon which to base it – and MSHDA definitely had a story to tell. Turning all the negativity into a positive story was challenging, but MSHDA's successes were building up throughout the state and were many and varied. Why not tell that story in such a way that showed Michigan WAS attractive to businesses and entrepreneurs and the state DOES contain unique and exciting places? Though Michigan found itself in tough economic times, MSHDA itself was strong financially and able to play a key role in the economic transition to thriving, vibrant communities and a thriving, vibrant Michigan. As a result, the idea of a promotional brochure to tell the MSHDA story was born, and it is the basis of our entry today.

Chapter III: The Objective – Building a New Michigan

Our challenge was to raise awareness of the work that MSHDA does for the people of Michigan to the highest level possible. That building a new and better Michigan consists of more than just bricks and mortar. That an economy can thrive only when it involves people and initiatives that work at every level in every region of the state. That creativity and strong partnerships equal new, sustainable ideas. That when people gain the skills and the hope to improve their homes, businesses and regions, they gain the collective power of success. The objective of our brochure was to prove our theory by providing examples and building upon those successes.

Chapter IV: The Target Audience – Telling the Story

The story we wanted to tell had many audiences, so the challenge to create just the right tool for the appropriate audience was the first order of business. We wanted to tell investors and developers that Michigan was a prime location for investment. We wanted to tell businesses and entrepreneurs that Michigan was attractive and friendly to commerce and industry. We wanted to tell young talent that Michigan was the place to begin careers and grow wealth. We wanted to tell families that Michigan was the place to live, learn, work and play.

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Chapter V: The Innovative Implementation – The Creative Concept

So we developed two identical brochures – one in two-color for wide distribution and one in four-color for a narrower distribution. Two brochures – the same message. The innovation of the booklet “Building a New Michigan” is not only in the design and messaging – graphically appealing and well written – but also in the method of delivery. The four-color version, designed for distribution to prospective investors and developers by our executive director in his travels around the state and the country, served as a leave-behind and reminder that MSHDA was driving the “building of a new Michigan.”

The two-color version was designed for wide distribution at housing fairs, conferences, a statewide speakers series sponsored by an online web-based magazine that promotes Michigan cities and neighborhoods, MSHDA marketing and outreach teams that travel the state promoting MSHDA programs, and any other venue that offered an opportunity to tell our story.

We didn’t stop there. Social media proved to be an extremely effective tool to promote our story. Our MSHDA e-newsletters included links to our online version of the brochure. Our news alert Web site was filled with stories and articles produced by the messaging contained in the booklet. (see the sampling of news articles included as attachments). The results were both measurable and effective, as evidenced by the news stories that were generated and the significant increase in our social media following.

Chapter VIII: Summary – The Story Continues

The narrative presented here today is considerably more than a description of a simple brochure. It is the presentation of an innovative concept that showcases people and places, a feeling of investment and deep belonging. It is storytelling at its finest, not lifeless prose. The benefits provided far outweigh the costs incurred to create it. The only expenses were minimal printing costs. It was designed in-house. All the photos are of real-life people and places that were touched by MSHDA programs provided by dedicated MSHDA staff. Online promotion, the creative use of social media and personal distribution didn’t cost us anything but provided incredible personal connections and lasting relationships that are continuing to build and grow.

This project is entirely replicable. It will not look the same or read the same because each state has a different story to tell. It is the concept of storytelling, the portrayal of the big picture and tying the stories and design into each HFA’s branding strategies that is the model to replicate.

The story doesn’t end here. It is simply the catalyst for building momentum as our story spreads. It is helping create a sense of place and instilling confidence that a brighter economic future is on the horizon for Michigan. We are being recognized nationally for our programs and proactive response to serious economic issues such as foreclosure, unemployment and homelessness. And it is working. There is a healthy, vibrant and thriving future in store for Michigan, and it all began with the promotion of a simple but powerful brochure. We hope you enjoy the MSHDA story as it continues to unfold.