

Typeface for Tennessee: How one city is using design to make a difference

Introduction

Sometimes, the most creative and innovative projects can come from the most unlikely of places. This is the case with Chattanooga, Tennessee. Most often known for its outdoor activities and railroads, Chattanooga has experienced revitalization in the last few years of its business sector and cultural footprint. Capitalizing on this new growth, two artists have sparked national interest in Chattanooga's economic development plan because of one customized design element: a typeface. This case study explores how this story binds together economic development, marketing, good visual communication and the power of a community.

Background/Literature Review

Economic Development Marketing

In the world of economic development, competition is fierce. Cities and states throw inordinate amounts of tax incentives and financial assistance at companies to woo wealth-generating businesses to their area. And in this environment, the smallest advantage can make a big difference. Just as traditional marketers define target audiences, primary messages, and unique selling points for their product or service, so do communities or municipalities promoting tourism and economic development. When marketing a city, officials often target businesses that will invest long-term, create significant capital investment and offer competitive-paying jobs.

To match the growing need for innovative and smart technologies in the 21st Century city, communities now focus on targeting new growth industries, such as high tech, green energy and digital media. According to the Council on Competitiveness' report *Measuring Regional Innovation*:

“In a global economy, U.S. regions can no longer primarily compete based on their natural resources endowment, low cost of labor, or tax incentives. Instead, regional prosperity depends on a region’s capacity to support innovative firms, institutions, and people.”

These emerging industries attract young talent, impressive work environments, and innovative products that provide a community with a flood of investment and promotion. But, cities and states must also contend with shrinking budgets and limited tax resources. Blane Canada (2012), a highly sought after economic development marketing firm states “it doesn’t matter how much you spend, it’s how you spend what you have that really matters” (para. 1).

To make smart marketing and development decisions, cities and states increasingly focus on what makes them unique. Based on Development Counsellors International (2011), an economic development strategy firm’s annual survey, the most effective economic development marketing techniques are: planned visits to corporate executives (where the economic developers travel to the company’s headquarters and make a pitch about the area); the municipality’s website or internet information; special events; advertising and direct mail. In aggregate (among other marketing functions), these techniques help form a recognizable and valued brand that emphasizes the community’s unique competitive advantages.

Implementing a successful economic development brand takes time, effort and resources to create awareness and improve perception of that area for business executives. In that plan, it is important for communities to pay homage to its assets, landmarks and cultural points of interest, but the strategy should outlast temporal government administrations or marketing fads. By creating an enduring visual and brand identity, a community can elevate its status from a

coordinated group of government officials, to a well-oiled, ready-to-work development agency. And one of the most helpful tools for creating a cohesive brand and visual identity, is typeface.

Typeface

According to Laura Franz (2010) of *Typographic Web Design*, “fonts are like clothing; we take them in and process their underlying meaning constantly” (p. 17). Typeface, or a set of characters of the same design, is an integral part of design. It sets the tone for the logo, the brochure, the website or any other message included in a design piece. Typeface can communicate the feeling or intention behind the design piece, as well as the practical denotation and emotional connotation of the piece (Franz, 2010). Typeface is everywhere, from billboards to the dollar bills in your pocket.

Type design originated with Gutenberg and the first printing press, and has since emerged as a preeminent feature of design, spurring several industry associations and collegiate degrees. According to TypeRight.org (1998), technological advances have also played a significant role in type design, allowing designers to create scalable files that allow for letters in any shape or size, instead of cutting each letter size independently. Moreover, computers opened the floodgates for more creativity, originality and ubiquity of type design. Typeface design has become an artistic expression, and exists as a design niche that employs less than 300 full-time designers in the world (Bond, 2012).

Typeface encompasses several design principles, including structure, optical compensation and legibility (Cheng, 2006). It must be legible—or how easy it is to distinguish one letter from the other—and readable, or how easily the words and letters can be read (Haley, 2012). Also according to Haley, legibility hinges on transparency, or how the font calls as little

attention to itself as possible; restraint, or the understanding that they are not overly bold or excessive; and the counters, or amount of white space in between the letters also help to create a more legible typeface.

Franz (2010) adds “the words themselves communicate the message, the font plays a supportive role” (p. 17). In other words, typeface should support the material’s message and lend visual impact, rather than overtake the actual message. Sharf (2012) adds “fonts subtly enhance and mirror our experience with the text, making a statement about the people who chose it — whether those people are newspaper designers or passionate citizens” (para. 4).

So what happens when one community combines economic development and good creativity? An unexpected project from an unexpected place: Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Situation Analysis/Findings

Chattanooga, Tennessee is a Southern city with a growing cultural and entrepreneurial footprint. Chattanooga, once known as a railroad and industrial hub, is also the site of the Coca-Cola Bottling Co.’s first bottling plant. The city’s reputation has ebbed and flowed throughout the decades, but a recent revitalization project has accelerated an entrepreneurial and artistic renaissance in the area most known for the Chattanooga Choo-Choo. Chattanooga has also experienced an uptick in capital investment with the location of a new Volkswagen manufacturing plant and implementation of a fiber optic high-speed network.

According to Bond (2012), between the 2000 and 2010 Census, Chattanooga quadrupled its growth rate, restored its riverfront development, focused on attracting new startups and artists, and enacted plans for greater citywide growth. This artist relocation effort set the stage for the

serendipitous meeting between two designers interested in making Chattanooga even more desirable for young professionals.

Meet Jeremy Dolley and DJ Trischler, both designers living and working in Chattanooga who met one day at a coffee shop and began talking about shared design interests. This meeting sparked the idea of a customized typeface, created specifically for Chattanooga that could help brand the city. Both designers wanted a typeface that spoke about both Chattanooga’s proud industrial history, but also its entrepreneurial and cultural-focused future. They then pulled in Roger de Villiers and Jonathan Mansfield, other respected artists and designers in the area to get the project started.

Dooley told the *Chattanooga Free Press*, “that the city has a certain vibe and a font would help capture that and express it” (Newcomb, 2012, para. 4). The design team conducted research to learn what Chattanooga was all about and explored the landmarks, businesses and traditions that made Chattanooga unique. Each designer’s aggregated perspective formed a typeface that encompassed traditional and contemporary design and built upon the city’s history and future goals.

Thus, Chatype was born. Chatype is a serif, rounded font with a stenciled and tech feel:





According to the *Times Free Press*, the typeface incorporates several design features:

1. Slab serif: which is a nod to the industrial history of Chattanooga, and its heavy and anchored design harkens back to the bottling plants and railroads that dot the area
2. Cherokee influences: which are characterized by the curvatures of the rounded letters that relate back to the language development of the Sequoyah in the early 1800s in nearby Northern Alabama
3. Futuristic feel: which speaks to Chattanooga’s burgeoning technology sector and focus on new economic development markets

The designers felt that the amalgamation of these design elements rightly reflects the complicated nature of the city, yet also represents the city as a “multi-faceted, living organism” (Harrison, 2012, para. 20).

To get the project started, the designers turned to Kickstarter, an online funding site capable of hosting their plea for Chattanooga citizens’ financial support of the project. According to Chatype.com, the official website of the font, its purpose is to “reflect character, extend excitement, and become a rally point for suffering projects. This opportunity...is as important as picking the colors in a flag” (para. 2).

The design team created a video explaining the reason and strategy behind the endeavor and pulled in several other contributors. They asked local designers, artists and city officials to speak about the importance of branding Chattanooga, what the typeface could mean for the city's marketing efforts and finally make a financial plea for help in creating the complete typeface package. A few of the quotes included in the video illustrate the communal and entrepreneurial approach to the project:

- “All cities that are memorable have character...the more that we as Chattanooga can capture our spirit and put in a meaningful bite sized way for people to get is very important.” (Andrae McGary, Chattanooga City Councilman – District Eight)
- “We’re going to be experiencing some pretty explosive growth here in the future. I think something that is important to Chattanooga citizens is that we maintain our sense of culture as well as our sense of some of the other things that make this place special, such as the environment.” (Stratton Tingle, Account Executive – Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce)
- “Chattanooga is in this adolescent phase, it seems like, kind of coming into its own, tons of development, brilliant people here, entrepreneurs, small startups, designers, it’s an amazing amount of culture packed into a small space.” (Aaron Rausch, Director of Coffee Culture – Mission Chattanooga)

The money raised through Kickstarter will help the designers provide the typeface package free for city officials to use on a number of things, including city documents, signs, bike paths, etc. And once the final typeface is available for public download (by June 2012), it will be free to the public but very specific in its copyright and trademark uses.

Chatype is the first typeface created specifically for branding an American city, even though this technique has been used in larger cities across the globe. Many international cities use specific typefaces for street signs and tourist attractions, but it has yet caught on here in the U.S. Paul Rustand, creative director of design firm Widgets & Stone, believes that even small selling points can foster city identity and a unique branding proposition, saying “it’s a great cultural thing and a great tool in the tool belt for communication” (Harrison, 2012, para. 38).

The city’s officials have embraced the idea and are investigating how to incorporate the typeface in the city’s marketing efforts. Dave Santucci, vice president of marketing for the Chattanooga Visitors Bureau, states “We’re just at the tip of the iceberg here. We run a lot of ads in Chattanooga to drive tourism, and we’re certainly anticipating using this font more and more in those” (Harrison, 2012, para. 11). Additionally, Chattanooga Public Library director Corinne Hill is on board saying “We have to do this. We will absolutely use this” (Harrison, 2012, para. 13).

Quick Timeline of Chatype Project:

- Fall 2011: Jeremy Dooley and DJ Trischler meet in Chattanooga and discuss the idea of a customized typeface
- November 2011: Dooley and Trischler connect with Roger de Villiers and workshop Chatype at entrepreneurial startup event 48-Hour Launch, where they connect with Andrae McGary, city councilman who pledges to present it to the City Council
- January/February 2012: Chatype.com is launched and a support video is hosted on Kickstarter in an effort to raise \$10,000
- April 2012: The project surpasses its goal by \$1,400

- June 2012 (anticipated): full Chatype typeface suite will be available for free, public download for Chattanooga government entities and businesses

What may be more interesting than the typeface itself is the buzz surrounding the entrepreneurial spirit of Chattanooga. Local and regional press has latched on to the idea and are covering the project each step of the way. The story has appeared in several sources, including *Time* and an upcoming issue of *National Geographic*, and garnered significant media coverage for the city and the typeface designers. Sources used for this case study range from newspaper articles, magazine features and typeface design blogs. This shows the viral-like power this project is having for Chattanooga.

The popularity and novelty of the typeface sheds much needed light on Chattanooga, its people and the city's business revitalization efforts. The purpose of the typeface is different than a private organization's identity, because it speaks about a place, not a thing (or product), which gives it an endearing hook for many typeface and economic development enthusiasts alike.

Other cities have taken notice. Philadelphia has implemented its "With Love" campaign that incorporates letters to potential visitors with a script typeface reminiscent of love letters. One Philadelphia reporter believes the city should take the typeface used in this campaign and apply it to the city's infrastructure, much like Chattanooga, saying "a unique font to grace the cityscape will connect Philadelphians no matter what part of the city we live in" (Sharf, 2012, para. 16).



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Also, Seattle has mulled over the idea as well, believing that a customized typeface could “help communicate that Seattle is a young, energetic city with a strong entrepreneurial bent” says Karen Cheng with the University of Washington’s School of Art (Zurita, 2012, para. 3). But cities are also quick to point out the investment cost and federal regulations for street signs prohibit fonts other than approved styles from being used. And, as Chattanooga has exemplified, a project like this takes time, community support and designers who can create something that an entire city is on board with.

Application and Implications

This case study brings together several implications for both the typeface design industry and economic development marketing. With an economic development or municipality organization embracing good design, a new, niche market opens for designers eager to weave creativity into traditionally stale topics, such as bike lanes, capital investment and job creation. With more economic development firms embracing private sector marketing techniques and trends, creativity and ingenuity will only continue fostering more strategic and valuable community, city and state brands.

Typeface is just one element of good design. In the future, communities could take this idea and expand on it by creating more interactive and creative websites, iPad apps and other digital media assets; as well as thinking outside the box for trade show booths, marketing materials and even public relations efforts.

Chattanooga, by being the first to embark on this, can create continual buzz and media discussion around the artistic movement of the city. This social capital could then expand into more goodwill for companies looking for a place rife with young talent and entrepreneurial

spirit. Only time will tell if this cohesive brand will translate into real economic growth. But a community project like this has tangential value to hard numbers. It creates a spirit of togetherness, something the community can work toward, and the opportunity for greater revitalization of Chattanooga's structural and cultural assets.

Conclusion

This case study provides one sample of how a city is trying something different. It also speaks to the power of good visual communication, and how one typeface design can tell the story of an entire community. It shows the power of a cohesive economic development marketing strategy and how a holistic approach to tourism or economic development can present the community as a willing and ready business partner for potential companies. Good design and strategic visual communication can make an impact in any industry or community, and Chattanooga is making that happen in new and exciting ways.

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