

# Building Aspirational Communities: Our Approach

We are driven by:

- The knowledge that the silent majority simply wants ambitious, higher aspiration actions that nurture a community they love to live in.
- A community-building objective: to build great communities that enable life well lived, that make people happy, and people speak about with pride.

Communities must be creatively brave to stand out, and become outstanding, in a world of generic noise. The braver one is with strategic direction and action, the less consensus there will be. We call it the ***Shark and the Goldfish Paradox***. Be careful where you swim to stand out from the crowd...the change-averse sharks lurk. There is an inherent momentum for community engagement and decision-making processes to move toward a lowest common denominator that ruffles the fewest feathers rather than highest form of aspiration. Yet we can all cite breakthroughs where stepping out from the crowd has generated handsome reward. And external audiences appreciate distinctive and creative efforts.




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So how do we bridge the gap?

Our community development in dozens of communities over the last 25 years yields six fundamental pillars for successful community and economic development:

**You need ONE Plan.** Too many Plans, Plans that collect dust on shelves, and boring Plans are the bane of municipal governance life. A process devoted to strategic positioning, generating and representing vision in simple, visual, and emotive form, and generating prioritized and ambitious strategies and actions that link all facets of community development together so there is understanding of the single “story” of the future of a community, can unify various community plans, and bring a direction to life in a way that resonates with both locals and target audiences. Interpret from what you have or create a new “master plan.” It doesn’t matter what it is or what you call it but let it be known that it is THE plan.

**Accept lack of full consensus.** Democracy positions everyone as a member of the community “Board of Directors.” The result (it’s natural...not a fault) is to devolve to average, and try to be everything to everyone – with bland vision and “shotgun” action that is not absorbed by target audiences needed to realize vision. Endless and expensive processes designed to be inclusive quickly become the tail that wags the dog. To build transformative plans we need effective outcomes driven by leadership and general groundswell of support, not process driven by un-obtainable desire for full consensus. We educate around community development foundations and leadership best practices. We work hard creatively to generate the boldness you need to compete in today’s marketplace. We work to have you pursue targeted vision and action...to be something to someone...knowing any community only appeals to a segment of a population for specific reasons (a value proposition), and our job is to connect with people most passionate about what your community has to offer.



**You must choose differentiation.** Most communities focus on “quality of life” experiences. The result is that they all sound the same. It’s critical for a plan-making process to define quality of life and lifestyle factors that are core values, and that can be shaped as a source of distinction to be used in marketing activity directed at tourism visitation, investment attraction, business retention, and/or internal community-building.

**Community development is locally owned.** Eighty percent of investment is local – which is why an inspired, inspiring, and actionable vision is so important. If you can convince local residents of the merits of higher aspiration, they will support you with sweat equity, and harder-edged commitment needed to get you there. We work hard on the language and visualization of vision to help build bridges to a local community that inherently wants to love where they live and be proud of its accomplishments.

**Leaders lead.** Strength of local leadership makes or breaks plan efficacy. We seek the trusted “Pied Pipers” in the community and work to involve them in the process, build their knowledge base, and build their buy-in so there is resolve to achieve long term results, building of community trust that enables leaders to lead, and resolve to push through plan adoption and implementation when the “Grumpy Gus/Sulky Sally” vocal minority emerge to express dissatisfaction and the “Bandwagon Jumpers” are waiting to see results before committing.

**Risk can be proactively managed.** Canadians are evolutionary not revolutionary. We design process and outcomes to deliver breakthroughs, not also-ran, but also recognize the value of ideas and innovation, the recognition of accelerating change in our environment, and the importance of building quick wins and incremental stages into plans. We also believe in the value of quantitative performance metrics in building confidence to step beyond norms.

# Generating Ambitious Plans: Our Approach

## THE OUTPUT

Some of us remember the most popular library books when we were in school: the pop-up and scratch-and-sniff books. The grape scratch-and-sniff was worn out, forcing olfactory wonders like the smell of dirt.

Ask yourself what you absorb these days. Chances are its catchy headlines, a cool picture, or an emotional story. Why? Because in our hectic world, our attention span is declining – which Microsoft (reported by the National Post) estimates at 8 seconds compared to a goldfish at 9 seconds. We don't have an answer for how one measures the attention span of a goldfish.

Imagine you are charged with creating the next Plan for your community. We can change the course of the future for the better. We can aim higher. We can aspire and reach, and realize it if we dare to try. For municipalities we so soulfully call “home”, it's quite an ability to influence lives.

And then we waste such amazing opportunity:

- We create endless engagement tails that wag the power of the plan dog, using techniques that are boring or too time consuming even for a goldfish. Consensus is impossible and pursuit of it is an appeasement process that arrives at average. Transformation is led...by leadership who make some tough decisions.
- We pay by weight for the output. Mantra seems to be the heavier a plan is and the further it falls down the stairs the better it must be.
- We string five syllable words together, barren of visuals, because they sound “smart.” In other words, we seem to do everything we can to make sure people don't read plans.
- We produce so many plans that in the words of a frustrated councilor: “We have so many plans I don't understand what the damn plan is.”

Neuroscience research (e.g. Buyology, Martin Lindstrom, Brainfluence, Roger Dooley) indicates that emotions – our reptilian brain - win out in decision making processes. Use of multiple sensory inputs generates 3-4 times the engagement level of simply seeing a product (e.g. a plan) displayed (Src: <http://www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog/articles/multisensory-marketing.htm>). Our brain craves simplicity.

Frustrated by lack of community interest in municipal budgets that have direct impact on people's lives, one of our team members once joked that “moat digging” should be included as a capital budget line item to attract a crowd at a meeting or two. Some might call that bait and switch but you get the picture: we need to be more creative and imaginative in how we engage people - in both the talking and the doing - about our common future.

We can borrow neuroscience/neuromarketing insights and apply it to our challenge at hand. With some good starting advice (<http://www.neurosciencemarketing.com/blog/articles/reptilian-brain-2.htm>) on how to appeal to the reptilian brain in hand, we can surmise that our brain is tired of “cafés,” surveys, focus groups, and meetings. Our brains would be interested in hearing storytelling, brainstorming ideas, or playing with sticky notes on walls to actively design the future, connecting the dots so people can see the single community development vision/strategy, and use of pictures, videos, kids' doodles, Twitter Q&A, LEGO, or other interactive tools like ideascale.com...whatever it takes to hold attention spans and shake loose the ability to imagine.

We employ a “Rule of 7” plan-making approach designed to more meaningfully connect with people and serve as a clutter-buster.

## Transformation: The Rule of 7

- **Be Bold with the Business** – transformation comes from a process unafraid of tackling and creatively resolving longstanding issues, emergent trends, or community pain points.
- **Strategize Concisely** – SWOT, vision/mission, a single umbrella development strategy – linked to build out and prioritization of 3-5 sub-strategies with corresponding actions, target audiences, and performance metrics are a must. The beating heart of a great plan is identification of a critical challenge to overcome/opportunity to realize, and what actionable objectives and actions overcome the obstacle. This approach forces choice and focus of scarce resources on a pathway of differentiation vs same as and same old and the community down the road. We like the book *Good Strategy, Bad Strategy* (Richard Rumelt) for its insight into putting strategizing on steroids.
- **Tell a Story** - all great stories have setup (character and plot), a key conflict, and resolution. Tell a compelling story of the future of your community, and what you are doing to get there. Weave a fabric together from the threads to create beautiful simplicity from the complexity. Remind people of the story and your progress...all the time...in every initiative. Make this your vision statement on the wall of a Council chamber and avoid the platitudes and clichés on today's walls.
- **Produce a Plan on a Page** – force yourself to visualize your plan on a single page in a graphic. Think community development not topic specific to connect the dots for people. Leave the eye-droop inducing bedtime reading to an Appendix and to those who can use the details to implement the plan.
- **Measure** – a handful of well-chosen quantitative measures allow people to use their cognitive brain to measure progress. Take people along for the ride. Produce an annual Progress Report Card.
- **Brand** – use creativity in naming of the plan, lighter and simpler writing style, bolding of colours, and use of infographics, photos, and illustrations. Use emotive language in the storytelling. Use powerful words like “legacy” to build implementation commitments.
- **Simplify** - DaVinci said “simplicity is the ultimate form of sophistication.” From strategy to messaging to marketing execution, simpler is always more effective. People don't rally around complexity, they rally around easily communicated solutions.



When we generate strategic planning outputs, we provide a longer background document that details process and action planning suitable for consumption by those implementing the Plan. BUT – these don't communicate well in a “noisy” world. So we add a primary output: a 10-15-page visual document that tells the story of your future. This output will be supported with a graphically illustrated PowerPoint deck that can be used for plan socialization and marketing.

## Engagement

Community challenge with engagement isn't engagement itself; it exists in spades in numerous plans, and as a value that is operationally important for municipalities. The challenge is to "hear the strategic" in the effort. This isn't the expense and effort of creating plans that seek impossible consensus – where the engagement tail wags the strategic dog so to speak. It IS about opening enough doors for everyone to participate, but being careful with the scale. It IS about avoiding blue sky exercises people get frustrated with and stepping into a critical gap in the plan-making process: connect dots and storytell what's being heard, put it out there for folks to throw darts at, and refine from there.

There are three key community audiences needed to bring vision and strategy to life: 1) Staff/Council/Committees; 2) Residents; 3) Subject matter experts (who have insight required to "push the envelope.")

Our approach to engagement reflects these considerations in the form of a "Mirrored Funnel" (see Figure 1) approach to community engagement. We ensure there is focus on two plan-making elements that are often poorly executed in municipal environments:

- 1) Interpreter – the role of putting existing plans, SWOT analysis, and community engagement on the same table to interpret as a single, compelling story of the future. Visual storytelling and creative narration are key breakthrough techniques.
- 2) Salesmanship – the ability to broadcast the back-end of the plan-making process. People more easily provide feedback to a strawman than they do blue-sky in front ends of engagement processes in the middle part of a plan-making process. The creativity of the output, and presentations to key staff/groups of movers and shakers are key breakthrough plan socialization techniques.

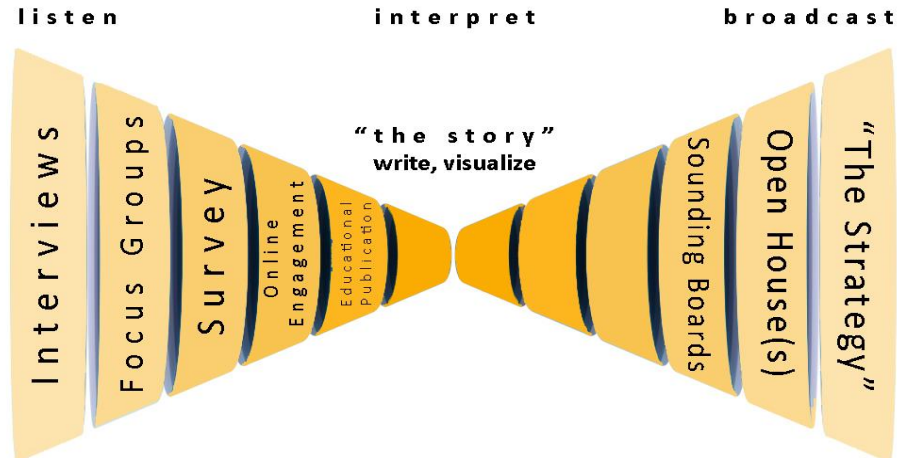


Figure 1- Engagement Model – illustrating “big funnel” listening phase, bridging of typical interpretation gap with consultant plan-development approach, and plan broadcasting to set the stage for plan implementation success.

*We employ marketing principles in community engagement to create the “real” discussions people want to have while avoiding “another meeting syndrome.”*

- Challenge status quo in a world of accelerating change.
- Emotional engagement – hearts and minds – “Leaving a Legacy.”
  - Note: “Legacy” is a powerful word that enables people to step away from selfish motives and to think about children, the future, and community-building.
- Systems approach – community development aspects are threads in a fabric and they must all knit together.
- Think ecosystem (environment, cultural, economic, fiscal) and helping people connect the dots.
- Educate around key issues.
- Pragmatic, not unachievable. Evolution, not revolution.
- Create two simple directional choices for people to consider as a matter of strategic direction.
- Create a catalyst – a defining issue statement that makes choice vital to generational community building.
- Transparency/honesty/inclusiveness of engagement – which creates trust.
- Use simple and visual targets/performance evaluation metrics. This allows a feedback loop to be effectively communicated to the community (e.g. “Scorecard”).
- Quality of experience of public participation is critical (e.g. communication style must be fun and engaging not dry, cerebral or bureaucratic).
- Head-on addressing of fundamental community issues (e.g. dynamic tension between long-time and new residents, young and old, rural and urban).
- Use SMART guideline for goals/actions development: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Bound.

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