

The Independence City

# INDEPENDENT

## Taking Care of Business with a Branding Campaign

By Anne Scheck

Two merchants in Independence on corners of the same street are closing their doors. Both are known for offering great buys on resale items. Both are known for valuing their customers.

But after they pack up this week and post final-sale prices at their shops on C Street, they'll head off in different directions.

"*Same As It Never Was*" is moving down Main Street to a bigger space. "*Second Time Around*" is moving to another city. The two illustrate what economists call "small-town churn," the turnover of businesses in local markets by relocation or closure.

Independence's "churn" may become a point of focus as the city embarks on a "branding campaign" this month by Portland-based Fisher Carlson Co. Branding can change the way a town "sees itself," explained Shannon Carlson, co-owner of the firm.

A brand is designed for a town in much the same way a strong identity defines a person. "It's what people say about you after you leave the room," she told the Independence City

Council during a presentation in January. Branding can "change the way a city sees itself," she said.

Though the project is just now beginning, she identified two factors already apparent about Independence: It's surrounded by a valley of vineyards, which puts it at the center of many Oregon wineries, and it has retained its scenic riverside downtown, largely protecting and preserving the historic buildings.

"I wouldn't be anywhere *but downtown*," said Lisa Cox, whose store, "*Same As It Never Was*" is moving all inventory of home furnishings – and the iconic brightly-colored bicycle that sits next to the entrance -- a couple of blocks away, from one end of Main Street to the other. She needs more square footage, she explained. "I didn't know we'd be this successful that soon," said Ms. Cox, a former department manager for IKEA in Portland.

However, "*Second Time Around*," which sells new and used consignment stock, is shuttering its business to go elsewhere. "I'm looking into other places, probably here in Polk County,"

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said Jenny Brown, who has been in business for nearly six years at 281 S. Second Street.

Like “*Second Time Around*,” some long-standing businesses have exited Independence over the past several years. Andy’s Café, a diner with a reputation for good food, town gossip, and non-stop congeniality, closed after moving from one side of Main Street to the other, into a bigger place. A popular Thai eatery known for its stoic, omnipresent owner -- and his wife’s great cooking -- left the opera house.

It has been replaced recently by new restaurateurs, who serve up Hawaiian fare. Currently, *the Luckiamute Watershed Council*, which has made its home at the *Little Mall on Main* for the past few years, is scouting for new offices.

Businesses come and go, and change is “natural,” observed Ted Baker of Portland, who refurbished the opera house before becoming its landlord. He’s upbeat about the future, he said, noting: “I’m happy with the progress being made,” especially a hotel and apartments slated for the riverfront.

What affect will branding have? That remains to be seen.

This isn’t the first time the city has been involved in formulating a marketing strategy. Five years ago – for a bargain basement price of \$250 – a Portland consultant came up with a plan, thanks to the city’s purchase of a donated auction item for her services at a fundraiser by the governor.

One hitch with the earlier plan is Main Street’s transition since then -- the list of attractions in 2012 included businesses now long past. “*Raging River*,” a highly praised steakhouse, is now gone; So is the butterfly farm, “*Wings of Wonder*.”

However, findings from that report also recommended the adoption of a tagline, with the region’s famed crop as part of suggested catch phrases, like “Oregon’s Home of Hops and History.”

“The tourism plan also got us thinking about the importance of branding,” Mr. Irvine stated. “Many cities think they need to develop a brand to figure out who they want to be.”

“We wanted our actions to establish an identity which would grow to a point that it would make sense to consolidate it into words. We feel like we’re finally at that point, which is why we’re moving ahead with the community branding effort,” he added.

The city’s new brand will bear a brief, descriptive message and a distinctive logo, which will be used on signage and banners across town, said Mr. Irvine. The cost is estimated to be about \$45,000.

Some residents still consider hops to be central to city identity. However, “wineries have become a big part of the landscape,” said Ryan Kingsella, the newly appointed director of the Monmouth-Independence Chamber of Commerce. That may be where new tourism possibilities lie, he said.

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And bike clubs have singled out the city as one they relish riding through, where they can stop for a snack or coffee without deviating from their route, Mr. Kingsella added.

In fact, two years ago – after Independence initiated a collaborative design project with the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development – a bunch of student researchers reached that same conclusion, assisted by Ric Stephens, an instructor at the University of Oregon. They recommended putting tourism emphasis on bicycle enthusiasts and designing “biophilic” areas throughout the downtown – more plants, more gardens, and more greenery.

They also called for re-naming Independence’s lettered streets all over again, in honor of different hop varieties -- a suggestion that has not been carried forward.

Branding a city is a necessity, according to Jack Schultz, author of the book “*Boom Town USA*,” which covers what he considers “the seven and a half keys” to success for small towns. Mr. Schultz is chief executive officer of Agracel Inc, a company whose mission, in part, is to develop business in small towns. One motto he holds: If you don’t brand your town, someone else will (and possibly far less meaningfully).

Asked by email how much “brand protection” is required to retain brand identity, he said he’s seen communities that “embrace everyone” do better than those that tried to erect barriers to keep out those businesses that might conflict with the preferred town image, such as franchises.

“That said, I’ve also seen that those that really-did well, also had some very hefty criteria for aesthetics and architecture for everyone,” he said.

Perhaps the most important aspect is simply the ability to develop a brand around the history and uniqueness of the community, he said. “It can be very powerful -- and some towns have done it very, very well,” he said.

At the Center of Applied Research for Nonprofit Organizations in Tulsa, investigators in Oklahoma are beginning to study towns in which “the built environment of the neighborhood” seems to correlate with the residents’ hope and well-being. Like people, the hopefulness of a community seems linked to a three-step process: a goal, a strategic pathway to reach it, and the energy and know-how to follow the path to reach the target, said Chan Hellman PhD, professor and founding director of the center.

During the process leading up to the branding campaign, Mr. Irvine said, people he contacted forged bonds across city boundaries. It was “the realization that we’ll get a lot more traction if we work collaboratively. We started meeting as a region to discuss tourism,” he said. This eventually led to the Polk County Tourism Alliance, he said.

As for Independence and its “brand,” Merriam Webster’s dictionary has a definition -- freedom paired with competence – that sums up the meaning of the word for the city’s name. Many here might say that’s a good way to describe the life they try to lead in their hometown.



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## **The Civics Lesson: A Plat By Any Other Name? Not likely**

All over Oregon, “plats” brought cities into existence, especially towns along the Willamette River. In fact, the very first provisional government in Portland was formed to help recognize and oversee “plats” -- plots of land acquired by early settlers, noted Robert Jordan PhD, an expert docent at the Architectural Heritage Center. And that’s how city “policing” got started, too. There really wasn’t much gun-slinging going on in Oregon, but property disputes were pretty common. So “law enforcers” were called upon to keep the peace over land squabbles. This gave rise not only to governments that needed to record and protect boundary lines, but helped grow the demand for a document interpreting occupation: lawyers. From 1820 onward, private land transactions increasingly required these new professionals as “advocates in situations of contention, difference or controversy,” according to a legal history published by Marquette University. “Life, liberty and *property* are considered basic,” Dr. Jordan pointed out. The word “plats” is considered basic, too. Plats are still called by that same traditional name today, on land charts and maps at most city halls.

-- Anne Scheck 

## **The Indy Hop Hauntings Help Capture Lively Town Spirit**

What doesn’t really hurt anybody, is truly strange and creates a sense of awe? A time-honored folk tale, of course! And Lenora, Independence’s most famous ghost, certainly meets that standard. That’s the opinion of William L. Sullivan, author and intrepid investigator of Oregon’s legendary characters, including D.B. Cooper, the long-vanished ransom-toting parachutist. Lenora and other ghost sightings captivate the community in ways similar to Bigfoot, the hairy forest-dwelling humanoid that so far defies proof of existence, he said. “They capture our imagination,” Mr. Sullivan explained during an interview after his presentation “Folk Heroes of the Pacific Northwest” at Salem City Club this past month. “And if they weren’t just a little bit scary, they wouldn’t be nearly as much fun,” he added. A “ghost walk”, like the kind held every autumn in Independence, brings people together in collective “mystery and wonder,” he said. This is both entertaining and fun, he pointed out. For those who don’t want to wait until the fall season to become acquainted with alleged hauntings here, two books – “*Spirits of Independence*,” a comic book by Ben Kreger and “*Haunted Independence Oregon*,” by Marilyn Morton – chronicle the city’s paranormal events and entities. For those who prefer getting the experience online, the Independence Heritage Museum has a new *iBook* that includes “a thorough investigation into evidence of ‘spirits’ who inhabit the museum,” featuring sound effects of their invisible footsteps on creaking stairs. AS 