

Glance in mirror shocks Prairie city

The business leaders of Swift Current, Sask., were so confident about their community's easygoing charm as a friendly, welcoming place that they planned to use the slogan "Swift Current – Open Door City" in a campaign to kick-start their stagnant economy.

But image consultants who analyzed the city of 16,000 in southwest Saskatchewan say that slogan won't work because Swift Current isn't all that friendly. In fact, they delivered a report to city council last week that accuses the "redneck" city of downright intolerance.

"Unless you actually lived there for 30 years and could provide a DNA sample to prove it, they weren't going to accept you into the community," Larry Bannerman, president of Trigger Communications & Design in Calgary, said.

"It wasn't just one person who said it – it was basically everyone we met with."

The people who hired Mr. Bannerman were shocked by the results. A group called Action Swift Current led by local business owners has been trying to renew interest in the city after 15 years of zero population growth. It's a problem facing many parts of Saskatchewan, and Swift Current had hoped that replacing its old "Frontier City" slogan would help.

"We thought that if we come up with a brand, everything else will flow," pharmacist Al Chilton, a member of the branding project committee, said.

The "Open Door" label seemed appropriate when it was developed in June, Mr. Chilton said. Whenever a new pharmacy opens in town, Mr. Chilton welcomes his competitors by giving them a vegetarian pizza. He thought everybody greeted newcomers so warmly, but he can't argue with the research that cost his group \$40,000.

"Maybe it wasn't really true, and we're not as welcoming as we thought," he said.

The consultants initially met with a small group of prominent citizens to develop the new slogan, but subsequent interviews with about 50 retailers, clergy, police, real estate agents, teachers, health workers and others proved that giving the city a facelift might take more work than was expected.

"Initial meetings with Action Swift Current, [the] chamber of commerce and other stakeholders in June painted a portrait of a community that speaks to diversity and acceptance of different cultures, beliefs and values. Unfortunately, through the interview process, we uncovered the exact opposite is true," the report said.

"We would encourage Action Swift Current to include a social behavioural modification plan as part of the ongoing repositioning for the city. This plan will be required to soften current citizens' position on ethnicity, multiculturalism and immigration in order for the community to embrace newcomers of all types of backgrounds warmly, genuinely and with sincerity."

So what does a city do when its self-image turns out to be flawed? "It shows we have work to do," Marty Salberg, director of business development for the city, said.

The goal is to increase Swift Current's population by 15,000 over 40 years, he said. The consultants will continue to search for a more fitting slogan, while city leaders try to persuade residents that they should rethink their values.

"We've got to get the community geared up to be more welcoming," Mr. Salberg said. "Some of it hurts. Some of the findings may not be good, but you have to get down to the bare bones of what your community is."

Not all the findings in the report were unflattering. The researchers suggest that Swift Current could market itself as an affordable city, with good roads, fresh air, clean water, and better schools than those in nearby Alberta. A new hospital and casino

are both under development in the area, the report also said.

But city councillor Jerrod Schaffer said he's still amazed that outsiders could view the city so differently than the insiders.

"That was a bit of an alarming wake-up call for us," he said.

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