

Action Alameda Brief



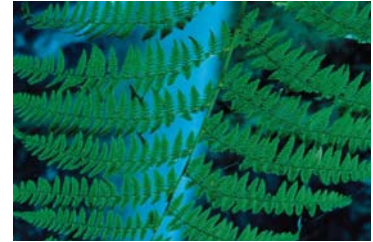
Action Alameda PAC FPPC# 1295196

A grassroots voice in the community

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The Smart Growth Brand



Have you bought Oregon branded apples at the supermarket lately? Or Penoka Brand Canadian apples? Or California Champagne? That would be sparkling wine made in California a la methode traditionnelle - wine makers in the Champagne region of France have been notoriously protective of the Champagne trademark and brand for their sparkling wine. 'Champagne' from California must be labeled 'California Champagne' so as not to be confused with 'Champagne' from the Champagne region. Beef suppliers have recently gotten into the act too, providing branded products at the supermarket retail level, which is incredibly ironic, as the metaphor of the marketing brand originated from the marquee that ranchers stamp onto their cattle.

What does any of this have to do with smart growth? Smart growth has evolved into a very sophisticated *brand*, and like any brand (Coke, Pepsi,

Starbucks, Krispy Kreme, etc.) its purpose is to encourage ongoing mass consumption of the product. In the case of smart growth, the product is a collection of ideas about land use and planning. Like any brand, it has *brand advocates*, who demonstrate *brand loyalty* and it offers a *brand promise*.

Developing brand loyalty which produces brand advocates is the holy grail of brand marketing. The strength of brand loyalty, the number of brand advocates, and the reach of the brand all contribute to the brand equity the brand represents. Brand equity is an asset, and more brand equity is a good thing for the brand owner. Every now and then some research firm publishes a report on the value of Coke's brand equity, which typically comes in at several billion dollars.

Those of us from a certain era may remember, or may have even taken, the "Pepsi

challenge" or at one point argued that Coke is better than Pepsi or vice versa. Or that Peet's coffee is better than Starbucks, or that the Apple MAC is superior to the IBM PC, or that a Chevy pickup truck is better than a Ford. These are all classic mega brands, and the brand advocate that argues in favor of Coke over Pepsi, despite seeing no direct return benefit from doing so, is demonstrating brand loyalty.

We see smart growth brand advocates practicing brand loyalty in the pages of the local papers, in the contributed commentaries or letters to the editor speaking of the benefits and value of smart growth. There is an ongoing debate in Berkeley about smart growth and its applicability to downtown development. I don't know if smart growth is good for Berkeley or not, but I fear that, because Alameda consists largely of an island separated from the mainland by an estuary, smart growth will most certainly be a bad

thing for Alameda Point, which represents roughly one-third of our main island's land mass.

Let's look at the brand promise of smart growth - Sprawl is the problem; Smart Growth is the solution. Urban sprawl is gobbling up our land, emptying city cores, creating congestion, pollution, blight, economic shifts and contributing to social inequity, obesity, asthma and loss of community. Smart Growth will create stronger neighborhoods and regions, reduce pollution and congestion and improve community health.

An implied theme of this brand promise is that smart growth consists of centering high-density residential construction around public transit nodes, to make public transit viable by virtue of the mass concentration of people within walking distance of the node, and reducing congestion and pollution by reducing the number of

2 ACTION ALAMEDA BRIEF

automobiles on the road.

Here in Alameda, although there has been vague talk, there are no no concrete plans to extend BART to the island in the foreseeable future. Nor are there any plans to fill in the estuary, for that matter. So public transit for Alameda Point will manifest itself largely as water ferry service and commuter buses exiting the Posey Tube in Oakland's Chinatown. Does Chinatown want all those buses running through their neighborhood morning and evening, Monday to Friday?

Further, what about points south of Alameda, where a large number of Alameda residents work? Not every Alameda resident works in Oakland or San Francisco. When UWI presented their vision for Alameda Point, which included a light rail system carrying Alameda Point residents to the Fruitvale BART station, they acknowledged the wide dispersion of work-place destinations across the Bay area for Alameda residents. Unfortunately, UWI with their innovative ideas pulled out of the competition for master developer at Alameda Point. How will the ferry and bus services solve the problem of Alameda residents working in south Fremont, beyond the Fremont BART station? Or

east of the Caldecott tunnel? (Hear the interview with UWI on our website.)

Not convinced that smart growth is actively managed as a brand by those who will profit from it? (I leave the answer to "who will profit" as an exercise for the reader.) The description above of the brand promise of smart growth comes verbatim from an August 2004 paper by ActionMedia, a public relations agency, entitled "Communicating Smart Growth. Implementing the Frame: Improving Our Communities. Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities." Go ahead, google it. (Google's brand promise: "Don't be evil.") This paper advises smart growth advocates to communicate their story using the frame model articulated by UC Berkeley linguist George Lakoff. I've seen Lakoff speak on this matter, and heard him explain how Republicans have been very effective at defining frames of debate to manage the national dialog and how Democrats have mostly failed at it.

Want to see this model in action close to home? Look no further than H.O.M.E.S. They have obviously been reading and executing this playbook, deliberately confusing "affordable housing" to mean "missing rung" housing. As the ActionMedia report notes,

the phrase "affordable housing" is "used interchangeably in both its technical meaning, pegged to Federal criteria of percentage of income, and in its common meaning of houses people can afford."

Further, as the report advises, H.O.M.E.S. repeatedly asks "Can our teachers, nurses, firefighters, bank tellers, newspaper reporters, deputy sheriffs, hairstylists, contractors, storekeepers, policemen, electricians, recent college graduates, retirees, insurance agents, social workers, paramedics, construction workers, and government employees afford to live in our county?" I've so far been able to verifiably count 100 sworn police officers in Alameda, and 500 teachers, surely not all of whom will need "affordable housing." 600 homes out of Alameda's more than 30,000 housing units represents just 2% of the housing stock. Just how many homes does H.O.M.E.S. think we need to build under "smart growth" to house our teachers, nurses etc. ? Will they give a number? What is the agenda behind their relentless advocacy of this brand?

Now, don't get me wrong, I don't believe that brands are necessarily bad. In our consumer society, we are all awash in a sea of brands, and they re-assure us that we will

get consistent products and services across different stores and different brand experiences. When you buy a Coke Classic today, it will taste the same as the one you drink tomorrow, and the next day, and so on. That is the value to the consumer of good brands. At the same time, however, many people feel manipulated by marketing and brand messages and, sometimes, the brand doesn't deliver, leaving the consumer dissatisfied.

For communities considering development issues, I think it's useful and necessary to recognize and acknowledge the smart growth brand for what it is. Settling for a Pepsi when you really wanted a Coke is one thing, but development decisions that have decade-long impacts on our community require a more critical evaluation. For Alameda in particular, we should question if wholesale textbook application of the smart growth *brand theme* is suitable for our city. What will we do as Alameda residents if the smart growth brand doesn't deliver on its promise? It will be too late to turn back once we find out.

David Howard, Co-Chair, Action Alameda.