

QUESTIONS

Kadie Ward

Founder, Build Strong Cities

Kadie Ward operates Build Strong Cities, a consulting firm that works with communities, cities and countries to achieve economic growth. She focuses on branding and innovative communication strategies to achieve goals.

A native of Sudbury, Ward, 33, worked briefly for the London

Chamber of Commerce after graduating in 2007 from Western with her masters in media studies. Prior to that, she earned a BA in philosophy, also from Western. She was director of communication with London Economic Development Corp., where she worked for four years before starting BSC in 2012.

A former fitness instructor—part-time during university—she is a fitness enthusiast. She also reads a lot about history, economics, politics and psychology. She loves culture in all forms and teaches part-time in the digital communications program, part of Western's Faculty of Information & Media Studies.

Your work is about enhancing the economic development of cities, but you focus on branding and communications strategies, right?

I take an unconventional view of branding cities and nations because effective economic development integrates all aspects of planning and growth. To rebrand or reposition a city for investment you need to take an honest look at your assets, attributes, community, industrial and urban development plans. I've spoken with communicators about their city branding campaigns who hoped to gloss over the city's challenges with new key messaging. But that messaging won't stick unless it's reinforced by city planning and services that exemplify it. If you want to brand your city as open and diverse, you better have infrastructure and a community to support that. If you want to brand your city creative, you need proof that it inspires your citizens to create. If you can't prove it, you can't rebrand. You rebuild.

What's an example of a strategy you suggested to a city that got people's attention? San Juan-Laventille is an economic and culturally polarized mid-sized city in Trinidad and Tobago. I recently worked with their

municipal government to develop a business and marketing plan for a major urban revitalization project—a \$52-million restoration of their historic market. The market is located at the junction of the country's east/west and north/south highways. An average of about 200,000 Trinians pass through the area daily. Rather than simply rebrand the market, we brought together the planning, engineering and parks departments to first integrate their plans to create a district that would serve as a destination, rather than a throughway, and second, develop a financial model that would sustain marketing outreach, maintenance and growth of the district.

You also work with businesses and other organizations. How similar are their branding and communication challenges compared to cities and municipalities?

Brand perceptions in general are shaped by functional and emotional experiences with a product or service. For municipalities, that means understanding how liveability and quality of life shape your citizens' perception. As I stated earlier, you have to look beyond your marketing and communications department and consider a host of variables that shape your citizens' interactions and perceptions of your city. This is a complex and exciting process that brings multiple departments like planning and services into alignment. Businesses and organizations go through a similar process, but there are more moving parts in municipalities.



You've worked recently in the Ukraine, Viet Nam and the Caribbean. Was that kind of geographical diversity a goal or serendipity?

The geographical diversity was expected. What's been a surprise is realizing that culture shock doesn't happen when you travel and work abroad; it's coming home with new eyes. My geographic and cultural diversity has fundamentally changed the way I view our Canadian municipal and national economic development.

You must get asked about London's downtown strategy a lot. What's your take?

London, downtown and the city as a whole, is thriving. Working around the world, and hosting international delegations, gives me a renewed perspective on London. I'm not denying that we've recently experienced slower growth as our main industries continue to adjust while new industries emerge. I'm just less pessimistic about it and more inclined to celebrate incremental progress.

Some cities—Paris, New York—seem to have a natural advantage in creating brands. Is there a lesser-known city you particularly admire for its

branding strategies? The only natural advantage global cities like Paris, New York, or London UK have is history. They've been around longer than most North American cities with time to emerge as centres of economic authority. Over the past two years, I've worked with 60 cities from 16 countries. They are all unique in remarkably similar ways: all have access to relevant transportation networks; an abundance of natural resources nearby; and each city has reputable education institutions, historic districts, lush parks, stunning cathedrals, etc. What sets them apart is their people.

I had the opportunity to present at a conference in the Netherlands with colleagues from Tampere, Finland. Tampere is a working-class mid-sized city that has served as an economic engine for its nation. First, their branding efforts highlight the light and life of the people in their city with their positioning statement, 'Tampere: All Bright!' Second, they have done a fantastic job leveraging social media with creative campaigns using Twitter and Instagram. Their brand focuses on the people who make Tampere a vibrant and bright place to live and innovate, who are truly a unique and competitive asset. **Ω**

INTERVIEW BY CHRISTOPHER CLARK



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