

## THE CORNER OF IDENTITY AND ACTION: BRANDING A NEIGHBORHOOD by Helene Solomon

Particularly in the urban context, a neighborhood’s brand identity plays a significant role in driving traffic and making it a desirable place to live or locate a business. After years of work with real estate developers, community groups and elected officials on branding Boston buildings and neighborhoods, we at Solomon McCown (SM&) have identified the essential principles for shaping a neighborhood’s brand in a way that creates buzz and yields tangible results.

### Turn on the Streetlamps

People have closely held opinions about the places where they live and work, and decisions about neighborhoods affect a broad number of stakeholders. Before any branding initiative begins, there must be an assessment of the stakeholders to involve and a streamlined process for involving them. When we worked with the Downtown North Association to build the Bulfinch Triangle brand (ultimately arriving at the tagline “Live, Work, Play in the Triangle”), we gathered local businesses and vocal residents on neighborhood boards around the table for SM&’s provocative and productive Discovery™ session. Incorporating all these voices built consensus and created a compelling brand system and messaging hierarchy. Once the right group has been assembled, the work should begin with a rigorous look at both the assets and drawbacks of the neighborhood. Realistically assessing the landscape is a crucial planning element that drives the messaging process.



### The Hub of Discovery™

The Discovery™ phase yields the distinctive advantages that inspire a brand and drive action. For an example, take Parris Landing in Boston’s historic Charlestown Navy Yard, with its challenge of transforming five buildings and grounds – which were more than a century old and in desperate need of an extreme makeover – into one of the most desirable places to live in Boston. Involved from the start of design and sales planning, it quickly became clear to SM& that the cachet lay in Philippe Starck and his company, Yoo Ltd., who were part of the design team. “Industrial chic” became the catch words, and Parris Landing became a must-see for potential homebuyers, as well as design aficionados who were curious about Starck’s new work. Starck’s style was imbued in every element of the campaign – from the look of the media kit to the chic launch event to the sales video, starring the master himself. Editors at *The Boston Globe Magazine* selected Parris Landing as one of the top 103 “Best of the New” things in Boston, and nine months after going public the sales team had surpassed its projected goal.



## Multiple Roads Lead to Results

Asking the right questions, assembling the right stakeholders, and employing the right process all drive toward creating the right campaign. Brand-building in neighborhoods is most successful when it employs an integrated approach, with community and media relations aligned with site development from the outset to maximize impact.



With Olmsted Green, for example, a 42-acre planned mixed-use, mixed-income community on the former site of the Boston State Hospital, the community had been waiting to see something come to life at this site that for 25 years had been an abandoned eyesore at the intersection of Dorchester and Mattapan. Understanding this helped shape a marketing and sales campaign that acknowledged at every turn that the neighborhood had been waiting – and that the wait was about to end. The public relations team was brought on board at the very initial stages of permitting, design and sales planning. Discovery™ revealed that the buyer demographic was youthful, outdoorsy and diverse, which helped lead to the identity and tagline “Boston. Better. Living.” The campaign also included messages; a logo; a sales and marketing kit; a launch event; a quarterly newsletter; a website ([www.olmstedgreen.com](http://www.olmstedgreen.com)); a groundbreaking that featured Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino; advertising that included a wrapped Boston city bus; and extensive media outreach and community relations. As a result of this coordinated, multipronged approach, Olmsted Green's lead database grew to include nearly 900 contacts, and without a model unit, 30 percent of Phase One units have already been reserved.

Strategic branding of a neighborhood – particularly when design, public relations and marketing initiatives come together in a creative, high-energy campaign – can be the most significant driver of economic opportunities that decide the future of an urban neighborhood. A thoughtful, integrated approach ensures that permitting, design and sales goals are met – bringing the “life” to street life.

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