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Taking the Helm:
How rural Minnesota's next
generation sees the future

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In Other Words: Sending the Right Rural Message

Neil Linscheid

I was a born-and-raised city kid, but now I live and work in southwestern rural Minnesota because it's a place full of opportunity for a young professional, and because the value of rural Minnesota was communicated to me by caring people. I want my community and other rural communities to be successful for the foreseeable future. In this article, I challenge leaders in rural areas to recognize the importance of strategically communicating the opportunities of their community to potential residents, current residents, talented people, business owners, and entrepreneurs well beyond their borders. I believe that our ability to communicate the value of rural places will create success and sustain other hard work that is being done to stimulate rural vitality. There are many working on this already, making great efforts to change the communication related to their community externally and internally.

Because I am now a small-town, rural citizen raising rural kids, I think this is worth doing.

My story

I was born and raised in St. Paul and moved to rural Minnesota to attend the University of Minnesota in Morris. My only early rural memories are of a lake 60 minutes from St. Paul and a few trips to Butterfield to see something called a "Thrashing Bee." So fishing and farming dominated my understanding of rural Minnesota.

At the University of Minnesota-Morris, however, I found the Center for Small Towns (CST) and my future path. As a research assistant at CST, I learned about health

care challenges rural businesses face (Thorson, Linscheid, Schmidt, 2004) and how metro media portray rural Minnesota communities (Winchester et al., 2004). Most importantly, I started to see opportunities in rural Minnesota. I worked with a few community groups and saw that even as a student, young and inexperienced, my skills were useful. Working with local civic leaders in that capacity also showed me how easily being accepted into rural civic life could be. I set out to develop the additional experience and education I thought I'd need to be successful in rural Minnesota. I attended the Humphrey Institute to learn more about economic development, leadership, and policy. I knew that economic development is a key challenge in rural communities. I also knew that economic development doesn't occur easily, especially in rural areas.

I've lived in several rural Minnesota communities: Wadena, Fawn Lake Township, Morris, Marshall, and now Clarkfield, in central Yellow Medicine County. I've seen great things in each of these rural places and consider myself an advocate for the well-being of each of those communities. And I'm getting the chance to stimulate economic development as a Community Economics Educator for the U of M Extension Center for Community Vitality.

Three years ago, my wife and I chose Clarkfield to be our home. Our choice wasn't dumb luck. Dave and Roselyn, Clarkfield residents, took notice of the potential for our young family and made the case for their community by telling us that "there is a great, growing school" and "there are great affordable homes for a young family to get started with." They invited us to supper, promised to connect us and told us they'd stick with us. They followed through on their promises almost immediately. Before we had made our final decisions to move, we had already been connected to a daycare provider.

Clarkfield is a great fit for us. With a population of 900, it's not too big or too small. The community really is supporting its school. It's a safe and friendly place. Most importantly, true to Dave and Roselyn's word, it is a welcoming place. I quickly got adopted into civic life and was chosen to sit on the city council and economic development authority. I volunteer with

the Clarkfield Community Foundation and the local Lions when I get a chance. Thanks to that sales pitch Dave and Roselyn gave me, my connection to rural Minnesota exceeds the dreams that were seeded in Morris.

And my family is not alone. As described elsewhere in this journal (see Ben Winchester, et al.), we're part of a trend of newcomers who are choosing to make a home in rural communities.

I view my story as an example of the impact that communicating the value of rural communities can have, yet I wonder who's going to make the pitch to all of the potential newcomers who are considering making a jump? Not just the newcomers as future residents, but also entrepreneurs as our future business leaders. I struggle with the question, and I have seen many other community leaders struggle with it as well. How are we going to find our voice and stay on the map? What can we do to make the ad hoc communication success exhibited in my story more coordinated? How can we make my story the norm for rural residents and not the anomaly?

Where we're headed: Forgotten places or land of opportunity?

Minnesota State Economist Tom Stinson and State Demographer Tom Gillaspy have consistently presented a clear and sobering view of rural Minnesota's economic and demographic changes in the past several years. Stinson and Gillaspy argue that our success will be tied to strengths in productivity and innovation. We must provide productive and innovative people in an incredibly competitive world market to keep our businesses and communities successful.

Recently, Stinson and Gillaspy examined the impact the recession has had on Minnesota (Stinson and Gillaspy, 2011). I'm struck by how much we have lost economically and how long it will take to regain our previous trajectory. But I also think the conclusions about our future needs remain the same. Productivity and talent will drive our future. We can't avoid the trends, but we can decide on a course of action. Stinson's summary of the situation five years ago may ring even truer today:

We cannot rest on past accomplishments. Extending the

state's record of strong economic growth over the next decade or more will be a real challenge, particularly in Minnesota's ruralplexes. Choosing appropriate statewide and local strategies for dealing with the pressures of globalization, demographic shifts, and rapid technological change will be crucial, and workforce development efforts will become even more important as the structure of the Minnesota economy continues to evolve. The task ahead will be substantial for rural Minnesota, but rural Minnesota has shown that it is capable of meeting the challenges that lie ahead (Stinson, 2006).

As I consider where rural Minnesota can be in the future, I've synthesized much research and many stories. I've concluded that regardless of which economic development policies we choose, our final success will correlate with our ability to communicate strategically as individual rural communities and as a state. Every dream we have, every wild idea, every policy change — and especially every effort we make to recruit productive and innovative people — will at some point be impacted by the quality of our efforts to communicate for a sustained period of time.

Strategic communication from rural Minnesota

The term "strategic communication" has been used in the context of international rural development: "Strategic communication is a comprehensive and holistic concept. It includes all the activities needed for identifying and assessing critical issues, designing and implementing appropriate strategies, and monitoring and evaluating the results" (Santucci, 2005). Writing about the importance of strategic communications, Santucci notes that "Strategic communication should not be considered a cost, but rather a resource saving device which reduces the risk of less than optimal design, wrong measures, poor implementation, poor results, and even social unrest in the countryside or towns." Social unrest in the countryside may not be a fear for leaders in rural Minnesota, but the need to have the correct measures, implementation and results is something all leaders strive to achieve.

Translating a broad concept to practical terms can be challenging. To overcome this challenge, the World Bank provides a valuable programmatic resource to its program officers and teams in the form of a guide titled *Strategic Communications for Community Driven Development: A practical guide for project managers and communication practitioners* (Mozammel and Schechter, 2005). The guide is written to assist staff working with specific World Bank programs, but I think the methodology it suggests is easily translated to rural Minnesota communities, especially if you substitute "community" for "programs" and "local leaders" for "project managers." The guide gives the following five steps to strategic communications worth repeating here:

1. Establish a communication management function.
2. Conduct an analysis/assessment.
3. Develop a communication strategy and action plan.
4. Implement communication activities.
5. Conduct monitoring and feedback activities.

Community leaders have taken many of these steps already. Finding examples of coordinated community communication efforts, however, is challenging. Marketing and advertising for industrial development projects is the most effective activity I've seen in many communities. Those efforts are most often, in my experience, targeted and well planned. Other efforts I've witnessed work to brand the community to encompass its unique features. Many of our regional centers do an excellent job in providing well-designed printed materials and online resources, as well as integrating the physical aspects of the community into those campaigns. One example is Discovermarshall.com, which integrates community signage, online branding, and several other media efforts to be a resource for residents and visitors. Efforts like Discovermarshall.com are an excellent start toward the communications I think we need to be successful.

As I visit with leaders in rural communities, however, it's clear to me there is an understanding that we'll need to go beyond branding efforts to be successful. We may be

facing a more challenging issue, namely a fight to keep our communities from being forgotten. Ann Markusen describes the phenomenon in her work about forgetting places and place-making. To avoid becoming a forgotten place, she argues, we can build networks of promoters to strengthen our sense of place and to help others remember why our place is worth keeping around. She reveals the factors that help us forget places, such as chain restaurants, stores, and media. She also notes a key to remembering places is building bridges to other places. She defines forgotten places as:

...communities and ecologies that are deprived of leadership and stewardship by the actions and attitudes of people both present in and absent from these environments. Such deprivation implies the wasting of human and natural resources, a form of destruction of community, and a sense of place and individual potential. Ideologies of efficient resource allocation deny this waste, hypothesizing that valuable resources, whether human or physical, will be absorbed elsewhere in the global economy. But in reality, substantial wastage occurs, much of it irreversible. And the cost of migration, financial and physical devaluation is borne by many (Markusen, 2003).

As rural leaders make a play for the productive and talented community members of the future, we owe it to ourselves to recognize and promote the many valuable resources and opportunities that rural places offer. Indeed, there is even a silver lining in the demographic and economic changes that Stinson and Gillaspay herald. Demographic changes will mean increased bargaining ability for talented, productive people. Rural youth should consider what this trend means for them. I see it as an opportunity for young workers to gain valuable experience more quickly than might be the case elsewhere. I also see it as an opportunity for young professionals to shape their work and family lives on their terms. Even when rural communities are used as a stepping stone for ambitious workers who have their sights set elsewhere, the community still has a chance to get great

people, if just for a while. And then, with the right sales pitch — with the right communicated value — maybe they'll stay. Will we be able to connect the right messages to the people we want to stay and recruit, i.e., entrepreneurs, talented workers, emerging leaders?

I think we're up to the challenge. For the remainder of this paper, I'll work to share pieces of this type of complex and interrelated communication effort. I believe these examples represent the types of activities needed to be the new cornerstones for creating a new narrative that shows the world what we have to offer.

Communicating with the world

Through the media: Understanding and articulating the value of a lifestyle that many of us take for granted can be difficult, especially because sometimes the value is not at the surface. The classic narrative of the value of rural Minnesota touts good schools, good work ethic, and good communities. I don't dispute any of these factors. The problem is that every other community on the planet is using the same narrative. But several media resources are revealing the more nuanced story — and it's more interesting and appealing.

The Rural Learning Center in Howard, South Dakota, has a blog called Reimagine Rural (reimaginerural.com). Visit Reimagine Rural, and you'll find Mike Knutson and guest authors leading an ongoing and rich discussion about the future of rural South Dakota. They take on pressing issues similar to many faced by Minnesota communities: the needs of youth, economic development, and the rural pathos. The stories I find most compelling are the ones about real people changing their community both socially and economically.

Reimagine Rural proves that we don't need to accept others' narrative of rural. By gathering just as active people, we can shape the story about the direction of rural places. The leadership lesson Reimagine Rural provides is that there are good things happening. With some effort those can be shared with everyone using online media, in this case a blog.

No rural doom-and-gloom narrative is as prolific as the exodus of young people. But the experience of rural youth is

actually complex and nuanced. Recently, an effort has been under way by the news web site MinnPost to document and communicate the complex story of rural youth. The series, called "Rural Minnesota: A Generation at a Cross Roads," is a collection of stories from across that state that show the varied problems of rural Minnesota, as well as the varied opportunities. This series is a wonderful example of honest communication and good reporting about the real rural Minnesota. It's something that changes perspectives and breaks down misconceptions.

Person to person: Each and every rural citizen has multiple opportunities to share the good and bad of their community. The good stories about a community can travel miles, and we hope they do. The bad stories also travel, so our diligence needs to include ways to bring the good things forward. Translating a community narrative is done by all citizens, but a few have taken additional efforts worth learning from.

Duluth has an active group of young professionals doing their part to communicate the importance of their community. This group has been working for the past several years to find ways their community can be competitive in the next decades. In the group's recently released report, *Attracting & Retaining Young Adults Taskforce* (2006), they offer several fantastic suggestions suitable for most communities:

1. Give young adults a chance to lead.
2. Create a better way to share information.
3. Raise awareness of career and economic opportunities.
4. Increase connections between college and university students and the community.
5. "We love this place. Now admit it. In public."
6. Support projects that help Duluth-Superior be a more vibrant place to work and live.

The report this group of young leaders created is inspirational and powerful. By taking a stand and outlining their interests, they are showing off their leadership skills. They're also providing advice that all of our rural communities can take to heart. The point they make that

most resonates with the theme I wish to advance is “We love this place. Now admit it. In public.” I’m struck by the simple way that statement says so much about our needs and solutions. I believe this should be every rural citizen’s mantra and responsibility. I can only imagine the economic effects it would have if every rural citizen admitted the value of their community in public. Raising awareness about the economic and career opportunities and being willing to admit in public they love their community are excellent examples of working toward a more strategic way of communicating.

Another example of a citizen taking responsibility for communicating the importance of her community is in Windom. Mari Harries is the founder of the Finding Windom blog. On Finding Windom (mari2cents.blogspot.com), you’ll see that it’s not just blatant boosterism that matters. Mari gives us something more powerful. She gives us caring truth. I believe it’s important to care about your community before you can communicate its potential and its challenges. Mari cares about Windom. She cares enough to share her personal frustrations and, more importantly, her aspirations. She’s also a new business owner. I’m confident that it’s the efforts of people like Mari that will make the most difference in the economic vitality of rural Minnesota.

Practical ideas

The examples I provided above are just a start to a new way in which we can strategically communicate the value of rural Minnesota communities. I see a few simple steps we all can take to bring us one step closer to this approach.

1. Support efforts by community groups, businesses, and citizens to create a positive image of your community. Give more than passive support for these activities by encouraging communication efforts that go beyond local and regional audiences. Practically, this might mean financially supporting Internet activities, branding efforts, and planning activities.
2. Provide resources to help rural Minnesota communities discover and articulate their unique value to the

global marketplace. This might mean supporting self-evaluation efforts and research.

3. Encourage citizens to acknowledge particular aspects of their community that they love. As the group of young professionals from Duluth notes, “You love it here. Now say it. In public.” This can be done through deliberate campaigns and through leaders encouraging others to speak up.
4. Ask the following questions about communications in your community, taken from the World Bank:
 - What types of stakeholders should be involved?
 - What is the desired change in behavior?
 - What messages would be appropriate?
 - What method or medium of communication would be most effective?
 - How will the communication process be monitored and evaluated?(Santucci, 2005. p.77)
5. Build capacity at all levels through education and financial support to ensure that every stakeholder has the ability to effectively communicate. In short, don’t sell short the importance effective communication will have on all efforts.

Conclusion

My most basic argument here is that no matter which outcome we hope to achieve, our road will lead through our ability to communicate. Therefore, it’s important to ensure that communication efforts at the state, regional, and local level are strategic and participatory. This means we’ll need to dedicate a portion of our efforts to creating effective comprehensive plans. I believe even small efforts to become more strategic in our communication will provide measurable results.

I don’t wish to diminish the many great efforts of Minnesota organizations to communicate the value of rural Minnesota. Instead, I hope to highlight the importance of this work and advocate for increased support.

I don't believe my choice to live and work in rural Minnesota happened by luck. I was deliberately shown the value of rural Minnesota by many people who cared ardently about me and their community. The people in Morris, Minnesota, showed me that a small town can hold opportunities. Dave and Roselyn in Clarkfield made a pitch, which resonated, for their community and its specific opportunities. I'm struck by the gift that the personal pitch for Clarkfield has been. It's been a case of the right message, using the right medium. I believe our aim as rural leaders should be to get to these types of personal appeals out for our communities as quickly as possible.

As an elected leader from a small rural community and as a person who often works with small rural communities, I know that the money to invest in a communication strategy is tight. Time is even tighter. Yet, I believe that even small steps in this effort will make a difference. I'll admit that I have work to do, and I for one am willing to take responsibility for communicating the opportunities of rural Minnesota to friends, family, and outsiders.

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