CARY

Own Your Process
Branding Cary

2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recognizing a shift from a growing community to a maturing one, the Town of Cary decided to undertake a branding process. One major goal was to better position the community to be more of a player on a national and international stage.

"Most local governments that decide to brand their community are trying to change the perception of that community," Town Manager Sean R. Stegall said. "Well, in Cary, we didn't need to change the perception of Cary in a meaningful way. What we wanted to do was be able to establish our brand more firmly as a community of excellence beyond North Carolina."

For many years, Cary only had its seal to represent it as a community. Use in place of a logo is not a seal's intended purpose. To reduce use of the seal, Cary began to treat stylized "Town of Cary" text as a "logo."

The Cary of yesterday is not the same as the Cary of today, and leaders wanted a brand to reflect that. In February 2022, after more than three years of research, Council unanimously selected the new Cary logo and tagline.

The branding process took several years — longer than anticipated — but what came out of it was a logo, tagline, and message that encouraged citizens to strive for more and 10 takeaways for Cary to share with you.

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INTRODUCTION/ BACKGROUND

The Town of Cary was founded on April 3, 1871. About 150 years later, Cary remains the second largest town in the United States in terms of population, just behind Gilbert, Arizona. Cary, now home to nearly 180,000 people, is located in the heart of the Research Triangle region of North Carolina, adjacent to Raleigh and Research Triangle Park.

Since the 1970s, growth from families flocking to the area for work within the region, particularly RTP, fueled Cary expansions in amenities, infrastructure, and services.

Then, in the mid-2010s, Cary began its transition from a growing community to a maturing one. This meant going from a community where greenfield development and annexations pushed Cary to nearly six times its acreage in a few decades to a community where redevelopment would become the norm.

Recognizing this shift from a growing community to a maturing one, the Town of Cary, including the Cary Town Council, decided to undertake a branding process. One major goal was to better position the community to be more of a player on a national and international stage.

Public and private organizations can have many reasons for branding or rebranding, including:

- They are a new organization.

- They don't know their audience.

- Their messaging isn't clear, or it is not in line with the organization's purpose.

- There are negative perceptions of the organization.

- They have a strong brand but it needs to be modernized.

For many years, the Town of Cary only had its seal to represent it as a community. As part of a contest sponsored by the Cary Chamber of Commerce, a Cary resident created the seal in 1964. Only minor changes had been made to it in 58 years.

Use in place of a logo is not a seal's intended purpose. It is uncommon for municipalities to use it in this way. To reduce use of the seal, Cary began to treat stylized "Town of Cary" text as a "logo."
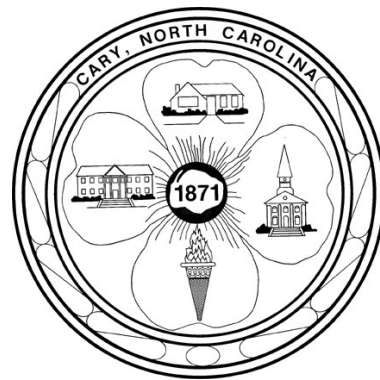
SEAN R. STEGALL

Town Manager

Most local governments that decide to brand their community are trying to change the perception of that community. Well, in Cary, we didn't need to change the perception of Cary in a meaningful way. What we wanted to do was be able to establish our brand more firmly as a community of excellence beyond North Carolina.

TOWN of CARY

CARY

"A few years ago, we were competing heavily for corporations. We had 'Town' in front of our name, and we had a logo and seal that looked like it was made in the last century," Mayor Harold Weinbrecht said. "When you're competing on a global market, that's not the way you want to present yourself. My goal was that when people heard 'Cary,' they would know where it is, kind of like Scottsdale."

Besides a refreshed logo, a branding process would provide Cary the opportunity to deemphasize its identity as a town.

"Some may find it quaint, but it's not accurate when it comes to what we are," Stegall said. "We're 180,000 people, a very full-service community, and that starts to send a different message when you're promoting outside of North Carolina."

The Cary of yesterday is not the same as the Cary of today, and leaders wanted a brand to reflect that.

THE BRANDING PROCESS

Because Cary did not need to go through a branding process to fix a perception issue, the organization had the time to do it well.

SEAN R. STEGALL

Town Manager

Success is not following some predetermined path. If the path is working, we stay on it. If it's not, we're going to go in a different direction.

Selecting a Consultant

On July 5, 2017, Cary issued a Request for Qualifications, (RFQ) looking for a company to uncover the community's brand identity and formulate a compelling brand strategy that positioned Cary for increased success. Eighteen companies responded to the RFQ.

In late 2017, Cary staff and members of the Economic Development Committee, or EDC, reviewed the submittals and selected two finalists for in-person presentations, tours, and meet-and-greets. Those visits took place in March 2018.

Since the goals of the process were economic development-focused, Cary involved the EDC, made up of the town manager, two Council members, Chamber of Commerce representatives, and citizens.

In May 2018, Cary selected North Star from the finalists because of the company's proven process, including research and experience working with local governments. North Star does exclusively place branding work and participated in the branding processes of McKinney, Texas; Tempe, Arizona; and Glendale, California.

"We had to have confidence that they could maneuver through the political waters," Chief Strategy Officer Susan Moran said. "North Star was the one that had hands down the experience and success doing that."

What Makes Cary Distinct

Cary and North Star kicked off the branding process with a four-month research phase to collect information on the public perception of Cary internally and externally. This time is about finding out what makes your community unique, said North Star Senior Vice President and Director of Strategic Planning Ed Barlow.

"The job of a brand is to tell your most compelling and competitive story," he said. "No three or four words is going to tell your whole story but you want people to take a second look and become interested in what you're going to say. Then, everything you do around that — your logo, your language, your narrative, the look and feel — should help play off that distinction."

Research data was gathered from focus groups, one-on-one interviews, site tours, an online community stakeholder survey, and an online general community survey. North Star presented high-level research findings from this phase to at a quarterly meeting with Council in May 2019.

CARY

"Hearing about the perception of Cary outside the region was really relevant because we're not trying to sell Cary to the people who are here. We already know they love it based on our biennial citizen surveys," Moran said.

Data from those living and working in Cary revealed extraordinary advocacy for Cary, including a clear appreciation for quality of life and hopeful attitudes about growth and future development of downtown. External perceptions revealed associations with upscale, urban lifestyles and high-performing earners. In addition to a tech-identity, well-manicured appearance, and well-managed growth, Cary was perceived as still lacking in terms of a downtown.

"There was a lot of confirming what we already knew, which is that we didn't have a perception problem," Assistant Research and Development Director Danielle Mahoney said. "Outside the community, there was a resounding theme that nothing really sets Cary apart. We don't have an identifiable landmark. That really confirmed our commitment to building out downtown more with Downtown Cary Park. It wasn't that we needed to fix something that was broken. It was more of making people outside of our community aware of what Cary was and getting ourselves on the map."

In order to fully devote the time and resources needed for branding, Cary paused its branding initiative during the summer and early fall of 2019 to allow staff to focus on the upcoming municipal election, which included a referendum on the ballot for a $112 million parks bond and $113 million transportation bond.

"We had the luxury of time on this," Stegall said.

Following the election, Cary formed a branding subcommittee consisting of the EDC and three citizen members of the Information Services Advisory Board to continue to provide feedback on the process and designs along the way.

North Star then used the research from the previous phase to develop a brand strategy. By the beginning of 2020, North Star presented that strategy to Stegall and Moran, and following several iterations, the branding statement was finalized.

CARY'S BRANDING STATEMENT
"For those who believe that something worth doing is worth doing well, Cary, a preferred and forward-thinking community within the Triangle Region with a distinguished legacy of excellence, is uniquely devoted to the best idea in our unwavering and continued pursuit of excellence."

Creative Development

With the branding strategy confirmed, creative development of design elements, including logos and taglines, began. Despite staff originally thinking the organization would only use one consultant, Cary added High Noon, formerly Big Fish and one of the RFQ finalists, to the creative development team.

"We were impressed by their creative work," Mahoney said. "As mentioned in our brand strategy DNA statement, Cary is always looking for the best idea in our pursuit of excellence, so bringing in another consultant to help with creative development spoke to that value."

Moving forward, North Star continued to lead the process, starting with creative work sessions, as the two groups collaboratively crafted design concepts for Cary. This relationship was uncommon for both agencies.

"We don't care where the great idea comes from. We just want the best results for our community," Barlow said. "We want communities to go through this process so that they can get their competitive, compelling footing in the conversation."

High Noon Senior Brand Strategist Katie Fleming described the experience as fun, rewarding, and educational.

"North Star was very welcoming, and we had a great working relationship," she said. "It was nice to have another partner that we could bounce ideas off of and then create something that we felt really proud of, like a child born from North Star and High Noon."

Around March 2020, Cary needed to step back from the branding process once again in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The pandemic really allowed us to take a strategic pause and reassess what was important," Mahoney said. "That gave us a lot of flexibility, especially when we got into the creative phase and knew we wanted to get more input."

Following the pause, Cary added Raleigh-based French/West/Vaughan to the project team to provide more options and perspectives to the creative development process. Cary already had a relationship with FWV through work on Downtown Cary Park.

"We just wanted to have as many options on the table to make the best decisions," Mahoney said.

FWV Senior Vice President Jenny Pilewski said she is seeing more and more clients hiring more than one agency.

"Really some of the best work comes out when partners can collaborate, and you get multiple opinions and perspectives," she said. "As long as the client is clear about the role and expectation of each partner, then we don't really run into an issue."

Cary also kept S&A Cherokee on retainer for the duration of the process.

"We wanted someone local to be plugged in in case we started seeing push back from the community and we needed advocates," Moran said. "We never had to use them, but that was in our back pocket."

Once Stegall approved several design options, he presented them to the branding subcommittee to narrow them down further and make a recommendation to the full Council.

But once the options made it to Council, some Council members weren't sure they were happy with the choices recommended.

■ Cary Town Council (from left): Jack Smith, Ed Yerha, Ya Liu, Mayor Harold Weinbrecht, Jennifer Robinson, Don Frantz, and Lori Bush.

"It's art. We would never get something where everybody went, 'Wow. That's amazing,' and I think that's what some of the Council members wanted to do. They wanted to create something that made you go, 'Wow,'" Weinbrecht said.

During the process, Stegall stopped holding one-on-one meetings with Council members to talk about their thoughts on the logo and tagline after noticing their opinions changed compared to group meetings. Weinbrecht said he could relate to this since his opinion of certain logo options shifted as he had more time to reflect on them.

"I had logos and taglines that initially I didn't like, and then over time, they seemed to grow on me and would become my favorite," he said.

Council reviewed numerous logo designs over the next few months. In total, the four consultants and Cary's in-house graphic designer came up with nearly 100 logo designs. After several months, Council ended up back where they started, with a modified version of the initial subcommittee recommendation.

"I think timing-wise almost too many people were brought in and too much weight was placed on every single individual's thoughts about every single element," Fleming said. "At the end of the day, not every single person is

going to love the logo or color palette, but as long as it really speaks to the strategy and the brand work then it's going to engage your audiences and be successful."

Pilewski said one strategy that may have helped was showing what the logo could look like in real life, like on signage or vehicles.

"Seeing it come to life is always the best part," she said.

If he had to go through a branding process again, Weinbrecht said he would handle the process the same way but would try to adjust Council expectations upfront.

"Take your time. Remember that it's hard," he said. "Keep in mind this is art, and the goal of it is to help us market ourselves globally."

TEN TAKEAWAYS

No organization does branding perfectly. In light of that, here is a list of 10 takeaways compiled by Cary based on its branding experience and advice from its consultants based on their experience in the industry. These takeaways are in no particular order.

1. Make the Investment

It is important to be willing to invest the time and resources up front to create a successful brand that will last a decade or more. Fleming referenced working with companies that skipped steps in the process to save time and money, only to end up needing to redo the whole branding process a year later because their brand didn't align with the organization.

"When you have the time and investment upfront, we're able to think of things that may happen in the future and accommodate that to allow your brand to really grow and shift," she said.

In its branding process, Cary was willing to put in the time and investment needed, and its culture of transparency and collaboration helped it to be a good experience for all.

"One thing that I've loved about working with Cary is that there's this mindset of, 'We'll take whatever time is needed to make it right. The end result is what's most important, not the date at which we achieve it,'" Pilewski said.

2. Skip the Contest

Contests may be well intentioned, but you miss an opportunity for research and strategy. Your new logo may not align with your brand and/or speak to your audience.

"This will be the Council's logo, and they deserve to be able to pick it, not have it picked for them," Moran said.

3. Determine Stakeholder Groups Beforehand

Ensure all the stakeholders that need to be involved are determined beforehand so that you don't realize along the way that you've left someone out. Then make sure they understand their roles.

"You have to be very deliberate in the way that you engage the community," Director of Economic Development Ted Boyd said. "You want to have experts, and you want to be able to help people understand their role in providing feedback. It's also helpful to share some of the research, because it's good for people to understand, 'What's driving this? What do people think about us? What do they not think about us?'"

4. Get Buy-In Early

Make sure everyone is on the same page and that partners and stakeholders understand what you are trying to do and what your goals and expectations are.

"If you can get people to buy in to what makes them special and distinct, that's what's important," Barlow said. "Because not everyone is going to agree on the creative output, but if they agree on what makes them distinct and they can see themselves reflected in that, then they'll get past the color they don't like."

5. It is More than a Logo

One of the biggest misconceptions when it comes to branding is that it's just about creating a new logo and tagline.

"Branding has a branding problem," Barlow said. "It's not just a logo and a line. Those are important tools, and you have to use them. But they have to work for you."

Focusing solely on creative elements and not taking a deep dive into the organization's mission, purpose, values, and audience could lead to a short-lived brand.

"When people are super hyper focused on just the creative elements, we like to let people know that, sure, we can just create a logo for you, but you have to be prepared in the next few years that it might not fit with where you're going as an organization and also might not engage your audiences like you think it will," Fleming said.

6. Not Everyone Will Love Your Design

Creating a logo and a tagline to represent your community can be challenging. It's like art — not everyone will love it.

"Know when to stop asking for consensus. Get buy-in up to a certain point without trying to please everybody," Pilewski said.

7. Think About Timing, But Don't Let It Control the Process

Timing is important. You should take your time to get it right, but be aware of the potential challenges of a lengthier process.

SUSAN MORAN

Chief Strategy Officer

Own the process. Don't let the process own you.

"Be willing to slow it down, stop it, or change it," Moran said. "You have control over time. If you have a relationship with your elected officials, then they're going to give you that time. It all comes down to the culture that you have established before you do this."

As previously mentioned, putting the necessary time and investment into the process is important to a successful brand, but a lengthy process can result in people over-analyzing elements.

"We could have stopped much earlier if we would have gone with a simple majority on the Council," Stegall said. "But if you're the Council member, this is Cary's identity. We really had to avoid having anybody hate it, and we were able to do that."

A lengthy process can also lead to stakeholders, including staff, consultants, designers, etc., losing the initial excitement for the project.

"Sometimes you might have a designer who works on it, and then we've got a long drawn-out process to get feedback, and by the time you're asking them to come back to it, they've sort of lost focus on whatever they were doing at the time," Pilewski said.

8. Don't Be Afraid to Take Risks

Don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone.

"That certainly was the case for the Town of Cary. There was, along the way, an effort not to revert back to what feels too familiar in order to gain consensus," Pilewski said. "That's a big piece of advice for others. Don't be afraid to stick to what you set out to do and not just go for the answer that's the easiest, most comfortable result."

9. Trust Your Partner Agency/Agencies

You've hired an outside agency for a reason. They are the subject matter experts. You may understand your community, but they understand the common misconceptions and pitfalls of branding processes. Trust them.

"At the end of the day, we've done this before," Fleming said. "We understand nuances within businesses and organizations, and we also understand what it takes to build a great brand. Listen and trust that we are not going to lead people astray, that we are actually pushing back for a really good reason and looking out for their best interests."

10. Stay Focused

Having many voices and perspectives throughout the project can throw you off course. Along the way, always keep in mind and stay true to what you are trying to achieve, including your branding strategy.

"We needed something strong. We needed something modern and clean with an inspirational element," Moran said. "We kept going back to the research about being a community that inspires people."

CONCLUSION

In February 2022, after more than three years of research, Council unanimously selected the new Cary logo and tagline.

"I don't think anybody really expected the process to last as long as it did," Mahoney said. "But having a Council and town manager be okay with that and knowing we weren't going to impose superficial deadlines just to meet them at the expense of the project, that was pleasantly surprising."

The final logo featured "Cary" written in a font designed for the organization with a star in the center of the "A."

"The reason why we chose a star is that there is something about a star that is very inspiring for people and makes them feel good, and we tested that with citizens," Stegall said. "It's not meant to be super artistic. It's meant to be one that continues to move us forward in our ability to brand and market the community."

The final tagline was "Live Inspired."

"It came from Council," Moran said. "One of the members said, 'I don't think it should be about us. I think it should be about the people and the experiences. It needs to be an action message.'"

Following Council approval of the logo and tagline, Cary staff worked with FWV on creating a rollout schedule and developing a standards guide. Like its branding process, Cary would take a slow and intentional approach to rollout.

"The urge is to come out strong and have the logo everywhere, but it's much more complex and nuanced than that," Senior Marketing Manager Jennifer Warner said.

The approach allows the organization to replace logos when cost effective to do so, whether that is as soon as possible or as assets reach the end of their useful life.

Once the branding process came to a close, Mahoney said she believed what they had created was a "true representation of Cary."

"The strategic DNA statement talks about Cary being an excellent community. It's forward thinking and is committed to the best idea. So I really think the star is representative of that," she said. "I also think the tagline is more important than the actual logo, because when I read that, I do feel a sense of pride for the community, and I think it's indicative of everything we've done and everything we hope to do.

RESOURCES

Timeline

- July 2017 — Cary Issues RFQ

- March 2018 — Finalists Visit Cary

- May 2018 — Cary Selects North Star

- September 2018 to February 2019 — Research Phase

- February 2019 to November 2019 — Pause for Elections

- December 2019 — Branding Subcommittee Created

- January 2020 — Branding Strategy Phase

- February 2020 — Creative Development Begins

- February 2020 — Cary Hires High Noon

- March 2020 to December 2020 — Pause for COVID-19 Pandemic

- January 2021 — Cary Hires French/West/Vaughan

- February 2022 — Council Selects Logo, Tagline