

# PIONEER PRESS

## **Selling the merits of a certain, distinct place**

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"Excuse me, sir, but you appear to be a local. Is there anything to do around here?"

"Why yes - I'm glad you asked. Minneapolis St. Paul has safe and vibrant downtowns, wonderful parks and lakes, fabulous shopping and dining choices, a powerhouse arts community and a tolerant, diverse and literate population. In fact, there's 'more to life' here. Have a terrific day."

"Sure will. If I don't freeze to death."

This exchange between bewildered visitor and committed St. Paul-Minneapolis is our imagined response to a new public-relations effort, to be launched this week. It is an attempt to make our Twin Cities region a "brand" that can be marketed to visitors and convention-goers and to workers who may be thinking of moving here.

Part of the idea is to turn us common folk into "brand ambassadors" who will extol the virtues of our community at every opportunity. And to minimize some of the, shall we say, less desirable aspects of our community, such as this weekend's killer wind-chill.

This new campaign is to be launched by St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak and the greatest minds of the business of "branding" and public relations. The idea is not that our area has to change, but that it has to show the world how great it is.

A partnership of private companies, PR firms and the two cities is behind the \$3 million to \$5 million campaign. After researching how the region is perceived by locals and those who do not live here, the marketing gurus decided to refer to the two cities as one unhyphenated place - "Minneapolis St. Paul" - and to include the catch-phrase, "More to Life."

An international "brand development company," Future Brand, did surveys and research into how our Twin Cities region is perceived. The conclusion: Locals like it here and have nice things to say, but those who don't live here are far less dazzled.

Some of the perceptions are based on myths, such as the belief that our region is economically weak. The region's high rankings for arts, education, health care, recreation and air quality are not well known, the group said.

The research looked at those who might consider moving to the Twin Cities for work - an important issue as the baby boom generation retires. It found that it is difficult for newcomers to break into social circles, and that minorities feel the region is not diverse enough. "People are not as friendly and welcoming ... as you would guess," one respondent said. "Locals tend to not want outsiders to come here."

Minnesota Nice? Guess not.

We have no beef with a plan to promote our metropolitan region, and we certainly do our share of self-promotion on these pages. We appreciate the message that the surveys bring through - that we are not always as welcoming as we should be. We appreciate anything that pierces our smugness and reminds us that we are part of a wider world.

Promoting "Minneapolis St. Paul" as one stop for tourists might make sense. But we all know that it is the subtle, street- and neighborhood-level differences that make these two cities interesting. Our cherished St. Paul-Minneapolis rivalry is part of the appeal, as is the distinctive look of the two downtowns. St. Paul was the frontier outpost that became the state capital. Minneapolis was the milling center that became a go-go financial center. There are dozens of ways of marking our differences - Catholic vs. Lutheran, eastern vs. western, homey vs. striving - and they all make the region more interesting.

So does our position on the globe, 45 degrees north latitude in the middle of the North American continent. Our lakes freeze solid enough to drive trucks on. Our winter culture of neighborhood hockey rinks and ice-house townships is as distinctive as our boat-and-trailer, late-sunset summers. These are things that remind us we are in a certain, distinct place, rather than Anywhere USA.

Bring on the branding. We can talk up these towns as well as anyone. But let's promote our region's benefits with a healthy dose of humility. We like it here, sure, but we don't pretend there aren't many other wonderful places to be. We want visitors to like it and we want new residents to feel welcome. But bundle up - for that, too, is part of our brand.