

# Fresh Brood Brand You, Brand Me

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Watching the April 19 live presentation of Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB)'s "Think Out Loud" radio program unfold made me ponder the Rural Economy Project recently launched by OPB and its partners.

Crossing the state from stem to stern, the project is reaching out to small business owners, entrepreneurs, and other community members about ways to help folks and their communities not just survive, but thrive in a tempestuous economy. As always, rural communities are plowed under the most.

Finding unique ways to enhance and diversify local rural economies is a keystone of the OPB project. While this revitalization effort is new, the idea behind it isn't. Rural communities everywhere often face a struggle just to survive. Always have. Always will. So community leaders are always looking for something to hang their hats on.

For one small town perched at the western edge of the Canadian Badlands in southern Alberta, Canada, that something was a pair of pointy ears.

Twenty years ago, the hardpressed, down-on-their-luck citizens of the small, wilting, but aptly named farm community of Vulcan (2006 population 1,940) in Vulcan County (population 3,718) decided to boldly go where no town has gone before by launching an ambitious enterprise to stave off a prolonged economic slump that had reached crisis stage. They opted to explore strange new commercial worlds, to seek out new tourists, and transport their part of Canada's Great Plains into a "Star Trek" theme town - the first of its kind anywhere in the known universe - based on the popular original television series that aired from 1966 to 1969, and lived on since then in syndicated reruns, spin-offs, movies, and remakes.

The series created the planet Vulcan, home to Mr. Spock, the pointy-eared, green-blooded, highly logical, half-human, half-Vulcan first officer of the starship Enterprise.

The tiny town of Vulcan adopted the motto "Just a Spock on the map," and set out to transform their part of the world. Not everyone in the community was ready to beam up. Some preferred to stay in the neutral zone and have the town's fortunes dictated by other less starry-eyed, more down-to-earth means. New-fangled notions always bring critics and skeptics out of the woods. And for a town that once boasted the most "prairie skyscrapers" - grain elevators - in the western half of Canada (only one remains today, even in an agrarian economy based on wheat, canola, and barley), the odds against success seemed astronomical.

As of last week, Vulcan had achieved new status as the officially designated Star Trek capital of Canada, and 79-year-old Leonard Nimoy, the actor who portrayed Mr. Spock, visited the town amid much fanfare.

This might seem like farfetched nonsense and selling out to many folks, but the residents of Vulcan made the concerted effort to save their town and at least a vestige of their rural way of life. While it has altered the character of the place and likely skewed the original intent of the town founders, it brings in tourists - and their money - giving the town and county a chance to show off its other attributes.

Put simply, it makes good business dollars and "sense."

Not all ideas can "live long and prosper" like the wacky scheme hatched in Vulcan, but anything that might help is worth considering. Trying to devise unique, unusual, or even starry-eyed ways to handle the ebbing of rural communities and the lifestyle they represent is never wrong.

The key word is lifestyle. The discussion during the OPB show in Newport centered on "lifestyle entrepreneurs," and marketing the Oregon coast as an ideal place for folks who could live and work anywhere, but would choose the Oregon coast for the lifestyle it offers. Many already have. In what some observers call "a quiet renaissance," accomplished and often well-heeled folks move to the coast,

set up small businesses, participate in the community, and slowly, but surely help change things for the better.

While they won't create a boatload of jobs, they help create a culture that can entice more like-minded folks, individually or collectively, to move here. It's about creating a brand identity for the Oregon coast. As I thought (not out loud) about this idea, I recalled a tiny tome from business consultant Tom Peters, part of his series about "reinventing work."

"The Brand You 50" (1999) featured ways "to transform yourself from an employee into a brand that shouts distinction, commitment, and passion." The premise behind it is that individuals, not corporations, are the fundamental units of our technology-driven wired economy, and whether we work for someone else or have our own businesses, we should approach our jobs with the mindset of an independent or freelance contractor. As such, we must present ourselves as someone who is savvy, informed, always learning and growing, who does quality work that matters, and provides value-added service that gets noticed. It's highly personal, but it involves others.

Brand You. Brand Me. Individually and collectively making a difference that draws others in, and makes them realize what's possible.

In that sense, we are all lifestyle entrepreneurs, and all have a role in making the central Oregon coast a great place to live, work, and play.

Think about it. Out loud or not.

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