

# Great Miami Riverway Branding

## Southwestern Ohio

Community Engagement  
 Brand Strategy  
 Brand Development  
 Implementation Plan

The Great Miami River corridor represents 99 miles of interconnected waterways and trails that stream through 15 different cities in southwestern Ohio, stretching from Sidney to Dayton and down to Hamilton near Cincinnati. Known for its historical significance, abundant water supply and multiple access points for recreation and industry, the river corridor is an integral part of the region’s future growth and economic development.

### Objective

Develop a brand strategy that unifies the Great Miami River corridor as a connected, regional asset, helping to pave new paths for further riverfront investment, population growth, tourism and community building.



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Sarah Hippensteel, Miami Conservancy District

## CASE STUDY

### Great Miami Riverway Branding

#### Challenge

If you're traveling along the Great Miami River's 99-mile stretch down southwestern Ohio, your adventure is sure to span multiple communities – Piqua, Troy, Dayton and Miamisburg, to name a few – recreational trails, public parks, entertainment venues and businesses that make this area a destination for all types of outdoor enthusiasts and supporters.

Despite a solid infrastructure, the river corridor has faced many historical, physical and political challenges that were recently reinforced by the Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) yearlong study on the corridor's economic and recreational



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potential. The study, which was commissioned by Ohio's Great Corridor Association (a member organization comprised of the communities that run along the Great Miami River) in 2014, acknowledged the river corridor is “on the right path,” but cited some of its limitations, including a lack of facilities, scarce overnight lodging and low head dams that reduce navigability.

The river also has a historical reputation for being dangerous and contaminated, and serves as a divider between the city of Dayton's economically disadvantaged east side from the affluent west side, causing some major perception issues. The crux of the study was awareness; the neighboring communities don't realize the value of this asset. Ultimately, the

USACE suggested that the entire corridor region needed a well-articulated, unified brand identity to drive the economic returns needed for further revitalization and growth.

“The corridor lacks the perception of being an actual place or destination because it covers nearly 100 miles and multiple cities,” said Stan Kegley, Engineering Project Manager for City of Troy. “The study was the springboard for all of us to get on the same page.”

After the study was released, the Miami Conservancy District (MCD), a regional government agency, was tasked with leading the Great Miami River Corridor Placemaking Project. The goal: To build a strong, integrated brand that positions the river corridor as one connected regional asset that fosters a sense of community and place among all residents, visitors, institutions and municipalities.

“We have all of these great assets here that no one really knows about,” said Sarah Hippensteel, Manager of Watershed Partnerships for the Miami Conservancy District. “Now we need to build a brand that presents this region as a one, multi-faceted destination.”

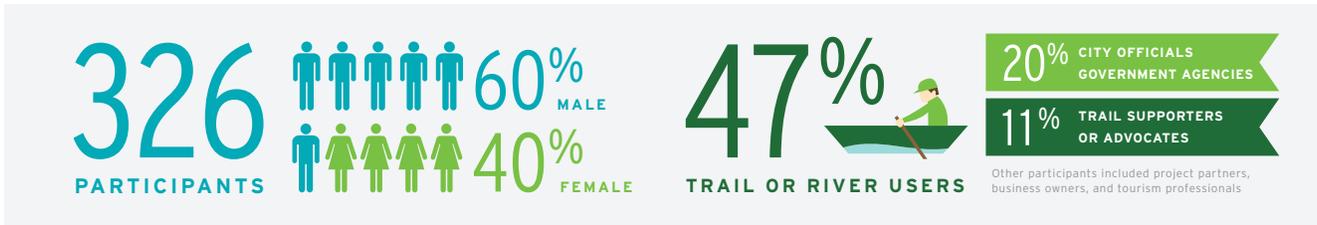
With objectives in place, MCD and participating communities formed a steering committee to manage the project. They also needed to engage a creative partner to help them build a comprehensive brand strategy that aligned with their goals. After narrowing the selection process down to two firms, the committee knew that Guide Studio's experience in bringing together multiple community stakeholders to develop a cohesive, regional brand would prove valuable throughout process.

“In addition to already working with one of our partner organizations (Five Rivers), we knew Guide Studio's unmatched placemaking expertise could propel the brand in the right direction,” said Hippensteel. “They aren't strangers to dealing with big projects that have multiple stakeholders with diverse viewpoints at the table.”

## CASE STUDY

### Great Miami Riverway Branding

GREAT MIAMI RIVER CORRIDOR BRAND DISCOVERY SURVEY SUMMARY



“Everyone on the committee had their own thoughts about the experience, but Guide Studio helped us look at the brand through our constituents’ eyes,” said Leslie King, Director of the Rivers Institute at University of Dayton. “If we are going to build connections and community around the river, we have to start with who it is for.”

### Solution

Before diving into the new brand strategy, Guide Studio kicked off the process with Brand Discovery sessions that gathered key background information from MCD, city leaders and external partner organizations. During these sessions, it was apparent that despite their different perspectives, everyone was aligned in their vision for the experience the river corridor would deliver.

When asked what the distinct advantages of the river corridor were, words such as “connected,” “approachable,” “active,” and “bold,” were voiced by the majority of participants.

While the feedback of those deeply involved in the project was important, Guide Studio also evaluated the current situation through the eyes of those who experience the corridor everyday

– direct users (outdoor enthusiasts). Feedback was gathered through surveys and focus groups that revealed valuable insights on what attracts people to the river, its top qualities and which activities stand out the most.

With the river corridor’s advantages clearly defined, Guide Studio could get to work on developing the comprehensive brand platform, which includes messaging and resources that can help key stakeholders successfully manage the river’s place-based brand so it fulfills their goals. Services included:

Target Audience Personas – Before building the brand strategy, the project team needed to understand and internalize their diverse audience, which includes people who use the river for recreational purposes, business owners,

## CASE STUDY

### Great Miami Riverway Branding

city leaders, schools, nonprofits, land owners, tourists and more. With so many subgroups to account for, Guide Studio helped the team segment the audience into three target persona categories listed to the right.

#### PERSONA CATEGORIES

**Direct Users:** residents who flock to the corridor for activity

**Supporters:** people who promote the corridor to diverse user groups

**Beneficiaries:** businesses, entrepreneurs and civic leaders who can use the riverfront to attract and engage people

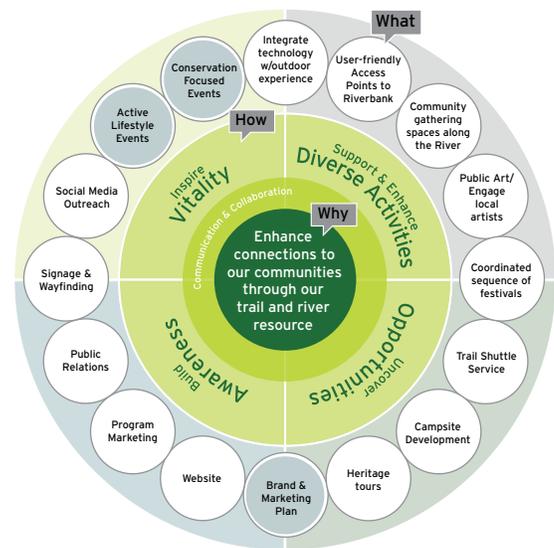
After creating these audience categories, the team developed a composite sketch of each persona group's personality traits, goals and motivations, which served as the foundation for creating a brand identity and messaging that would resonate with each group.

**Positioning and Purpose Statements:** With defined target audiences, Guide Studio moved on to creating an honest and forward-looking positioning statement. It includes points on the corridor's distinct value (the connection of 99 miles of convenient outdoor activity), products and services, guiding principle (making it easy for people to plan trips), the intended audience and benefits.

In addition to the positioning statement, Guide Studio helped the committee define their brand purpose – the unique benefit that the river corridor brings for the greater good – also referred to as their “WHY”. The WHY unites both internal and external audiences around a common, core belief that drives them to support

and advocate for the brand. The Great Miami River corridor's WHY focuses on enhancing the connections between the communities and people that touch the river.

Guide Studio supported the WHY statement with the corridor's “HOW” – the actions their stakeholders and constituents would take to support the purpose – and the “WHAT”, which are the places and programming the river opens up to the community, such as trails, water activities, events and entertainment, industrial space and more.



The GMRC connects the land and water trails of the

Distinct Advantage

Great Miami River with vibrant riverfront communities,

offering access to abundant recreational activities,

Product/Service

along the water and into town, making it easy for

The Guiding Principle

residents and visitors to enjoy the region's outdoor

The Audience

recreation scene and create memorable experiences.

End Benefit

**Distinct Advantage:** the connection between trails and towns; 99 miles of approachable, convenient outdoor activity

**Product/Service:** numerous activity options, including those that extend beyond the trails and into the towns it connects

**Guiding Principle:** aspirational - making it easy for people to plan trips, extend the experience, and feel comfortable along the way

**Audience:** people of all ages and ability levels, from the region and beyond

**End Benefit:** access to activities that contribute to personal health and vitality, as well as stand-out experiences

## CASE STUDY

### Great Miami Riverway Branding



#### LOGO CONCEPTS

Guide Studio created three different logo concepts that echoed different characteristics of the river corridor through bright colors, shapes and symbols, and typeface.

In addition to the concepts, Guide Studio fashioned each logo option across signage and promotional materials so the client could visualize the logo in practical applications and evaluate which option was the best fit for their new brand identity.

**Brand Name:** Picking the perfect brand name is no easy task. Every place and organization craves something unique, but it also needs to accurately reflect what you offer. For this project, the new brand name needed to explain what the place is while also tying together all of the communities that share it. Guide Studio developed several name options that conveyed the river’s geographic location, tangible and intangible benefits and the experience it offers to constituents and visitors.

“When it came to picking a name, we wanted to collect everyone’s feedback, but we employed a consensus-based process to arrive at the best option,” said Hippensteel. “As long as the name suggested the depth of everything that we have to offer, people were willing to live with the decision.”

Ultimately, the committee selected the name “The Great Miami Riverway” for a few reasons. First, it speaks to the physical location. Next, the word “Riverway” evokes a sense of connection, access and activity, which are all things that the destination promises and delivers. Additionally, the word “Great” indicates the length (99 miles) of the trail and implies that multiple communities have ownership of this regional asset.

**Logo and Visual Components:** After deciding on the new name, the client could move into one of the more colorful phases of brand development – the logo.

“The new logo needed to capture the essence of everything the river corridor represents without being overly cluttered,” said Kegley. “It also had to be in harmony with all of our individual city logos and signage – people should still know where they are on the map without having to look too closely.”

For example in Logo Concept 1, the letters in “Riverway” connect together and flow into waves, which speaks to the connectivity of the river corridor across multiple communities. Additionally, the rounded typeface is friendly and approachable, and the symbols in the center of the mark could be consistent or swapped out depending on the place or promotion. Similarly, Concepts 2 and 3 illustrate the Great Miami Riverway’s approachability, connectivity and activity.

“There were varying opinions about the logo depending on age and background – millennials loved the bright, vibrant colors while baby boomers preferred more traditional options,” said Kegley. “Guide Studio did a really nice job

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## CASE STUDY

### Great Miami Riverway Branding

of letting different groups share their feedback and made good suggestions for how logos could be adapted.”

“People are reinvigorated by the new brand, but we need to be thoughtful about how our city brands and the Riverway brand work together without competing for attention,” said Kegley. “The last thing we want to do is create confusion.”

### Results

The Great Miami Riverway brand will make its official debut in the spring/summer of 2017 in conjunction with the river corridor’s peak season and regional events, including the 10th Annual River Summit, hosted by the Rivers Institute at the University of Dayton. Additionally, MCD and all 15 cities that neighbor the Riverway are working on a master implementation plan that outlines how the various municipalities will promote the Riverway in coordination with their individual city marketing plans.

“While the new brand’s influence on the Riverway’s bottom line has yet to be known, it is already making an impact on the project’s key stakeholders, with many of them already

offering more budget dollars to bring the brand to life. Guide Studio has also crafted a robust brand launch plan that maps out key milestones and activities that community leaders will activate next year.

“Historically, the southwest region of Ohio has been synonymous with aviation because of the Wright brothers, which is wonderful, but we needed to build an identity that reflects what we offer today,” said Kegley. “I believe this new brand strategy allows us to promote the fact that you can come to our region and experience a variety of journeys.”

Hippensteel adds, “For a long time, we were all talking about different parts of a disjointed story. Now we have a concise and attractive story to tell...the Great Miami Riverway is an active, fun and exciting place that has something to offer everyone.”

