

# Uptown Brand Strategy & Identity

## Cleveland, Ohio

Stakeholder  
Engagement

Brand Strategy

Brand Development

Uptown in the Circle is an established district of Cleveland with a lot going for it: proximity to higher education, premium healthcare facilities, arts and entertainment, and more. With an address placing it within the perimeter of lively University Circle, the urban mixed-use area had been redeveloped over the past ten years. Despite the many desirable attributes of the district, Uptown never fully came to life and foot traffic dwindled for the shops, restaurants and nightlife occupying the space.

This project was a collaboration between Guide Studio and Placeholder. Placeholder facilitated a process to identify and articulate the vision; then Guide Studio delivered the branding support to bring it to life.

### Objective

Uptown knew they needed to make a change to generate more awareness. But, before a single marketing tool or tactic could be designed, stakeholders came together for a deeper dive into who they are, what they offer, and how they can work together to reawaken the district. What they needed was a clear vision that would position them for increased tenant and visitor interest, as well as future growth.



***“We thought our mixed-use project, Uptown, needed branding and marketing support, but Rachel and her team quickly assessed that we needed to take a step back and get our stakeholders aligned around a clear vision first. The process helped identify a compelling vision that is rooted in authenticity – one that can drive our decisions about product, programming and experiences well into the future.”***

Chris Ronayne, President, University Circle, Inc.

## THE VISION

### UPTOWN

A stimulating destination where you can **feed your curiosity**, and embrace and celebrate your inner nerd.



#### Problem/Challenge:

In addition to low foot traffic, Uptown also experienced high turnover with the tenants they did have. Locally owned merchants who struggled with higher rents were replaced with fast casual chains already flooding the Cleveland metro area. With no clear vision and little reason to visit, people were bypassing Uptown for other trendier options. Sean Watterson, owner of Happy Dog, with locations in both Uptown and on the near west side in the Gordon Square Arts District, could sense a difference in his locations. “Uptown didn’t have the neighborhood feel that we have on the west side. We were not getting any overflow business of people making a night of it in Uptown. Part of our jobs as tenants is to build our community by building our local businesses. That is hard to do when the energy is missing from the area.”

Adding to the complexity of Uptown’s situation were the numerous stakeholders involved in managing the space. The project is overseen by real estate leads at Case Western Reserve

University (CWRU) and University Circle, Inc. (UCI), as well as the Cleveland Institute of Art, MOCA, and developer MRN. This complex ownership relationship often resulted in a challenging decision-making structure; yet, collectively, the entities knew that something needed to change. “We always wanted Uptown to be a 24/7 entertainment destination for people who live in the surrounding neighborhoods – not just faculty, staff, students,” explained Kevin Slesh, Director of Real Estate – CWRU. “We had envisioned that some physical changes with parking and signage would help reposition us. Then Rachel and her team approached us with a different point-of-view.” Placeholder advised Uptown to take a step back and re-evaluate the value they deliver: to their tenants, neighbors, and community. Using this information, everyone involved was now looking through the same audience lens for a clearer, more unified understanding of how to tell the Uptown story in a way that would resonate with the people who matter most.

## CASE STUDY

### Uptown Brand Strategy & Identity

#### PlaceHolder: Creating a Solution for the Uptown Vision

To start, PlaceHolder conducted a four-stage, iterative process to build the vision. The process began with an Experience Audit designed to put everyone into visitors' shoes. This helped identify issues, challenges, strengths and opportunities.

"I think many of us knew there was a problem, but we didn't know what the problem was or how to fix it. The Experience Audit helped shed light on this," said Watterson. "Rachel and her team brought clear data and info to the table on who our customers are and who they could

be. Those specifics helped level-set everybody. No one had rose-colored glasses on anymore." Specifically, the research revealed a lack of understanding in several key areas, including some basics: What is the area's name? Where do you park? And where is it actually located? Over the years, Uptown had been referred to as an arts district, college village, culinary hotspot and retail destination. The reality is that visitors choose where to go based on the promise of an experience, but Uptown's experience was being watered down again...and again.



PlaceHolder also uncovered some clear differentiating factors. There was vibrancy and life in occasional events in the area – events that brought people together organically, such as concerts, art installations and film festivals.

Combined with the unique destinations in close proximity to Uptown – including the schools and art spaces – the success of these events shed insight into who Uptown could be: a quirky, eclectic, artistically lit area. Using this as a springboard, PlaceHolder outlined the core values that would drive Uptown into the future, including their vision: a stimulating destination where you can feed your curiosity, and embrace and celebrate your inner nerd.

Fulfilling this vision required clear planning. Working with stakeholders, PlaceHolder identified and prioritized opportunities, including

(1) investing in public spaces with design interventions and creative programming that piques interest and creates a place where people want to stay and explore, (2) creating a better balance of tenants that offer something unique and different, and (3) enhancing the authenticity of the area by creating opportunities for visitors and students to make Uptown their own.

**Noted Slesh:** "It was important that our vision included the framework for what we are and what we do, and Rachel helped us articulate this. There's a lot we're doing that's cool – now we're pulling it together and marrying it with retail operations."

#### Guide Studio: Designing a Solution for the Uptown Brand

With a vision and plan in place, Guide Studio set to work on the branding, including tools that would: (1) attract tenants that share in the vision, (2) inspire existing tenants to push the envelope, (3) attract visitors seeking what the brand promises, and (4) steward a reputation for being Cleveland's intellectually curious hotspot. "We have this intellectual playground with lots of interesting things happening that people don't know about," said Watterson. "Our immediate challenge was to determine what this looks like; how do we draw attention to it?"



## CASE STUDY

### Uptown Brand Strategy & Identity

Watterson personally took on the challenge of becoming Uptown's first District Manager, a temporary role that had him tackling the area's tenant and programming needs until a dedicated resource could take over. Guide Studio began bringing definition to many of the key themes, including developing a clear positioning statement that differentiated WHY Uptown is important to the community:

Guide hosted focus groups to test the positioning. The research revealed that the core concept resonated, yet some language – like the word “intellectual” – should be avoided. The audience responded best to informal and playful language and visuals; ideas that spoke to “underground” discoveries that were still accessible and far from pretentious.

The end result is an identity that speaks to the multi-dimensional nature of the area. Visuals, including the new logo, are geometric

and colorful – a nod to the art and science institutions that culminate in Uptown. These colors are also practical and highly intentional: Guide selected each shade to compliment the identities of stakeholders. The look provides a cohesive style that works across a variety of marketing elements.

These components are slowly taking shape. The initial launch included Guide-produced materials that will help attract right-fit tenants, as well as more visitors: a new website design, signage and additional branding materials.

“This is all about building a destination that is worth visiting,” said Ronayne. “Using vision and purpose to get our stakeholders aligned and on the same page has been incredibly effective in what we've accomplished so far. We're on the right path to make Uptown the right place for our tenants and our audiences.”

***Uptown is a district of Cleveland where world-renowned institutions, independent restaurants, local bars and funky retail converge; where unique programming and interactive public art invite exploration; and where a global and diverse community of intellectually curious people gather to get their fill.***

