

Moving Towards Equitable Maker Ecosystems

The Role of Local Branding Organizations

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Urban
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Kristi Brown, founder of That Brown Girl Cooks! is a lifelong entrepreneur, but she started her current business back in 2012. She decided to produce an original black-eyed peas hummus recipe, famous among her friends, in large batches, and to get some help she reached out to a local branding organization called Seattle Made. The organization assisted with putting her in front of grocery store distributors and small batch producers—the kind of exposure that can jumpstart a small-scale food producer’s career. Her recipe caught their attention, markets began selling her products, and today her business is thriving.

Brown says documenting her experience as an entrepreneur of color to Seattle Made is a common aspect of her relationship with the organization. This has helped Seattle Made expand their understanding of the unique challenges entrepreneurs of color face, while also informing the organization’s outreach campaigns that showcase diverse makers and manufacturers.

“In the industry I’m in, there aren’t very many black women. I’m a ‘poster child’, and that can be both beneficial and harmful,” says Brown. Seattle Made’s efforts go “beyond

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the poster child” work of simply including an entrepreneur of color, she says. The organization is emanating a culture that could inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs from Seattle’s diverse neighborhoods.

At the Urban Manufacturing Alliance (UMA), we are seeing a recognition among local branding organizations that they can address social inequities through their core programming. In order to highlight this work, we interviewed multiple branding organizations on how they are promoting equitable economic development strategies for local production economies.

Many local branding organizations are working to sustain and grow local economies, and to expand the freedom of making or small-scale manufacturing to underrepresented groups. In other words, by working on growing and sustaining small-scale manufacturing, these organizations are making an effort to battle inequality. But in our current age, in which the racial wealth and employment gaps remain as wide as ever¹, how are local branding organizations living up to their potential for increasing opportunity for all?

This report has two aims: first, to give an overview of the current efforts of a sample of local branding organizations wrestling with the question of how to address inequality in their cities; and second, to offer suggestions to branding organizations who are unsure of steps they can take to address inequality. We interviewed seven local branding organizations that are each wrestling with the questions of greater diversity, inclusion, and social equity. All of these organizations are still developing their own approaches to equity, but there are some lessons worth noting as each works to make positive changes in their cities.

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Branding Organizations

This report defines a local brand as a “...logo, name, term or design that creates a distinct place-based identity for a good manufactured in a given city.”⁵ A local branding organization, then, is an organization designed to promote a local brand through its own work. This definition is deliberately broad as local branding organizations, in practice, take myriad forms, ranging from for-profit enterprises to offshoots of public offices or university-affiliated centers. But they are all dedicated to promoting the local brand and the products of its members. The services local branding organizations provide are as varied as their institutional makeups, ranging from business-to-consumer marketing projects to technical assistance to workforce training and recruitment. Because of this it is difficult to pin down a singular definition or describe a single service that branding organizations provide, and as this report shows, local branding organizations’ missions continue to evolve and grow in response to what their members and organizational leadership see as vital local issues.



UMA and Equity

The Urban Manufacturing Alliance's Equity Community of Practice² and *Equitable Innovation Economies* (EIE) Initiative³ have supplied resources and guidance on the question of equitable and opportunity-enhancing development for its members over the past five years. This work focuses on what cities can do on a policy level in partnership with firms and practitioners, ranging from industrial redevelopment to setting up technical assistance programs for up-and-coming entrepreneurs.

As an extension of the EIE Initiative, this report focuses on the role that local branding organizations play in making our communities more equitable. The seven organizations—SFMade, Seattle Made, Made in Montreal, Made in Baltimore, Portland Made, Made By Memphis, and Made in NYC—represent a broad swath of local branding organizations ranging in age, size, programs, and structures. These organizations were chosen because most are still defining what it means to them to pursue equity-focused work as a branding organization. They represent the diversity in the ways that organizations have pursued equity as a strategy at various stages of organizational development.





Inclusion vs. Equity? Inclusion and Equity?

A fundamental tension that runs through equity work is defining the distinction between inclusion and equity. Often believed to be interchangeable, equity and inclusion are separate concepts. Equity is the systematic approach of ensuring that everyone has access to the same opportunities, recognizing that not all communities share the same “starting point.” Inclusion, on the other hand, is when individuals feel welcome and valued, and are given opportunities to grow or participate within a market, system, or organization.

Further, one doesn't necessarily follow the other. Inclusion can be said to be a necessary, yet ultimately insufficient, feature of equity programs as you cannot do equity work if you are not working with people and groups who are excluded. But what happens after people are included? Tackling long-lived social inequality as a goal means also attacking other barriers that go beyond inclusion. This does not mean that inclusion isn't valuable, but it does mean that organizations need to be intentional in their inclusion and outreach strategies and recognize their limits if they are ultimately concerned with attacking social inequity. In this sense, inclusion is the necessary first step.

Equity work, beyond inclusion, then, should broadly follow the rule of expanding opportunity, choice, and resources to those who historically have the least. This can include, but is certainly not limited to, active recruitment programs for frequently excluded or underrepresented groups, bridging capital gaps that often affect women- and minority-owned firms more than others, or working directly with members to prepare them to be better and more efficient employers.

Most of the interviewed organizations have inclusion programs or strategies. Often these programs come about because organizational leadership or members noticed a particular lack of diversity. Many interviewees mentioned the inaccurate portrayal of makers and small manufacturers as predominantly “hipster” white men with large beards, and how such a vision limits the potential and scope for manufacturing more broadly. As a response, many organizations have at some point launched explicit outreach programs or initiatives to address this. For example, Portland Made and ADX, a local makerspace, partnered with the Equity Foundation to provide scholarships for classes and membership at ADX to at-risk youth.

But having outreach programs and goals doesn’t guarantee success. In one case, even an organization performing intentional and extensive outreach over six months found it difficult to reach traditionally excluded groups. Broadly speaking, local brands found that they could not necessarily rely on the social networks of more established maker or small manufacturing communities alone. In this case, at least, longstanding segregation and mutual community distrust made outreach challenging.

It is up to organizational leadership to prioritize equity work in order to overcome the challenges present in the greater community. The San Francisco-based local branding organization SFMade, for example, is a more “traditional” member-driven organization whose leadership, citing its own mission, made steps in staffing and



programming to connect with hard-to-employ individuals through a variety of formal and informal partnerships. They also forged links with member firms facing their own workforce shortages. In this case, working with their members, local workforce agencies, and workers has proven a valuable service for all involved and has opened up additional opportunities and funding for the organization as a whole. This success is built through a growing web of formal and informal connections with city and regional workforce agencies.

The organizations that feel they are successful at their outreach with traditionally excluded workers and communities differ in two main areas: partnership breadth and institutional makeup. Groups that are making strides in outreach and inclusivity all mention the importance of identifying a broad array of partners beyond the groups and organizations with which they would normally interact. Seattle Made, as we will mention below, spoke about outreach to refugee communities, and has not only helped displaced peoples find work, but also linked their membership base with a new community of skilled workers and future business owners.

Alternatively, organizations attached to city governments or universities often already have access, and a clear mission, when it comes to reaching out to underrepresented communities. The organization Made in NYC is embedded in the decades-long community empowerment mission of its host, the Pratt Center for Community Development, which is the oldest university-based community planning organization in the United States. Made in NYC advocates not just for its member businesses but for the ecosystem of residents, workers, and businesses across the city that activates manufacturing productivity. They recognize that businesses exist within and are part of working-class communities that are often disadvantaged or displaced by policy decisions initiated or supported by the City. They also recognize that the health and vitality of communities contribute directly to the success of businesses. Made in Baltimore, which was initially embedded

in the Baltimore Office of Sustainability but is now part of the Baltimore Development Corporation, has a broad mission that encompasses support for local manufacturers and Baltimore's struggling neighborhoods. At their start, they took advantage of the City's existing relationships with a broad array of NGOs and community organizations to connect with and serve their membership.

In short, while there are some real distinctions between inclusion and equity, inclusion is by no means an easy "way out" of equity work if done sincerely. Organizations looking to be more inclusive have to do the hard work of planning their outreach strategies and building relationships with institutions that are aligned with or serve the communities they would like to benefit.

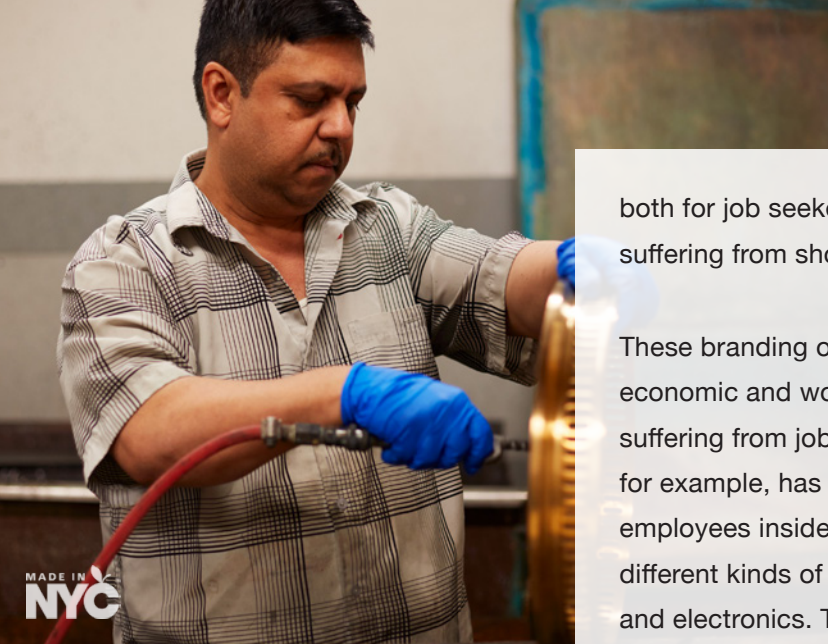


Embrace Being An Intermediary

One large area of commonality among the branding organizations that have strong equity programs is that they are intimately involved in workforce issues. In many cities, small manufacturers complain of worker shortages even as there are communities that suffer from unemployment rates 2-3 times the city average. As a result, almost all of the interviewed organizations do some form of training or assistance for members, but few take the extra step of becoming full workforce intermediaries.

SFMade has workforce programs that function as an intermediary between workers and employers throughout the hiring process. In the case of Made in Baltimore, the organization is currently setting up deeper relationships with local organizations in and led by African American communities in order to better match employers and employees in a city that has long been impacted by segregation and a heavily racialized labor market. As with many equity programs, these organizations find that embracing their role as an intermediary is an advantage

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both for job seekers and member firms who are constantly suffering from shortages of qualified labor.

These branding organizations are filling a gap that plagues local economic and workforce development agencies, communities suffering from joblessness, and small manufacturers. SFMade, for example, has a set of online materials that provide potential employees insider advice on how to prepare for job interviews for different kinds of SFMade member manufacturers in food/beverage and electronics. These materials are gleaned from employer focus groups. On the employer side, SFMade has also produced a comprehensive guide for employers regarding hiring and recruiting workers that covers everything from interview protocols to covering state labor law.⁴ For small firms, SFMade acts as a de facto human resources department, while also helping workforce partners get hard-to-employ individuals considered for jobs.

While this does add significant work, local branding organizations are already well positioned to dip their toes into the intermediary game by leveraging their most precious resource: their existing relationships with manufacturers. A lot of the work that SFMade has to do is just picking up the phone or talking with employers face-to-face, reassuring them that a potential employee has promise. Being honest and upfront with their membership so that they are not taken by surprise is essential here.

All of the branding organizations interviewed offer support services ranging from technical assistance to financial consulting in order to help businesses grow. While all businesses need a better understanding of financing options and technical innovation, in order for these businesses to grow they need good employees. Branding organizations interested in offering more services to their members as well as directly attacking unemployment in their communities should reach out to their local workforce agencies, and attempt to forge some new relationships.



Build Out Your Networks

An essential lesson from every interviewee is the importance of expanding your organization's network and influence. This is generally good advice but it takes on extra salience for these organizations doing equity work. Most branding organizations have excellent connections with their members and related city and professional organizations, but it is an unfortunate fact that the communities and people most in need of increased access to good jobs are often socially isolated.

One example of an organization expanding its network and supporting workforce intermediary work is called Northwest Sewn, a collaborative project between Seattle Made and local sewn trades training program Muses. The project started as a response to Seattle Made members noting they could not find local sewing options. In the process of searching for local alternatives, Seattle Made partnered with Muses, which had discovered the untapped potential within local refugee communities where many women have sewing experience but little

“... but it is an unfortunate fact that the communities and people most in need of increased access to good jobs are often socially isolated.”

formal employment experience. For Northwest Sewn, Muses runs a training program for refugee and immigrant sewers, and Seattle Made provided support by fundraising and connecting trained sewers to Seattle Made member businesses.

In this case, member demands allowed Seattle Made to take advantage of the skills of a large, yet often underrepresented, population. This network-building requires bringing together many refugee communities from different parts of the world who speak multiple languages, as well as managing relationships between members and sewers to ensure that everyone is adequately served.

On the other side of the country, Made in Baltimore is growing its own network as part of its overall mission to help provide good jobs to its community as a whole. And in Baltimore, this principally means connecting black people to jobs. As a result, Made in Baltimore is very intentional about partnering with local black organizations and business owners in order to guarantee they are reaching the communities and people who are most in need. This outreach and connection is seen as essential in Baltimore as the city faces increasing inequality and the societal and economic costs of racial segregation.

Finally, it is essential that organizations be civically engaged. Many organizations already advocate on the part of their members with local officials, but it is vital that they become intimately familiar with local power brokers and policy makers. Local policy affects issues ranging from available space and real estate to hiring, and small manufacturers are often not represented in these policy conversations. Additionally, if organizations wish to be larger players in their cities in mitigating inequality and expanding opportunity, then they have to be connected with local non-profits, city planning and economic development offices, and workforce development boards. These institutions not only shape policies that affect members but will also be key partners in programming and, in some cases, potential program funders.



Takeaways and Conclusions

The organizations interviewed here offer multiple realizations on the changing nature of branding organizations and lessons for organizations that want to do more to tackle social inequality.

In this piece, we've highlighted three major takeaways that every organization had either resolved or were actively working to resolve:

1. Making initial forays into being more inclusive as the necessary first step in starting equity work;
2. Taking on workforce development as an essential part of programming in order to meet member demands but also to link traditionally excluded groups to new jobs; and,
3. Connecting with a variety of offices, organizations, and programs in the local area so organizations can be an effective advocate for their members and for their community.

PANORAMA WINDOWS PHOTO CREDIT: TOMMY VENUS

LIGHTS UP PHOTO CREDIT: CHRIS MOTALINI

AJC JEWELRY PHOTO CREDIT: CHRIS MOTALINI

MOMO DRESSING PHOTO CREDIT: CHRIS MOTALINI

These are vital steps an organization can take, but an even more important takeaway for equity-oriented work is for the organization to be explicit about its intentions, and its capacity to dedicate real resources.

Many of the interviewees noted that equity, or equity-oriented issues, were already part of their organization’s missions, but the language was vague or equity priorities (such as workforce development) were consistently delayed or forgotten about amidst other priorities.

Overcoming this requires dedicated leadership and action.

Each of the organizations interviewed have experienced leaders who are doing the hard work of institutional change, embracing experimentation, and working towards a more equitable and just economy. For those who wish to do more to fight growing social and economic inequality, they should reach out to their local economic development offices, workforce boards, and NGOs (including the Urban Manufacturing Alliance’s Equity Community of Practice) to start making connections with institutions that need help connecting people with sustainable, rewarding work.

For entrepreneurs like Kristi Brown, Seattle Made is a connector that has catalyzed her business’s growth in the Seattle area: the organization’s value “has been proven by their network and the impact that I’ve seen on my own business.” She says her relationship with Seattle Made represents the potential impact local branding organizations can have on entrepreneurs of color nationwide. “No organization can do too much to make sure that they’re working with people who reflect the community they serve.”

How Can I Start a Local Branding Organization in my City?

See our [toolkit](#) on how to develop a locally-made brand platform or check out the resources on our [Local Branding Community of Practice page](#).



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SURDNA FOUNDATION





Endnotes

- 1 Hamilton, D. & Darity, W. 2017. [The Political Economy of Education, Financial Literacy, and the Racial Wealth Gap.](#)
- 2 Urban Manufacturing Alliance, 2013. [UMA Toolkit: How to Develop a Locally-Made Brand Platform.](#)
- 3 Urban Manufacturing Alliance, [Equity Community of Practice.](#)
- 4 Urban Manufacturing Alliance, Pratt Center for Community Development, and PolicyLink, 2016. [Equitable Innovation Economies Initiative.](#)
- 5 SFMade, 2015. [Recruiting and Hiring Manual.](#)