

# Case Study: Rowan County – county-wide branding initiative

## Executive Summary

The Rowan County Community Branding Initiative, led in partnership with Chandler Thinks Destination Branding Specialists, represents a collaborative, internally focused effort to develop a cohesive brand identity for Rowan County, North Carolina. While aiming to market the county for tourism and economic development, research revealed the necessity of reshaping internal perceptions and fostering community pride. The project successfully shifted local attitudes from self-criticism to celebration, initiated a unifying message of authenticity, and provided a compelling story that both residents and visitors can embrace, setting a solid foundation for further growth.

## Project Details

<b>Partner Agency</b> Chandler Thinks Destination Branding Specialists	<b>Lead Organization</b> Rowan County Tourism
<b>Focus Area</b> County-wide community and destination brand development	<b>Project Objective</b> Develop a unifying, authentic county brand to support economic development and tourism, starting with internal engagement and pride

## Key Challenge

Despite its rich countryside and charming towns, Rowan County was mired in negative self-perceptions. Community members tended to be more critical of flaws than enthusiastic about the county's strengths, creating substantial internal resistance to external branding initiatives.

# Community Engagement & Buy-in

Before starting the brand development, community leadership organized a series of meetings and focus groups including leaders from both the public and private sectors across Rowan County. These meetings evaluated whether there was collective buy-in to pursue a community brand, ensuring broad-based support before advancing. Once sufficient buy-in was confirmed Rowan County Tourism decided that a community brand was a worthy investment and moved forward. The Rowan County Board of Commissioners, following the Tourism board's recommendation, appointed a brand task force. This group included a wide range of community members tasked with guiding the brand's development.

## Stakeholder Engagement & Initial Brand Development Process

### Stakeholder Engagement

**41**

#### Interviews

with community stakeholders

**7**

#### Local Focus Groups

with 59 participants

**3**

#### Online Focus Groups

in outlying markets with 58 participants

**1,331**

#### Community Surveys

from local community members

**314**

#### External Surveys

attitude/awareness/perception  
surveys from nearby cities

The project also reviewed Rowan County's digital footprint and conducted community segmentation profiling.

## Key Themes from Research



### History & Heritage

Repeatedly cited as a top asset. The NC Transportation Museum, historic preservation, and local heritage sites emerged as major community points of pride.



### Outdoors & Agriculture

Stakeholders and surveys emphasized Rowan County's rural landscape, agricultural experiences, parks (notably Dan Nicholas Park), and scenic beauty.



### Location & Access

The county's central Piedmont location, proximity to major cities and interstates, and access to transportation (road, rail, air) were consistently valued by both residents and outsiders.



### Vibrant Communities

Community-specific identities (e.g., Salisbury, Kannapolis, China Grove) were revealed through surveys and focus groups, each contributing distinct perceptions and strengths to the broader brand.



### Cultural Heart

Salisbury stands out as the cultural, historic, and economic hub of Rowan County, frequently referenced for its arts scene, events, college town feel, and downtown energy.

## Data Highlights

- Residents and outsiders agree on Rowan County's strengths: **history**, **natural beauty**, **location**, and a **sense of community**.
- Community surveys showed strong pride in heritage, positive perceptions of local amenities, and recognition of Salisbury's key role.
- Review of digital search and social media data confirmed that Salisbury draws the most attention and recognition among Rowan's communities.
- Outsider surveys noted Rowan County as a "nice place to visit," friendly, historic, and with good quality of life.

Challenges identified included a legacy of political tensions and poor self-image among residents, though external perceptions were generally more positive.

## Brand Platform

### Target

People seeking a country setting with a dynamic cultural heart.

### Landscape

Conveniently centered in the North Carolina Piedmont, close to thriving metros, yet offering "relief" from their pace.

### Promise

Life includes both a historic cultural center and the distinctive charm of rural communities.

### Benefit

Residents and visitors have true choices on the kind of experience—and pace they want each day.

## Established Truths Incorporated into the Brand

- Rowan County's rural and agricultural lifestyle is highly valued by residents.
- Its central location and access are desirable for both business and leisure.
- Salisbury's role as cultural and educational center is vital.
- While internal self-perceptions can be negative due to local politics, outsider opinions are much more favorable.
- Rowan County's dichotomy of engaging countryside and urban vibe speaks to its unique character. But what defines our county is its compelling spirit of individualism that connects residents and visitors alike... this is the place where you can truly, be an original.

## Creative Execution



### Photo Library

Created a photo library to reflect the brand and celebrate the faces of the community who became advocates for the brand.



### Video Content

Assembled videos highlighting the originality of Rowan County to bring the brand message to life and deepen local engagement.



### Marketing Materials

Developed marketing and advertising materials, including digital, print and billboard campaigns, that reflected new brand values.



### Messaging Strategy

Ensured messaging resonated with both local audiences and external visitors, focusing on pride and originality.

# Implementation & Rollout

## Print Advertising

Developed and placed ads in regional publications conveying the "Be an Original" theme.

## Billboard Advertising

Installed visually striking billboards across the county, reinforcing the new narrative and inviting both residents and travelers to celebrate Rowan's uniqueness.

## Logo Adoption Across the County

Rowan County Tourism funded the creation of new logos for organizations throughout the county. To date, more than 70 entities have adopted new "Be An Original" logos that represent their organizations, while fitting within the overall brand framework, ensuring county-wide brand unity.

## Community Engagement

Ongoing outreach to maintain momentum and deepen internalization of the brand message.

# Outcomes and Impact

## Increased Community Pride

Residents became more likely to promote Rowan County's assets and uniqueness, shifting away from habitual self-critique.

## Unified County Image

The internally driven process established a credible, compelling county brand based on authenticity and individualism.

## Marketing Foundation

Enhanced ability to attract new visitors and economic development by presenting a cohesive, positive image aligned with local realities.

The Be An Original brand has become a hallmark of the Rowan County community. Be An Original messaging is woven throughout the community from light pole banners to emergency response vehicles, the brand is thriving

# Brand Expansions

- 1 — COVID-19 Support (2020)**

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Rowan County Tourism expanded the brand with COVID support kits for local businesses. These kits included: branded hand sanitizer, signage, shop local stickers, decals for shops to indicate 6ft distance for safe queuing, and more. This initiative provided practical support to businesses while reinforcing the brand's presence within the community.
- 2 — Brand Refresh (2022)**

In 2022, a comprehensive brand refresh was undertaken to align with Rowan County Tourism's new website launch. The brand's color palette was expanded and a new photo library was created in partnership with David Bailey Photography out of Nashville, Tennessee. Rowan County Tourism adopted blue from the new palette as its primary color, signaling a fresh yet consistent brand identity.
- 3 — County-Wide Wayfinding System (2025)**

A county-wide wayfinding system was developed in partnership with Rowan County Tourism and each of Rowan County's communities. Welcome signs and directional signs were installed throughout the county bearing the Be An Original brand standards.
- 4 — 10th Anniversary (2026)**

Rowan County Tourism will celebrate the 10-year anniversary of the brand's adoption in 2026 with a series of county-wide celebrations, collaborations, and creative original initiatives that build on a decade of community-focused success.

Ongoing efforts to reinforce and expand the county brand through continued engagement, new marketing channels, and the creation and adoption of new logos throughout the community.

# Community Voices

"Rowan County needed something bigger than a logo and an ad. They needed to believe in themselves and they needed a story they could all get behind. This branding project did just that."

— James Meacham, President/CEO Rowan County Convention & Visitors Bureau

## Additional Resources

Additional information about the Be An Original brand can be found on Rowan County Tourism's website at : [visitrowancountync.com/about-us/rowan-county-community-branding/](https://visitrowancountync.com/about-us/rowan-county-community-branding/)



A series of billboards were created to represent the county as a whole, as well as establish the "Be An Original" Brand.



Rowan County Tourism's website was the first to be completed to reflect the new branding initiative.



# Brand Implementation Examples



A photo library was developed in order to create impactful messaging about community, education, economic development, small business and visitors.

Messaging was used throughout the community for various impacts through traditional advertising, billboards, digital advertising and more.





# Highlights of Brand Adoption

The "Be An Original" brand has been successfully integrated across Rowan County, showcasing a unified identity and fostering community pride. These examples illustrate the diverse ways the brand has been embraced by local entities, from municipal services to transportation hubs.



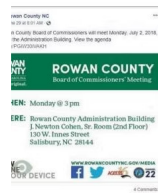
## Town of Faith Banners

Many municipalities, like the Town of Faith, have adopted the new branding on light pole banners, funded through Rowan County Tourism initiatives, enhancing local identity.



## Emergency Services Fleet

Rowan County Emergency Services proudly displays the new "Be An Original" logo across its entire fleet, unifying essential services under the county brand.



## Social Media Integration

The "Be An Original" brand has been swiftly integrated into Rowan County's digital presence, including active use on social media platforms, for consistent messaging.



## Airport Rebranding

The Mid-Carolina Regional Airport underwent a significant rebranding as part of the initiative, with its new sign prominently featuring the "Be An Original" identity.

Gold Hill Brochure



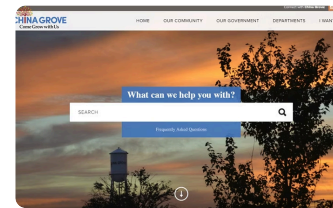
## Marketing Materials

The "Be An Original" brand was adapted by nearly all of Rowan County's municipalities, and can be found throughout their marketing materials.



## Logos

All facets of the community were invited to join the Be An Original brand by being given the opportunity to have a new logo created free of charge.



## Municipality Websites

As municipalities received their new logos, they began incorporating their logos and the brand as a whole into their individual websites.