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# **BREW FEST: COMMUNICATION AGILITY IN RURAL AMERICA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Business communication is vital to solving any business problem. Yet, the uncertainty of the future makes business communication complex and requires organizations to be strategic and have communication agility. This pedagogical case study is used in the collegiate business communication classroom to help frame a business problem. Students reading the case will gain an understanding of a real-life business scenario involving the importance of communication agility and cultural events in a rural community. Students are then challenged to use best practices in business communication to help ensure the future of the community event, Brew Fest.

**Keywords:** teaching case study, business communication agility, cultural events, rural resilience

## **INTRODUCTION**

Business communication is vital to every area of an organization's operations (Rentz & Lentz, 2021). When faced with a challenge, an organization will rely on communication to problem

solve and almost no workplace problem can be solved without communication (Rentz & Lentz, 2021). In the future, organizations must approach business communication with agility, especially in times of uncertainty and increasing competition in the craft beer industry (Biscotti, 2023; Boone, 2022). For this case study, business communication agility is defined as the ability to provide effective, authentic communication related to stakeholder values while adapting and responding quickly, adeptly, and flexibly to change (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2022; Van Ruler, 2019). Stakeholder needs and values cannot be interpreted by an individual organization, but should include input from various stakeholder groups to identify and establish shared and authentic common ground (Van Ruler, 2019). Through such an inclusive approach to business communication agility, the resulting core identity should unite disparate stakeholders around well-defined goals and a core identity that is more adaptive and resilient to changes in the external environment. As such, this case study helps to facilitate understanding of the needs and values of a key stakeholder group, attendees of a craft beer festival in rural America to ensure not only the long-term success of this annual event but that mutual benefits are accrued.

This teaching case study is utilized in a collegiate business communication course to challenge students (acting as consultants) to make business communication decisions that will impact the future of rural Ford, Texas and the Downtown Ford Development Corporation (DFDC).

## **BEGINNING OF THE CASE: THE CITY OF FORD**

Located near the Texas and Oklahoma border, Ford, Texas is home to 21,000 people and is the largest city in a 100-mile radius. This quaint town has much to offer such as museums, parks, outdoor recreation, arts, a regional airport, and close access to an interstate system. Ford was even named an *All-American City* by National Civic League in the late 1990s (Past Winners, 2020). While Ford has much to offer, attracting people to Ford, especially Downtown Ford, has been a challenge.

The Downtown Ford Development Corporation (DFDC) was created in 2001 as a non-profit organization, funded with both private and public funds. The mission of the DFDC is to foster awareness and promote Downtown Ford as a vibrant center of commerce, recreation, arts, government, and history that serves the people of Ford, the surrounding region, and visitors from around the world. In its 20-year existence, the DFDC has relied on a number of events to help get groups of people to Downtown Ford to generate revenue for downtown businesses and showcase all the city has to offer. The largest of these events is Brew Fest, a premier craft beer event designed to draw in breweries and craft beer enthusiasts from across the country. The DFDC stumbled upon the idea for this event in 2015 when one of the DFDC's board members attended a similar event in Oklahoma City.

Brew Fest now serves as the largest fundraiser for the DFDC. Public funding from the City of Ford has fluctuated over the years, so fundraising is more important than ever. The DFDC will depend on the continued growth and success of Brew Fest to function as the Downtown Ford Development Corporation and continue to pursue its mission of fostering awareness and promoting Downtown Ford (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021). Communication agility will be vital in the growth of the event, especially as craft beer festivals become more competitive (Biscotti, 2023; Boone, 2022). Yet, perhaps Brew Fest plays an even more important role in providing much needed cultural experiences to a rural community.

## **Role of Festivals in Rural Communities**

In rural areas of the United States, there has been a steady decline in population growth within the last two decades. The percentage of rural residents age 65 or older has increased and now accounts for 20% of the population in the rural United States (Davis et al., 2022). An aging population combined with youth retention issues and higher cost of living make retaining and engaging youth and attracting new residents to rural communities a vital component to sustaining rural communities (Duxbury & Campbell, 2011).

Ulrich Beck (Beck et al., 2003; Beck & Lau, 2005) argues for a “reformed” or second phase of modernity in which many of society’s basic institutions, including governments, economic activity, and work are transformed through a pluralization of boundaries and the renegotiation or reordering of roles, identities and hierarchies within society (Beck & Lau, 2005). Mayer and Knox applied these concepts to better understand developments and changes within the sphere of small towns. For small towns, the legacy of modernity included “decades of economic and demographic stagnation” including, in many instances, “a decline in locally owned businesses with a consequent loss of local distinctiveness, character and sense of place” (Mayer & Knox, 2010, p. 1547). According to Mayer and Knox, in the context of a second phase of modernity, four “sensibilities” are guiding the efforts toward small-town sustainability: food, environmentalism, entrepreneurship, and creativity; they document how specific configurations of these sensibilities have shaped the efforts of individual communities and encouraged the formation of inter-town networks and cooperatives (2010).

In Ford, Texas, the decline in downtown businesses, loss of character, and sense of place was a reality throughout the downtown in the 1990s. However, with the creation of the DFDC in 2001, Downtown Ford began to see opportunity for development within the small-town due to the shifts associated with second modernity. Culturally-themed festivals, like Brew Fest, are a way to celebrate rural communities. Festivals often strengthen relationships within the community and foster pride by bringing people together (Godinez, 2019). While Ford has not participated in any networks such as those described by Mayer and Knox, Brew Fest and other initiatives at Ford can be understood as the efforts of one U.S. community to meet the challenges of second modernity. Indeed, sensibilities identified by Mayer and Knox—food and entrepreneurship—have driven the development of Brew Fest. And an additional sensibility—creativity (in the form of communication agility)—may play a large role in Brew Fest’s continuing success. Reflecting on the history of the city can help to understand the cultural and heritage opportunities of Ford, Texas, especially Downtown Ford.

### **Understanding the History of Ford**

The City of Ford was once known as the Wild West, where saloons and dance halls filled the ungoverned town. By the mid-1870s, the railroad workers and Wild West characters moved on. The town calmed and became home to immigrants, mostly from the Volga German region. From the German-inspired cuisine to the limestone buildings, the Volga German heritage still runs strong in Downtown Ford today.

Downtown Ford was thriving in the early 1900s until the 1980s. By 2000, Downtown Ford was filled with blight and dilapidated buildings. The City of Ford had focused on developing the town closer to interstate and the downtown area continued to decline. An original DFDC board member and lifelong City of Ford resident has fond memories of what Downtown Ford used to be. “Downtown was what we knew and where we were. It was the gathering place. There was no other place you went to in town” (S. Jacob, personal communication, March 29, 2021). The declining landscape of Downtown Ford concerned many community members and sparked a community-

driven rehabilitation effort of the area, beginning with the creation of a non-profit organization called the Downtown Ford Development Corporation (DFDC) with a full board of directors. As one past board member said of downtown, “It is not the heart of this community, it is the soul of the community” (S. Jacob, personal communication, March 29, 2021).

In the early 2000s, a developer in a nearby town approached the DFDC board with a plan to develop seven of the dilapidated downtown buildings, if the DFDC could purchase the buildings. The board received large monetary donations from businesses across town to support the effort and then turned to a grassroots fundraising effort by asking the entire Ford community to contribute. The effort was successful. The initial seven buildings were revitalized, bringing in small businesses and restaurants alike (S. Jacob, personal communication, March 29, 2021). The majority of downtown was restored and the DFDC is the cornerstone of continued rehabilitation and success of Downtown Ford. The DFDC is also the driving force for getting people to gather in Downtown Ford.

### **Budget & Events for the Downtown Ford Development Corporation**

The DFDC has an annual budget of \$175,000. The City of Ford contributes \$54,000 to that annual budget, but each year the city has contemplated cutting funding by 5% to 10%. Event fundraisers, such as Brew Fest, and donations support the remaining budget. The DFDC has two employees, the Executive Director and the Director of Events and Operations. It relies on a number of interns and volunteers to execute events and activities. One of the greatest challenges for the DFDC is the “desperate need of more positions,” according to Tara Boom, Executive Director. Not having the funding for staff positions impacts marketing efforts and as Boom mentioned, “the ability to tell our story” (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

### ***Annual Events***

So many of the events hosted by the DFDC are worth sharing and help tell the story of the DFDC. Retail events, such as Cottontails and Coffee, are collaborative efforts between the DFDC and downtown businesses. At Cottontails and Coffee, guests participate in an adult Easter Egg hunt while enjoying various kinds of coffees along the way with discounts to retail locations, prizes, and food.

The Downtown Ford Market is a crowd-drawing series of events. The market is open May through October on Saturday mornings and features local growers, bakers, and producers, as well as craft and product vendors. In addition, the DFDC includes locally grown foods with their Farm & Family event. This fundraising event includes fellowship, entertainment, and a five-course meal all made with locally sourced food from the Downtown Ford Market vendors. This event is one of two annual fundraising events for the DFDC, but is limited to 150 guests. Events play a key role in the DFDC’s efforts. Boom said:

“Events can bring people in large masses. While we can do our best with marketing across the country and bring in a few people at a time, the events allow us to bring in a large mass of people at one time and showcase what our district has to offer with the fun, dining, and entertainment we can provide. We host 14 annual events now and only two of those are fundraising events. I am really proud of that fact. The rest are strictly events to bring awareness and support the businesses that are in downtown. The other great thing about bringing those masses in is those people are not only coming for events, they are coming to spend money in our community. If we can keep them downtown, then these people are

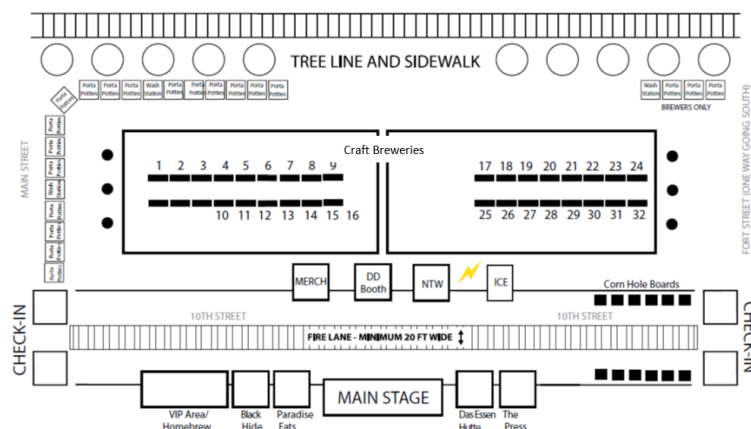
spending money at our small, locally-owned businesses. It does not matter what kind of event the DFDC hosts, it benefits a downtown business.”

### ***Brew Fest***

The Brew Fest event is DFDC’s most attended event and its largest fundraiser. This event will net \$70,000 to \$90,000 per year (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021). This event began in 2015 when two local breweries helped the DFDC with attracting brewers to the event. Without brewers promoting their craft beer, there wouldn’t be a festival (Moody, 2021). The event has grown from 20 brewers from all across the state and 400 tickets in 2015 to 50 brewers and 2500 tickets in 2019 (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021). Tickets to Brew Fest sell out within minutes online.

Brew Fest is fortunate to have over forty volunteers to help with check-in, security, and various roles throughout the event (Moody, 2021). In addition to craft beer from across the world, attendees enjoy live music, a cornhole tournament, and a homebrew competition (Moody, 2021). Of the tickets sold, 500 are VIP tickets, allowing ticket holders early access to the event and exclusive food sampling during the event. Figure 1 provides a visual example of the Brew Fest event.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Brew Fest Event Map**



The DFDC depends on the continued success of Brew Fest and hopes to grow and adapt the event in the future to keep people coming back to this culturally-themed event. This is a tough challenge, one that will rely on a deep understanding of the craft beer industry and the ability to continuously adapt to environmental impacts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **CRAFT BEER INDUSTRY**

When Germans began to immigrate to the United States, they brought with them pieces of their heritage, including beer, food, and social events for family and friends (Moody, 2021). The American lagers did not live up to expectations, so the German Americans began brewing their own. They helped develop commercial refrigeration and bottling solutions and even contributed recipes that advanced into international brands, such as Pabst, Miller, and Busch (Moody, 2021).

The rise in craft breweries did not happen overnight and has fluctuated over time. The U.S. has seen a dramatic increase of craft breweries in the 40 years, going from 37 breweries across the U.S. in 1985 to 4,225 in 2015 (Gatrell et al., 2018). In 2015, craft beer accounted for 21% of beer sales (Gatrell et al., 2018). Many breweries in the middle-United States were situated in historic downtown locations, preserving and revitalizing a city's downtown (Crutchfield, 2019). With the rise of craft breweries, the German heritage of Ford, and two award-winning craft breweries in Ford, hosting a craft beer festival was a natural fit.

### **The Brewology Project**

Understanding consumer values and motivations implicated in the growth of the craft beer industry in the middle-United States is important to continue the success of Brew Fest. A group of faculty and students from a nearby university conducted a research study (The Brewology Project) to identify salient factors underlying the popularity of craft beers and beer festivals in the middle-United States. Brew Fest was identified as an ideal festival to collect data.

### ***Sights and Sounds of Brew Fest***

Along with data collection, researchers captured the sights and sounds of the festival with pictures and video. To visualize the event, review the sights and sounds at: <https://use.vg/bsC4n4>

### ***Demographic Data***

The Brewology Project collected over 200 surveys at Brew Fest which provided insight into who attended the festival and their motivations for attending, as noted in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Survey Participant Demographics**

<b>Gender</b>	59% 39% 2% Preferred Not to Answer	Female Male
<b>Age</b>	Average: 43 years old Median: 35 years old	
<b>Marital Status</b>	53% 36% 11% Widowed/Divorced/Separated	Married Single
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	94% Caucasian	
<b>Employment Status</b>	86% Employed full-time/part-time	
<b>Level of Education Completed</b>	41% Bachelor's Degree 29% Master or Doctorate 25% Some college, technical college, Associate's degree	

### ***Middle-United States Values***

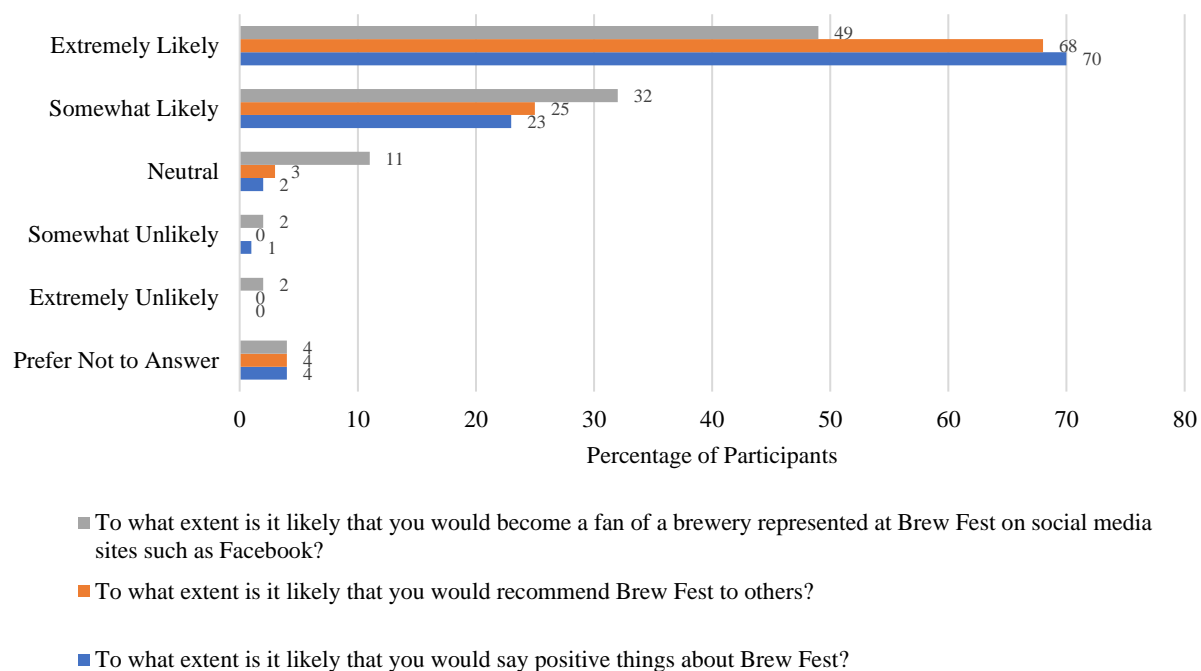
Survey participants were asked to list cultural values most typical of people in the middle-United States region. Available in the Appendix, a word cloud provides a visual representation of themes, where the size of each word indicates frequency and importance. For example,

“hardworking” and “family” were identified most frequently, whereas “knowledge” (located at the top of the figure) may have been referenced by one person.

### ***Event Findings***

The survey administered at the Brew Fest event collected answers to event-specific questions related to participant experience. Figure 2 provides results of the event-specific questions. One of the questions asked was, “To what extent is it that you are likely to recommend Brew Fest to others?” Similar to a Net Promoter Score, this question was designed to gauge customer loyalty (Albert & Tullis, 2013).

**FIGURE 2**  
**Perception of Brew Fest Experience**



### ***American Dream Values***

In addition to event-specific questions and demographic questions, participants were asked various questions pertaining to the craft beer industry and craft beer festivals. Results suggest that drinking craft beer is not sufficient motivation to attend craft beer festivals. An important motivation is the extent to which individuals feel immersed in craft beer culture, which appears to relate to more traditional American Dream ideology rather than contemporary values. Craft beer and festival marketers would want to consider these two distinct market segments.

## **A GLOBAL PANDEMIC AND RURAL RESILIENCY**

In late 2019 and throughout 2020, the world was greatly impacted by a severe acute respiratory syndrome called coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19). In many countries, travel was limited, as were events and gatherings to help prevent the spread of the disease (Tosh, 2020). Ford, Texas and the DFDC experienced the same hardships during COVID-19 and had to cancel its top



fundraising event, Brew Fest. This put tremendous strain on DFDC's budget and an unquestionable concern for small businesses in Downtown Ford, as all store fronts were forced to close.

The pandemic did not stop the DFDC from adapting and moving forward to support small businesses and the community. It started a Better Than Ever campaign to help filter money to downtown businesses. Partnering with a downtown bank, every community member who purchased a \$20 gift card to a downtown business also received a \$10 bonus gift card to use at either Wal-Mart or donate to the local food pantry. The campaign was very successful and the DFDC sold out of gift cards in 48 hours (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021).

The DFDC received *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES)* funding allowing the DFDC to purchase hand sanitizing stations for downtown businesses (Cares Act and Small Businesses, 2021). The funding supported 100 stations, 400 batteries, and 400 gallons of sanitizer (T. Boom, personal communication, May 10, 2021). The assistance was much appreciated by downtown business owners to help keep customers safe.

## SUMMARY AND MOVING FORWARD

Throughout the case study, we have learned about the rural community of Ford, Texas and the important role the DFDC plays in bringing culturally-themed events to the community. Ford experienced rural resiliency throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but now it is time to focus on rural resiliency in the future. The DFDC must now get back on track with holding events and communicating with stakeholders. Business communication agility is essential in further developing relationships with stakeholders and will be important for the DFDC to have positive communication outcomes with their future communications. Consultants, *like yourself*, are charged with helping the DFDC look to the future.

With communication agility in mind, Boom understands the importance of effective, authentic messages related to stakeholder values. Boom has asked for your help in using business communication media to do marketing for a future Brew Fest event.

1. On behalf of Tara Boom, draft an email message to announce the next Brew Fest event to the Ford community and encourage Ford residents to continue to volunteer at the upcoming event. Previous communication with the community has not embraced the importance of culturally-themed events, rural resiliency, or meeting the challenges of second modernity. Within the email, emphasize the importance of food and entrepreneurship ("sensibilities" described by Mayer and Knox, 2010) to the Ford community.
2. Next, draft a social media message to the craft beer community to announce the upcoming event. Your message must resonate with the values of the craft beer community (authenticity and effectiveness of the message). You should also consider how this message might need to shift from medium to medium (adaptability and flexibility of the message).

## CASE NOTES

### Location

Ford, Texas, the Downtown Ford Development Corporation, and Tara Boom are pseudonyms for the location of this study. Aside from using pseudonyms for the names to ensure anonymity, all facts presented in the case are real and accurate. The issues presented are real, as well as the Brewology Project discussed.

### Funding

The Brewology Project was a grant-funded research initiative through the Office of Scholarship and Sponsored Projects at the authors' institution.

### Using the Case

Instructors who wish to use this teaching case may contact the FBD Journal Editor to request a copy of the corresponding teaching notes. This request should include the instructor's name, credentials, contact information, and the class in which the case will be administered.

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