



ORIGINS

# WHAT NOW?

## Bridging Alberta's Reputation-Reality Divide

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## The Problem

“Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution – more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to.”<sup>1</sup> – Lisa Cron

Today, there is a global competition for talent. Young people weigh a variety of criteria as they decide where to live. Economic conditions including career opportunities and affordability are certainly important, but young adults also consider other factors that relate to livability including clean, safe communities, access to transportation, vibrancy, inclusivity and active experiences.

In 2021, Canada West Foundation led a study to examine why, after decades of net positive migration, Alberta had experienced net negative youth migration for the previous five years.<sup>1</sup> The resulting report, *Work to Live*, discusses how Alberta's reputation among young people is a challenge.<sup>2</sup> Youth living both inside and outside the province believe Alberta is dominated by the oil and gas sector and offers limited career prospects in other sectors. When specifically asked what percentage of Albertans work directly in oil and gas extraction, participants estimated between 40 and

<sup>1</sup> Among other research, the study involved 12 focus groups of young adults from across Alberta and a survey of 2,000 young adults (1,100 Albertans, 400 each from Toronto and Vancouver and 100 from Kitchener-Waterloo.)

70 per cent (the reality is under seven per cent). And while only 33 per cent of survey respondents think Alberta has a diverse population, Calgary is actually the third most diverse city in the country.

Because perception is reality, it doesn't have to be true, it only has to be believed. This divide between Alberta's reputation and Alberta's reality challenges the province's capacity to attract and retain the next generation of talent.

## The Solution

“Narratives are memorable and deeply human. In them we see repeating patterns and values.”<sup>3</sup> – **Brand Tasmania**

Bridging this reputation-reality divide begins with stories. The Canada West Foundation report, *Work to Live*, recommends that “... the key to the attraction and retention of young talent for Alberta comes down to telling better stories and telling them in better ways.”<sup>4</sup>

Stories are what define humanity. They allow individuals to make sense of themselves and their role in the world. Individual stories contribute to large interdependent and collaborative narratives that define families, communities, regions and countries.<sup>5</sup>

Great stories persuade – connecting people over a shared sense of purpose and belonging.<sup>6</sup> Reputation often lags behind reality because a reputation is rooted in stories of the past. To bridge this reputation-reality divide Albertans must tell new stories, rooted in the reality of modern Alberta, that resonate with young people.

However, simply telling new stories is not sufficient. In today's information-saturated world, Albertans must reconsider how they tell their stories. This starts by recognizing that reputations are complex and interdependent. The reputations of the province, its communities and its dominant economic sectors affect one another. This reputational interdependency involves collaboration by citizens and community leaders across the private, non-profit and public sectors. Collaboration will contribute to the harmonization of the stories told while also aggregating the resources necessary to tell them with impact. Bridging this reputation-reality divide through collaboration can transform Alberta's capacity to attract and retain the next generation of talent.

“Many stories being told about Alberta are about oil & gas, an aging workforce, or youth leaving. The stories Alberta's post-secondary students want to tell are about resilience, dedication, inclusion and growth. We know that youth have an opportunity to change the province's reputation. Investing in youth, including a sustained commitment to higher education, will ensure that we can tell a new Alberta story.”

— **Jon Bilodeau**, Executive Director, ASEC, and Dawson Thomas, President, SAITSA

## How youth in Toronto and Vancouver view Alberta

28%

view Alberta as having a diverse economy.

31%

believe it provides opportunities to move up in their career.

33%

view Alberta as having a diverse population and international outlook.

41%

believe Alberta big cities offer similar opportunities for work and living as other major cities.

“I've always identified as a Calgarian. And in Alberta, I also recognize the difference among the two. They are not the exact same. I think that difference is what makes this province a great province – the diversity of thought.”

— Focus group participant

“My parents and grandparents immigrated from Korea in 1988. Just talking about what Alberta was like in 1988, versus now, is a complete 180° difference. Today, you see groups of people together and it's all different kinds of people, wearing different things. They all look different and that gives me a lot of hope.”

— Focus group participant

# Why Reputations Matter

The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come.<sup>7</sup> – Steve Jobs

Place reputation is complex. Place reputation, be it a country, province or community, incorporates two dimensions. The first is the character of a place – being known for something relevant to the audience. The second dimension is the overall positive or negative perception of this place held by individuals. Thus, place reputation is contextual and audience specific. For example, for international talent Canada’s country reputation may be highly influential while provincial or community reputation may play a negligible role.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, for young Canadians a provincial or community reputation may be most influential. For this reason, understanding the interdependency between place reputation and a young person’s identity is a critical consideration.

The recent Canada West Foundation study found that for young people, place is an extension and projection of their own identity.<sup>9</sup> If someone identifies as a tech entrepreneur, they may think of themselves (project themselves) as living in a global tech hub. If someone identifies with progressive social values, they may project themselves living in a jurisdiction reflecting these progressive social values. This projection is called social identity and it is a mechanism used by people to rationalize their place in the world.<sup>10</sup>

This sense of belonging and social identity is deeply rooted in an innate human desire to be part of a social group. When the study explored this question among young Canadians, they found that urban respondents, especially Torontonians, Vancouverites and Calgarians, identify more with their community than their province or country. In other words, these young people identify as a Torontonian, Vancouverite, or Calgarian over being Canadian or of their province.

However, this research found an interdependency between community and provincial reputation. Respondents in both Vancouver and Toronto had similar favourability scoring of their city and their province. In contrast, respondents in Calgary and Edmonton scored their city favourability far higher than their province.<sup>11</sup> When this study further examined the factors that defined Alberta, the leading four unprompted responses from youth with high moving intentions were oil and gas, nature, conservative, and intolerant. Interestingly, both the conservative and intolerant responses were more prevalent among youth in Alberta.

The reputation-reality divide facing Albertans is real, as are its consequences on the attraction and retention of young people. So the question facing every citizen in Alberta is, what now?

## Place reputation

**49%**

of respondents in Calgary identify with the city, compared to 13 per cent with the province. In contrast, 48 per cent of those in rural Alberta identify with the province and only 12 per cent with their community.

## Moving to Calgary or Edmonton

**44%**

of respondents from Vancouver and Toronto state they would never consider moving to Calgary and 52 per cent would never consider moving to Edmonton.

## Where you live

**67%**

of respondents from Toronto and Vancouver believe where someone lives says a lot about them, compared to 54 per cent of those who live in Alberta.

“When you say Albertan, there’s this weird connotation that you’re conservative and you’re put in this bucket automatically. And I don’t identify myself as that kind of person. I’ve never said I’m Albertan ever.”

— Focus group participant

“I’ve always identified as a Calgarian. And in Alberta, I also recognize the difference among the two. They are not the exact same. I think that difference is what makes this province a great province – the diversity of thought.”

— Focus group participant

# Recommendation

“You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built in the human plan. We come with it.”<sup>12</sup> – Margaret Atwood

To bridge the reputation-reality divide, Albertans need to collaborate to reframe the stories and how they are told.

## STEP 1: CRAFT GREAT STORIES

Over the past two-decades countries and cities, not just corporations, have adopted storytelling as a framework to amplify their strategies. A story is a powerful tool to create a shared sense of purpose and community. It is a mechanism to empower advocates.<sup>13</sup> The first step toward bridging the reputation-reality divide facing Albertans is to craft great stories based on the four-story pillars.

### FOUR-STORY PILLARS

STORY PILLARS	Scope	Implications	Sample Key Performance Indicators
<b>GREAT STORIES ARE TARGETED</b>	Great stories start with the audience. Understanding an audience enables the story to resonate with the issues and themes the audience cares about – issues and themes that can change their minds.	Young people are not a homogeneous group and therefore the stories told and how they are told must be targeted to different audiences and their values. The Canada West Foundation report identified seven distinct young talent segments.	Proportion of stories by target audience.
<b>GREAT STORIES ARE TRUE</b>	Great stories must be authentic and real. Great stories become the foundation of building trust between the storyteller and their audience.	The stories Albertans tell must be authentic, honest and transparent. The result is not all facets of the stories told will always be positive. However, the resulting trust developed between the storyteller and the audience will be invaluable.	Proportion of stories that can be verified as factual.
<b>GREAT STORIES ARE CONSISTENT</b>	Great stories from Disney to Apple are consistent – reinforcing the critical trust between the storyteller and audience.	Consistency is the greatest threat and opportunity facing Alberta’s reputation-reality divide. This consistency is rooted in the reputational interdependency that includes the province, communities and sectors. Developing a collaborative process for both aligning and telling stories across audiences is imperative to building trust and reinforcing key narratives.	Proportion of stories aligned across the province, communities, and key sector channels.
<b>GREAT STORIES EMPOWER STORYTELLERS</b>	Great stories transform their audience into storytellers.	Three-quarters of respondents in the Canada West Foundation study defined social networks as their primary source of information. Thus, the most influential storytellers are people, not organizations or governments.	Number of people actively telling or amplifying Alberta stories on social media.

## STEP 2: COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING

Crafting great stories is the easy part. The hard part is to find innovative ways to tell these stories so they cut through perceptions and have positive impact. No single group can do it alone. Real impact depends on exceptional focus and discipline. Untargeted and fragmented investments across different storytelling channels weaken the potential for key narratives to reach target audiences. The result can be a wasted investment with no sustained impact on attitudes or behaviours. As a result, bridging the reputation-reality divide requires a commitment to an inclusive, collaborative storytelling framework that engages citizens and community leaders from across the private, non-profit and public sectors. To succeed, this collaborative framework needs to both harmonize the stories told and coordinate the resources necessary to tell them with maximum impact.

### COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING

STORY PARTNER	Scope	Story Resourcing	Story Telling	Story Crafting
<b>Economic Development Agencies</b>	Community stories	√	√	√
<b>Regional Tourism Agencies</b>	Community stories	√	√	√
<b>Commercial and Non-Profit Organizations</b>	Provincial stories Community stories Sector stories	√	√	√
<b>Indigenous Partners</b>	Community stories	√	√	√
<b>Citizens</b>	Personal stories Social amplification	√	√	√
<b>Provincial Government</b>	Provincial stories	√	√	√
<b>Municipal Governments</b>	Community stories	√	√	√

## Conclusion

The stories currently shared about Alberta among young people, both inside and outside the province, have created one of the greatest risks facing the province when it comes to the attraction and retention of talent. Alberta's reputation continues to lag behind its reality in many areas essential to critical stakeholders. However, this also presents a momentous opportunity to reshape Alberta's reputation through the crafting of new stories that all Albertans will want to tell.

**ORI  
STORIES**



# Stories

*from other places*

## Newfoundland & Labrador

Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have established a reputation of friendliness and knack for storytelling. The province ranks among the Top 10 Friendliest Cultures in the World, according to Maclean's Magazine. Oftentimes, a place brand is synonymous with a city or region's story. In Newfoundland and Labrador's case, their brand is storytelling. "Storytelling is part of our DNA", exclaims Christopher Mitchelmore, Newfoundland and Labrador's Minister of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation. "A Tangled Tale" was an eight-week campaign showcasing the province's proud storytelling tradition. This campaign not only communicated Newfoundland and Labrador's brand authentically, through and by its people, but aimed to encourage travelers to visit and create their own authentic experiences and tales to tell.

### Alberta's takeaway

To ensure an authentic place brand, citizens must become the chief storytellers.

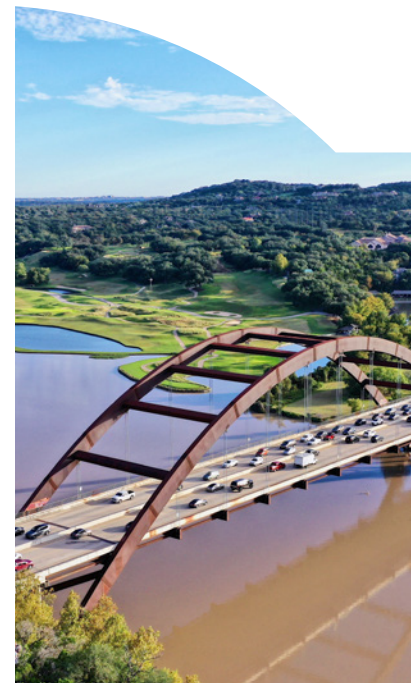
## Austin

"Austin is to Texas, what Berlin is to Germany." What does this mean? It means it bears almost no resemblance to the state surrounding it and that's a good thing.

Earning titles and coining popular phrases such as "Keep Austin Weird," and "Live Music Capital of the World" didn't happen by mistake or overnight. In 1991, it was discovered that Austin hosted more live music venues per capita than anywhere else in the United States, sometimes hosting over 100 live performances on the same night, solidifying its title as Live Music Capital of the World. The city decided to make its reputation a priority by continuously investing and improving its nightlife, music scene and other activities deemed attractive to younger demographics. In 2019, [Business Insider](#) described Austin as a "hotbed" for millennials, with a vibrant music scene and growing tech sector. The city is now one of the country's fastest-growing major metro areas\* while also increasing tourism. It's a win-win.

### Alberta's takeaway

Decoupling place brands and building trust takes time. Austin's distinct brand evolved over 40 years.







## Calgary on Purpose

In 2019, [Calgary on Purpose](#) was a self-funded citizen-driven group which asked the simple question – who are we, where have we come from and where do we wish to go?

To answer this question, they designed a collective process for shaping a renewed story of the city. This organic process is anchored to the principles of honesty, humility, respect, diversity, generous listening and creativity.

Over two years, Calgary on Purpose listened to the diverse stories and aspirations of Calgarians with the goal of identifying the common values and hopes that bind Calgarians together. In their [2021 report](#), Calgary on Purpose identified five major themes and recommitted to be the home for open and honest conversations about the future of their city.

### Alberta's takeaway

Telling authentic stories about place is not about politics. It's about people.

## Tasmania

In 2019, Brand Tasmania was founded with the mission of inspiring and encouraging Tasmanians, and those who want to be Tasmanian, to “quietly pursue the extraordinary.” Brand Tasmania’s mandate is to develop, maintain, protect and promote a Tasmanian brand as a shared public asset. This process involved conducting 440 unique interviews with Tasmanians about what they love about their state. Through these in-depth conversations, consistent themes emerged and with those emerged a true representation of thoughts and opinions of the state. Knowing and owning their story allowed every Tasmanian to appreciate all that Tasmania had to offer, instilling a pride in its residents, encouraging the sharing and promotion of the state’s successes and, most importantly, forming an authentic brand that truly differentiates Tasmania from anywhere else in the world. The strategy is simple, they want every Tasmanian to be a brand ambassador.

### Alberta's takeaway

Alberta needs to flip its thinking.



## Auckland

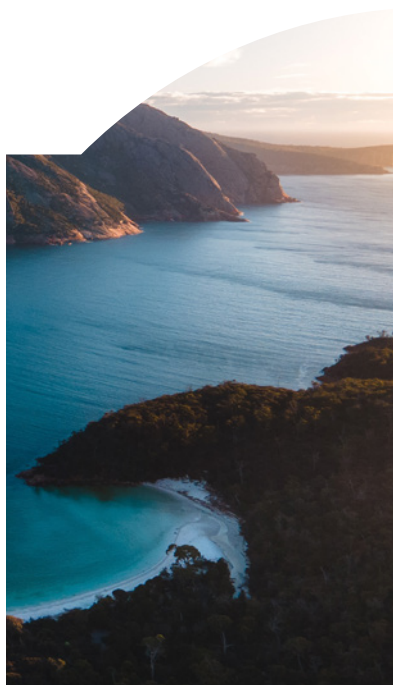
Once a community lacking a cohesive and intentional story, Auckland, New Zealand has since won City Nation Place’s ‘Place Brand of the Year 2020’ award. Dedicated efforts from Auckland Unlimited, an economic and cultural agency committed to ensuring Auckland remains a desirable place to live, work, invest and do business, drove the effort. So how did Auckland propel its community brand into the spotlight? Through stakeholder engagement, effective storytelling and a true understanding of the complexities of community branding. Auckland Unlimited took a comprehensive approach to establish their community brand through robust research, engaging their citizens (creating buy-in along the way), and ensuring stakeholders were as informed as possible, including executive buy-in at the mayoral level. Auckland Unlimited used Destination Think’s trademarked process for uncovering Place DNA, which revealed that Auckland has a strong rational appeal with a relatively low emotional appeal. This finding was pivotal for the community because emotional appeal builds reputation and attracts individuals. The brand focused on building the emotional connection with Auckland.\*\*

### Alberta's takeaway

The importance of stakeholder engagement, the power of technology in uncovering place DNA, and how effective storytelling helped them share what Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland has to offer for students, visitors, skilled workforce and investors alike.

\* Brookings Institute: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan\\_brookings-metro-millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2018-jan_brookings-metro-millennials-a-demographic-bridge-to-americas-diverse-future.pdf)

\*\* <https://placebrandobserver.com/auckland-city-branding-success-story/>



Images: Unsplash

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- <sup>7</sup> This quote is attributed to Steve Jobs based on Andrew Gordon's recall of a presentation.
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. News and World Report. *U.S. News Best Countries 2021*. Online, 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/rankings>
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