Until 2007 when the Maytag Company closed its doors in Newton, many Iowans identified the company with the city. In the eight years since Maytag’s closure, the city’s population and employment rate has remained stable; this was a story many in Newton hadn’t heard. This is one of the many stories Get to Know Newton, a community outreach project celebrating Newton’s many great amenities, aimed to tell.

How did Get to Know Newton get started?

Umsted: In 2012 the city passed a comprehensive plan which specifically called for the creation of a new community brand. We had this void in what the identity of Newton was. From that we started working with consultants to establish and new brand identity. We really wanted something engaging and fun; something that highlighted not just what the community is today, but what we want to be into the future.
Through that process we also identified a new vision for the community, which is that Newton will be a family-friendly, progressive community that will stand out as a positive place in central Iowa. We also identified a narrative that we want to tell the region: Newton has an ideal central Iowa location, a strong education system and strong recreational facilities.

Unsworth: A lot of this was just reminding people of the good things we have. I came to the city in 2008, right after Maytag closed, and you didn’t hear anything positive. Reminding people of the neat things Newton does have has helped overcome that loss of such a major employer.

Knabel: Get to Know Newton really has changed both the tone and substance of the conversation. We had some council members with a commitment to using that 2012 comprehensive plan to take the community forward. They were committed to looking toward the future rather than dwell on what we’ve been and what we’ve lost.

I don’t think there’s any question or doubt that Get to Know Newton has changed the attitude and feeling and engagement of the community about itself.

What is it about Get to Know Newton that was able to help change attitudes?

Umsted: One challenge in any community is that people who are negative tend to speak out and find platforms to tell their message. So through that invitational phrase, Get to Know Newton, we’ve created a platform to talk positively.

Well, what should I get to know? Then you’re thinking about what you should get to know-- that’s happening right now, not what should I have gotten to know 10 years ago. I think it encourages the positive people to speak out more, because you don’t feel alone in your positivity.

Unsworth: Get to Know Newton allows people to pick what they like about Newton and gives them their own voice to promote the community in their own way.

Umsted: The tone and message of the campaign has also been adopted by several of our partner organizations: Mainstreet, Newton Development Corporation, Housing Development Corporation.

It is a marketing and rebranding campaign, but we haven’t just updated signs and placed advertisements. We’ve also been doing new community engagement events, and we’re actually creating some of that new, positive energy. Last year we created a city festival. We also started Newton vs Newton, where we challenged Newton, KS to a series of fun community engagement activities.

Tapping into what makes people care about things is important, and competition is one of those things -- as we found with the People’s All-Star Competition. It gets people riled up and excited.

Knabel: Those individuals that have been here awhile were maybe skeptical at the beginning. But I do think they have come to appreciate, maybe even in a bigger way, the things we have and the events that make Newton special. There is some skepticism, you’re never going to get over all that, but this has afforded the community an opportunity to be proud of themselves.

Part of the story is that Newton hasn’t lost population or jobs since 2007. Was that news to the community?

Umsted: Even just around the table of 20-30 community leaders that were working on this part of the comprehensive plan there were so many things about Newton that people didn’t know. That is kind of where we came to this rebranding idea.

The jobs recovery was a surprise to many people at that table, and was a surprise to many in the community as we launched the campaign. There were a lot of things people within Newton didn’t know about Newton, and those have been good and important stories to tell.

Advice for others?

Knabel: Stress the positive. Every community has great things going on. It’s a matter of telling that story. The other thing -- if it’s a priority for you, you’re going to commit resources to it, and you’re going to have to spend some money to make it happen. That may be a hurdle elected-officials are going to have to know and address. It’s not going to happen by itself. The support from the city council has been critical.