

Empathy-First Rebranding: Unifying 400+ Independent Organizations

TROUT UNLIMITED CASE STUDY

Prepared by

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THE CHALLENGE

Trout Unlimited, the nation's leading coldwater conservation organization, 66 years old, with over \$100M in annual revenue, had never gone through a formal branding process. In addition to its brand identity being undefined at a national level, the 400+ grassroots chapters also each had their own idea of what their brand was. Many of these chapters were rightfully proud of their brands, but they weren't consistent across the organization. As we looked to expand our audience from primarily fly-anglers to anyone interested in conservation or who loves water, it was time to implement the rigor that a fully developed brand offers.

The trouble seemed to be the organizational structure. All 400+ chapters are independent and the national organization had no stick, just a carrot. Fly anglers are obstinate and oppositional by nature, so sending orders to the chapters from on high was out of the question. It had been tried before and always failed. We needed to find a way to create brand unity without mandating compliance. With chapters from Alaska to Georgia and New York City to Twin Bridges, Idaho, it's hard to overstate the diverse needs of our many chapters. If we attempted an all-encompassing, top-down rebrand, there was no way all of our chapters would adopt it.

However, if we failed to establish brand consistency, we'd

never play on the same field as the larger conservation organizations. The challenge was to find a way to consistently present Trout Unlimited across all of our chapters and channels while giving the chapters ownership, not an imposition. One brand, 400+ independent organizations, thousands of opinions—it was a challenge for the ages.

How do you turn a \$100M ship with 400 independent organizations without a rudder?



PHOTO: JOSH DUPLECHIAN © TROUT UNLIMITED

THE APPROACH

What finally unlocked our approach was realizing that chapters needed frameworks, not mandates, and that these frameworks needed to be like Goldilocks. Too loose and our brand consistency wouldn't improve, too tight and they'd never be adopted and our brand consistency wouldn't improve. They needed to be just right.

We also realized these frameworks had to be so great and so easy to use that our chapters would beat down our doors to get at them. So we started to listen. We listened for months. We held strategy sessions with our board. We grilled program staff about what they needed on the ground and grassroots leaders about what they held dear and what tools would make their lives easier. We reached out to anglers who weren't members to understand what parts of our value proposition anglers actually cared about. Partnering with Big Duck, we found that many fly-fisherfolk didn't identify as "anglers." That term held too much weight with them, they didn't feel like they were experienced enough for that name, or that it was a term reserved for experts. We found that many chapters had logos that meant a lot to them, either because of all the work done under those banners or because they were made by key members of the organization that were no longer with us. We learned that it wasn't a lack of clarity that was in the way of adoption, it was the lack of ease and customization.

Chapters didn't need more rules. They needed better tools.

We decided to approach this rebrand as mandate-free. We'd provide tools, templates and systems that our chapters would want to use — tools to make their lives easier, not more tedious. To allow for local identity we offered all chapters official TU logos, while encouraging them to use their own (if they liked them) as "trade art." We also kept our stakeholders in the loop, whenever we had a great new idea, we got gut-checks from the people on the ground that would be using them. We knew that in order for this to work, it needed to be more than good, it needed to be wanted. It needed to be easier to use what we built than it was to go it alone. We turned the top-down approach of traditional rebrands upside down and let the rank-and-file have unprecedented insight into the process. It was the only way to make it work.

THE SOLUTION

With a ton of research under our belt and strong relationships with stakeholders, we built a unified brand system that allowed our chapters to maintain their own unique identity without diluting the TU brand. It showed our chapters that we really cared about their concerns and didn't want to bark orders from on high, and that we trusted that with the right tools and information, they could be effective representatives of the TU brand. Without a top-down mandate, and with a lot of room for individuality, we broke a lot of sacred branding rules, but we finally cracked the adoption code. Rather than angry emails from chapter leaders telling us exactly where we could put our new rules, the emails were requests for standardized logos, additional slides to our PowerPoint template and access to our new colors and fonts. This system included five core components: a flexible logo architecture, a comprehensive template library, detailed brand guidelines, voice, tone and messaging guidance, and support for chapter transformation.



PHOTO: JOSH DUPLECHIAN © TROUT UNLIMITED

We went from angry emails to eager requests.

THE FOUNDATION

Branding is so much more than mood boards and color choices. We wanted to ensure that our chapters clearly understood who and what Trout Unlimited is and how to talk about it. To that end, we created comprehensive brand guidelines that outline everything from our organizational narrative to our key messages, brand position and personality, and an elevator pitch.

The positioning work with Big Duck gave us critical clarity on who TU needed to be for a broader audience. Through extensive listening sessions, we learned that many people didn't identify as "anglers"—the term felt too heavy, too exclusive, reserved for experts. We evolved our positioning from "for fly anglers" to "for anyone who cares about cold-water conservation," expanding our tent while staying true to our mission. We also discovered that stories about the people making conservation possible were more compelling than the conservation work itself. This insight led to our new tagline, "Every River Needs a Champion"—both a call-to-arms and an invitation to become a champion yourself.

This strategic foundation drove every visual decision that followed.

View the complete Trout Unlimited Brand Guidelines at brandbook.tu.org.

Visual identity without brand strategy is just decoration.

VISUAL IDENTITY

TAGLINE

EVERY RIVER NEEDS A CHAMPION

After extensive listening sessions with stakeholders from the grassroots to the boardroom, we learned that our conservation stories were compelling, but not as compelling as the stories of the people that make them possible.

We decided to create a tagline that was both an invitation and a call-to-arms. It clearly states the challenge and subtly invites the viewer to become a champion themselves.

VISUAL IDENTITY



The goal of this rebrand was as much about our brand positioning and messaging as it was about Trout Unlimited's visual identity. With that in mind, we kept our logo with some slight color tweaks.

LOCKUPS



Every River Needs A Champion

Every River
Needs A Champion



Every River Needs A Champion



PHOTO: JOSH DUPLECHIAN © TROUT UNLIMITED

We created a wide variety of lockups. Single line, stacked, reversed. Any use case we could think of, we built a lockup, and gave our end-users guidance on how and where to use them.

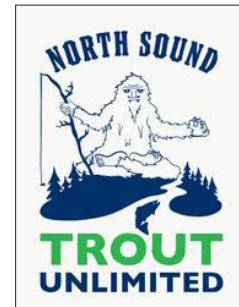
FLEXIBLE CHAPTER LOGO SYSTEM

To honor chapter independence while building consistency, we designed clean, professional logos chapters preferred over existing marks. For chapters emotionally attached to their logos, we offered official marks for formal use—like letterheads and RFPs—while encouraging their own as trade art for merchandise. This flexible framework respected chapter identity while strengthening national cohesion—achieving 50%+ voluntary adoption without mandates.

TRADE ART EXAMPLES



JOHN MUIR



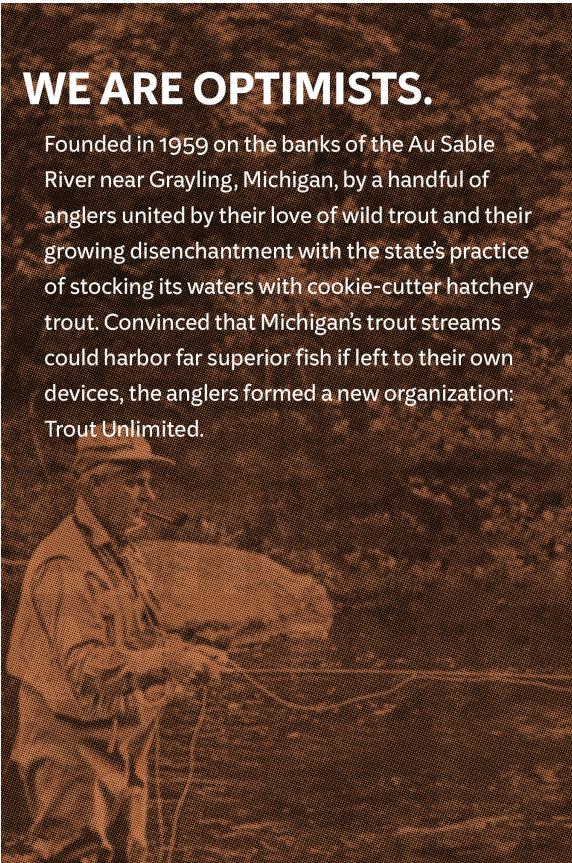
OLD LOGO



NEW LOGO



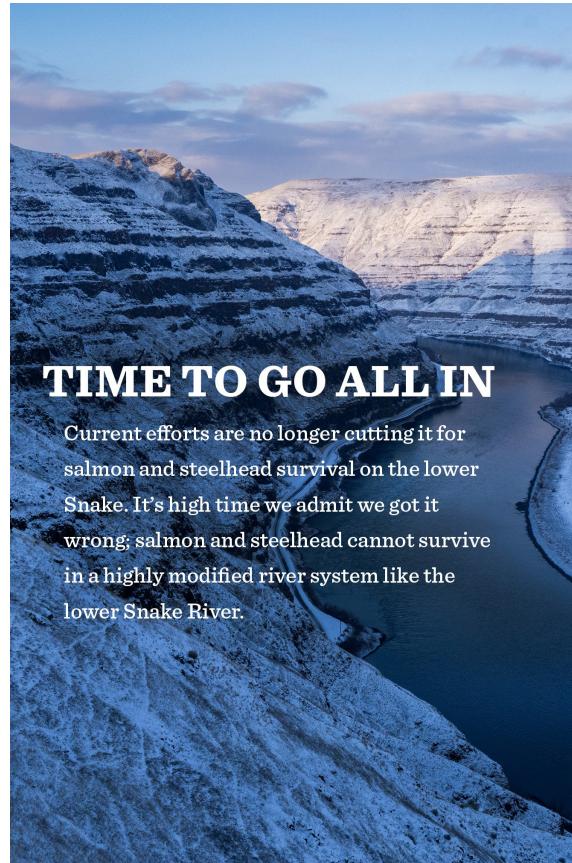
TYPOGRAPHY



WE ARE OPTIMISTS.

Founded in 1959 on the banks of the Au Sable River near Grayling, Michigan, by a handful of anglers united by their love of wild trout and their growing disenchantment with the state's practice of stocking its waters with cookie-cutter hatchery trout. Convinced that Michigan's trout streams could harbor far superior fish if left to their own devices, the anglers formed a new organization: Trout Unlimited.

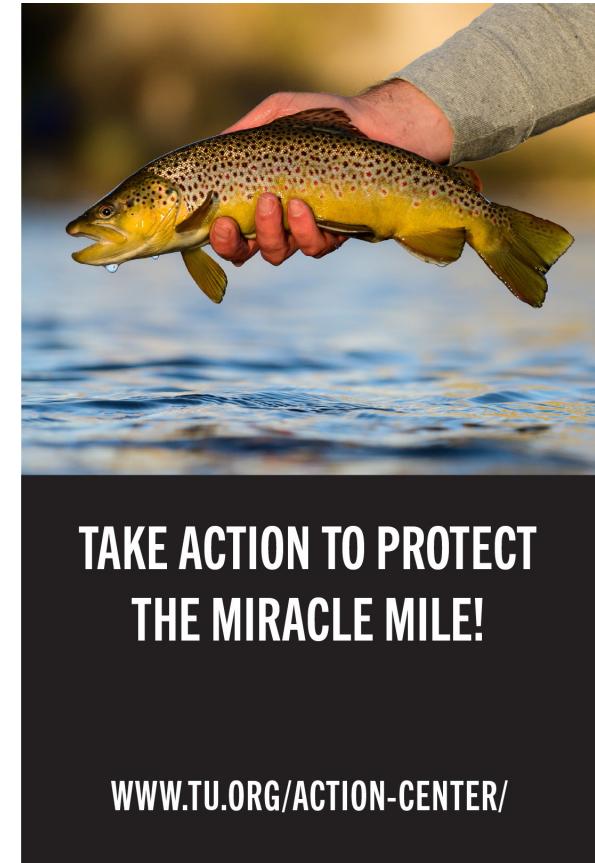
Kit Sans



TIME TO GO ALL IN

Current efforts are no longer cutting it for salmon and steelhead survival on the lower Snake. It's high time we admit we got it wrong: salmon and steelhead cannot survive in a highly modified river system like the lower Snake River.

Sentinel



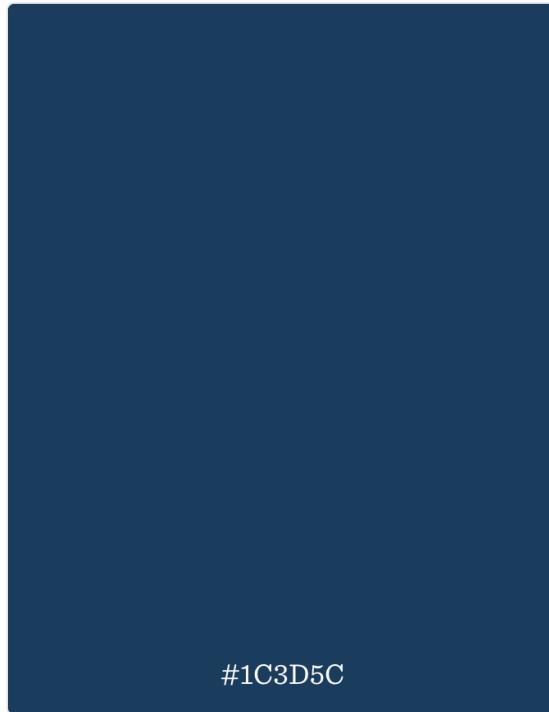
TAKE ACTION TO PROTECT
THE MIRACLE MILE!

WWW.TU.ORG/ACTION-CENTER/

Trade Gothic Next

PRIMARY COLORS

Brand blue



#1C3D5C

Brand green



#529766

Brand orange



#994C1D

The previous palette was just two colors. A brand blue and a brand green. We expanded the palette and brought them closer to natural tones than the bright jewel tones they'd been previously.

SECONDARY COLORS

Coldwater



Moss



Campfire



Backcountry



Grass



Icelandic



Sunrise



Lichen



BACKGROUND SHADE COLORS

Clear sky



#CDDAFO

Sea green



#E6E8D1

Light roe



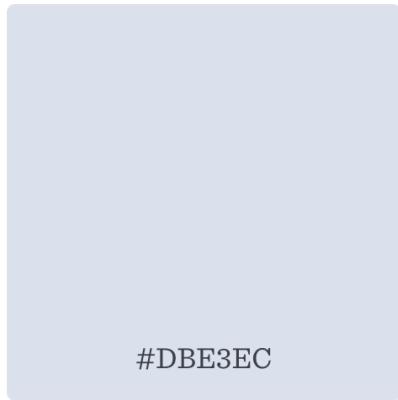
#ECCAB5

Stone gray — dark



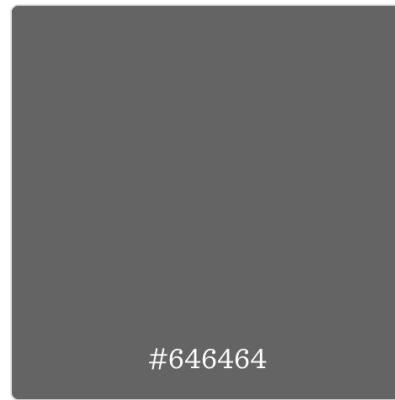
#3C414B

Stone gray — light



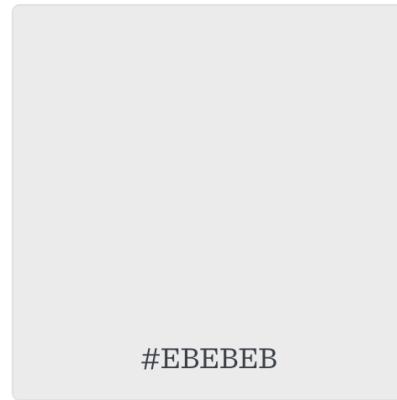
#DBE3EC

Warm gray — dark



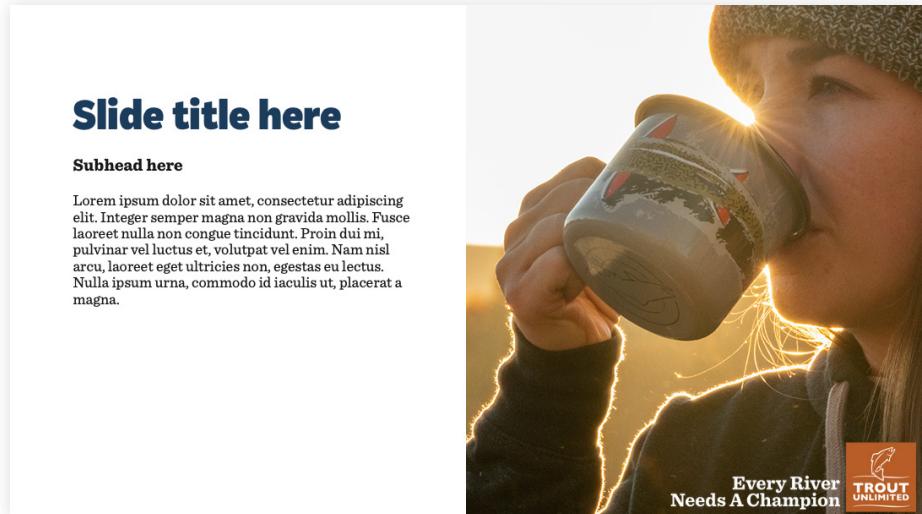
#646464

Warm gray — light



#EBEBEB

POWERPOINT TEMPLATE



Nearly 50 slide templates were created to handle almost any presentation needs a chapter may have. All photos can be customized for chapter and program relevance.

TEMPLATES



JOIN US FOR A TREE PLANTING

Planting trees locally is good clean fun. Now let's get dirty.

Join us at Green Cottage on the Pere Marquette River, Baldwin
on Saturday, May 02 at 9:30 a.m.

Event poster templates



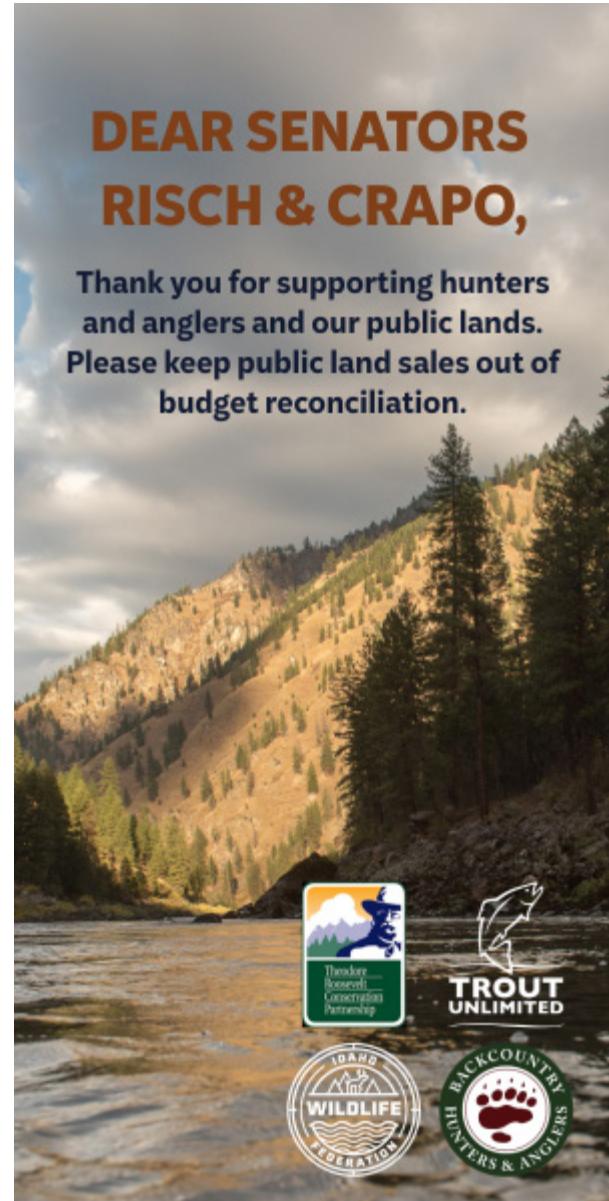
Postcard templates

From event posters to social posts, we built templates in Canva to allow local expression while staying on-brand.

TEMPLATES



Email header templates



Instagram templates

THE SYSTEM

With a creative team of three, we set ourselves to building tools and systems that would empower our grassroots leaders and allow our small team to answer requests in a timely manner. In addition to our messaging frameworks and visual guidelines, we implemented request workflows using a combination of SharePoint and Monday.com. We identified clear decision-makers and communicated those to stakeholders. We established clear governance: chapters could customize templates freely within defined parameters, but any new logo variations or major brand adaptations were reviewed by the creative team to maintain consistency. The key was providing the tools and information necessary for the new system to be easier than the old way of chapters just doing it themselves.

We identified and trained regional leaders who could travel to chapter meetings and teach the new system. At packed regional rendezvous across the country, these trainers showed grassroots leaders how to use our tools. It's been amazing to watch the often standoffish relationship between the national organization and the chapters morph into a relationship built on partnership, support and trust.

Armed with our toolkits (posters for events, newsletter templates, a custom email signature generator, and a comprehensive PowerPoint template), messaging

guidelines, key messages, and even a standardized elevator pitch, our grassroots leaders have taken our new brand and run with it. Our new tagline, "Every River Needs a Champion," is everywhere. Chapter materials look great and on-brand—all created without hiring designers.

**Three people. 400 chapters.
Zero mandates.**



PHOTO: JOSH DUPLECHIAN © TROUT UNLIMITED

THE RESULTS

Focusing on collaboration and building empathy with our stakeholders allowed this rebrand to deliver meaningful impact across the organization:

- 50%+ voluntary adoption rate across 400+ chapters within six months - without mandates or compliance requirements
- 50% reduction in design requests to creative services team through comprehensive template library
- Improved brand consistency across all chapters while preserving local chapter identity and autonomy
- Three-person creative services team successfully supported 400+ chapters through organization-wide transformation

Most importantly, the rebrand was adopted and embraced rather than resisted—proving that collaborative, human-focused change management can transform even the most complex distributed organizational structures.

With our tools, they built on-brand materials. Without designers.

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