



**How to improve the chances of successfully developing and
implementing a place brand strategy**

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26 May 2008

1. Introduction

Place branding (for countries, regions and cities) is a relatively new discipline and inevitably people have many questions about it. One important question is how to successfully brand a place. This question actually consists of a number of discrete questions, namely whether:

- Branding is more suitable for some places than for others?
- There are pre-existing factors that increase the likelihood of successful place branding?
- There are factors that improve the success-rate of the brand development process?
- It is possible to predict the success of a place brand strategy?

This paper tries to answer each of these questions by describing the criteria and factors that contribute to successful place branding. By assessing the place, the players and the plans they make, it is possible to predict the likely success of a place branding initiative.

2. Should all places brand themselves?

There is a debate whether all places should be actively branding themselves or that the method is more appropriate to some places than to others. There is a perception that places facing some sort of crisis are more likely candidates than places with stable economic, social and cultural settings.

Although a place that faces a crisis may become acutely aware of the weaknesses of its brand and decide that it is high time to do something about it, there is little evidence to suggest that crises in themselves are a reason to brand a place. This is due to two factors, namely:

- Brands are not built (and seldom even destroyed) in a day. Place branding is certainly a long-term endeavour and requires years of consistent and persistent actions for the brand to take shape.
- Branding will not help solve the crisis simply because only decisive and targeted actions will do so. The brand will however, provide the context for solving the crises and the brand's strengths should be applied to the solution. A strong brand will also help to mitigate the effects of a crisis as the crisis will not be (one of) its only claim(s) to fame.

If it's not places that face immediate calamity, catastrophe or disaster, then which places can most usefully apply branding? Certainly, some kinds of places are more likely candidates for place branding. These include:

- Places that face intense and increasing competition. These places are obvious candidates because they need to sharpen their competitive edge to retain or improve their positions. This is currently happening in Southern Africa, where the rise of South Africa is putting pressure on the neighbours. In Europe, competition between major cities has increased over the past decade and a place such as Amsterdam finds itself competing with Madrid and Barcelona for visitors, investors, talent and events. Similarly in Asia, Hong Kong is facing more intense competition from the likes of Shanghai and Singapore.
- Places that face complex development tasks, such as areas of urban expansion, regeneration and transformation. These places need to have a very strong sense of what they wish to become, what they will offer and how

they will function, which is what branding can offer them. Examples are mixed-use waterfront developments that dot the cityscapes around the world: Hamburg, Toronto, Lyon, Melbourne and the like.

- Places that face a slow and steady decline. Such places often loose businesses, inhabitants, institutions and events at a pace that doesn't start the alarm bells ringing until the scale of the problem becomes acutely apparent. These places have the opportunity to stop and even reverse their slide if they act in a concerted effort to shore up their brand. Examples are Southampton in southern England and Cleveland, Ohio in the USA.
- Place that have lived through a crisis and need to reinvent themselves. These places have had a major crisis that has completely altered the economic, social and (sometimes) cultural structures. There is no opportunity to reverse the situation and the only thing left is to completely rethink the brand. One of the most obvious examples is Bilbao in Spain that has reinvented itself as a tourist destination after the collapse of its manufacturing base. Other examples of place needing to reinvent themselves are Belfast and Detroit.

3. The likelihood of successful place branding

Not only is there discussion about which places should develop their brand strategies, there is also debate about what preconditions improve the likelihood of success. We find that having the following characteristics contribute to a place's ability to brand itself:

- Unity: the key stakeholders of the place need to agree to come together to shape its future by developing and implementing a brand strategy. This is not a given in most places. Stakeholders have seldom sat together to discuss their shared future and to determine how their views on the subject coincide and differ. And in even fewer places have stakeholders actually decided to act to jointly shape that future. We've worked in places where bringing together the stakeholders and getting them to work together was the hardest task of all.
- Diversity: places that are more economically, socially, culturally and naturally diverse stand a better chance of developing a strong and effective brand. This is due to the fact that place branding is not an exercise in reduction, but rather one of adding or enhancing layers of richness. Diversity gives such places like Vancouver, Kuala Lumpur and Cape Town their attractive edge.
- Initiative: places whose stakeholders already (jointly) undertake (marketing) initiatives. These provide necessary experiences beneficial to the place brand development efforts. This is due to the fact that they have already accepted the need for changes and are taking actions to bring them about.
- Experimentation: there also needs to be a willingness to take risks and a certain tolerance towards failure of experiments. Often, accepted ways of working are entrenched and people stick by what they know. Risk aversion is often prominent in some of the large (and bureaucratic) organisations that are key stakeholders of many places.

4. What is required to successfully develop a place brand?

Not only are there existing factors that improve the likelihood of success for place branding. More importantly, there are factors that influence the success of the brand development exercise itself. These are:

- Partnership and leadership: a place brand can only successfully be developed and implemented by the key stakeholders of the place. It is not a task to be

left to the government alone. The organisations that can shape the future of the place through their actions, investments and communications should come together in partnership and should demonstrate shared leadership in the development and implementation of the place brand strategy. In lots of places, government departments have been tasked to brand and market their city, region or country and the results are mixed at best.

- Vision and strategy: the first thing the brand partners need to do is to share and compare their views on the future of the place and make sure that they develop a shared vision of a greater magnitude than the sum of their individual visions. Existing visions often are highly sector-related (in one case we found 23 visions for the same city) and do not rise above the commonplace of a great place to live, with the best possible healthcare and education and jobs for everyone. Once they have agreed a shared vision, the partners need to map out a strategy for the brand of their place that they can jointly deliver.
- Appraisal and creativity: the brand partners need to be realistic and understand what has shaped the brand of their place so far, and what has worked in the past and what has not. That should, however, not preclude them from finding new ways of doing things, from developing original ideas and from creating innovations for their place.
- 'On brand' implementation: Finally, the partners need to involve other stakeholders in realising the brand through actions, investments, attraction programmes and events that demonstrate the brand in action.

There is an immense task here of managing the stakeholders and their activities and communications to ensure that agreed initiatives are carried out, consistently and 'on brand'. The brand partners must, therefore, decide how best to organise this task to ensure effective implementation of their plans.

5. When is a place brand a success?

Finally, there is the question of when a place brand strategy can be considered to be successful. In other words, what should the place brand embody of to become successful?

- Value and purpose: the brand is a promise of value and one that needs to be kept. The more valuable the place brand is to its key audiences, the more likely they will be swayed by it. The brand also provides a sense of purpose to the place's stakeholders, as it embodies the things they want to achieve. The stronger this sense of purpose, the more likely that stakeholders will pull together and deliver. Too often the brand of a place does not provide a common purpose, but only a trite slogan: City of Lights (Anchorage), The Friendly City (Orange County), Get In On It (Baltimore), Every Day Is An Opening Day (Atlanta) and It's Cooler Here (Edmonton).
- Truth: the brand needs to reflect the reality of the place. Place brands are largely built on people's experiences of the place, on recommendations by trusted endorsers, and on what goes on in the place. Any dissonance between the brand's promise and these realities harms the place brand's equity. The experience of the rough immigration treatment meted out to visitors harm the brand of the USA. The scenes of the scores of itinerant labourers sleeping on the streets of Mumbai can come as a shock to a first-time visitor to 'The Fastest Growing Free Market Democracy'.
- Inclusive and for the common good: the brand must appeal to the local community and must provide it with tangible and intangible benefits. Only if the place's brand is embraced by its population, businesses and institutions

will it also be credible to outsiders. In Bangalore local pride groups conflict with what is seen as the 'outsiders' of the city's booming IT industry. In a bid to appease these activists, the city government decided to change the official name of the city to Bengaluru, which is the local pronunciation and the city's IT companies have started to fly the local flag. Neither move will do much unless the Kannada population of the city feel that they have a stake in the city's future.

- **Creativity and innovation**: the brand must help to encourage and release the resourcefulness and inventiveness of the stakeholders in their quest for realising the place brand strategy. The brand should promote new ways of working, investing and communicating and advance new and original ideas, products and services. Newcastle-Gateshead kicked off a flurry of creative activity with the Angel of the North, a huge steel statue along the motorway, and followed this up with the distinct Millennium Bridge, the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts and the Sage Concert Hall. All a far cry from its drab and dreary post-industrial past.
- **Complexity and simplicity**: the brand of a place needs to reflect its richness and not try to reduce it to a single utterance or representation. However, at the same time, the core of the brand must be straightforward enough for people to grasp its value easily. Italy stands for style, France for romance and Japan for perfection, but we also know that these places have a lot more to offer that makes them distinctively attractive.
- **Connectivity**: the brand must help to connect up people, businesses and institutions inside as well as outside the place. A brand that allows and encourages people to rally around it stands a far better chance of being successful. In some cases, making use its Diasporas relationships with the home country help to fan the brand's flames. Cases in point are Ireland, India and China.
- **Validity**: a brand must remain relevant to its stakeholders and audiences over a long period and it can only do so by delivering consistent value to them. This does not mean that the brand should remain unchanged. The world changes and so do people's wishes and expectations, the competition (and what they have to offer), and economic, social and cultural developments. It is important to regularly check and preserve the soundness of the brand over time and to take appropriate actions for it to retain its significance.

6. Risks and rewards

Place branding is an intricate activity and chances of doing it successfully rest on a proper understanding of the factors that influence the outcomes. Without understanding the risks involved and how to reduce these to a manageable level, success is unlikely and subsequent failure will simply prove what the (inevitable) critics have said all along: 'it's a waste of money that could have been better spent on health, education, housing, infrastructure, etcetera'. But if there are possible risks, there are also potential rewards to successful place branding, such as:

- Improved and sustainable competitiveness, e.g. for attention, investments, jobs, inhabitants, institutions, visitors and events
- Higher returns on investment, e.g. in real estate, infrastructure, promotions and events
- Coherent development of the place as physical, social, economic and cultural planning join up to realise the brand's promise
- Pride in the place, as the population, businesses and institutions experience its (renewed) sense of purpose and direction

- Unsolicited praise, approval and endorsement from media, celebrities and (international) institutions
- Increased word-of-mouth among (foreign) target audiences as personal experiences and a wish to be associated with the place create a buzz

The Author

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Sicco has lived, worked and travelled across five continents. His exposure to the great diversity of these continents has helped him to develop his understanding of and sensitivity to differing cultural, motivational, economic, social and competitive issues.

Sicco has (co)authored several books, among them:

- Global Brand Strategy – Unlocking Branding Potential Across Countries Cultures and Markets (Kogan Page, 2003)
- Beyond Branding – How the New Values of Transparency and Integrity are Changing the World of Brands (Kogan Page, 2003)
- New Age Branding (ICFAI Press, 2003)
- City Branding – How Cities Compete in the 21st Century (Placebrands, 2006)
- Global Branding Perspectives and Challenges (ICFAI Press, 2007)