

# **BRANDING AN ANONYMOUS LOCALITY: SMALL PLACE, BIG BRAND IMAGE**

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## ABSTRACT

By means of branding, “places” i.e., countries, regions, cities or other locations can establish a desired, distinct position in the global market, which could contribute to sustainable economic development, enhance overall influence (“soft power”), and facilitate partnerships with other places, businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and government agencies.

- Moreover, to the extent that many businesses leverage their products’ place-of-origin (“hometown”), a “top-of-mind” place brand should also help increase the perceived quality of local products or services and improve the financial performance of local business.
- The purpose of this presentation is to develop a branding strategy framework for smaller, lesser-known localities, which ensures that the outcome of the branding process is a properly defined, attractive place brand. The latter may then serve as an “umbrella” brand that could be extended to various locally made products and services in an effort to appeal to outside consumers, investors, visitors, and other target markets in a consistent and efficient way.
- It is argued that—to build such a brand—smaller, “unsung” localities, which generally possess limited resources and past branding experience, while facing high branding barriers, need to take a longer-term, investment approach to place branding; they should pursue a focused approach (which concentrates resources on a few, well-defined market segments) capitalizing on existing as well as created assets to organically build and communicate an authentic, yet evolving, brand concept that is embraced by all major stakeholders in a proactive way.

# Why Place Branding?

By means of branding, *places* can establish a desired, distinct position in the global market, which could contribute to sustainable economic development, as well as enhance their political influence (“soft power”), and facilitate partnerships with other localities (Yan 2003).

Moreover, to the extent that many businesses leverage their products’ *place-of-origin*, a “top-of-mind” place image should also help increase the perceived quality of local products or services and improve the financial performance of local businesses (Jaffe & Nebenzahl 2001).

Applying the branding concept to places is often criticized for treating countries, cities, regions, etc. as products i.e., “*commodifying*” them. However, today’s fiercely competitive, global market environment, where decision-making is often focused on symbolic meanings as opposed to tangible characteristics, underscores the importance of systematically creating a unique, powerful, and lasting relationship between a locality and its various stakeholders.

# Purpose of Presentation

The purpose of this presentation is to develop a **branding strategy framework for a smaller, lesser-known location**, which ensures that the outcome of the branding process is a properly defined, attractive place brand. The latter may then serve as an *“umbrella”* brand that will enable the locality to successfully leverage its sub-brands i.e. locally made products & services to appeal to foreign investors, visitors, and other target markets.

# Literature Review--Brand

A *brand* is a "name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association 1995). In other words, the purpose of a brand is two-fold: (a) to serve as a tool for creating product differentiation and (b) to represent a promise of value—something akin to an informal "contract" between seller and buyer. Moreover, a brand incites beliefs, evokes emotions, and prompts behaviors (Kotler & Gertner 2002).

Lastly, brands offer a reassurance of quality and "peace of mind" making purchasing decisions easier and less anxiety-ridden; they "frame" the user's experience with a product and may thus enhance the satisfaction derived from it (DDB 1997).

A brand plays a fundamental role, especially in the case of complex products: consumers facing difficulties in evaluating such products decide whether to buy them or not on the basis of their brand appeal. The latter becomes even more important when the positioning strategy of the product emphasizes the emotional dimension (Alon & Jaffe 2013).

To that extent, *Brand Loyalty* should be viewed as a strategic dimension; it could lead to decreased marketing costs and increased market leverage attracting new customers (through brand recognition and acting as a warranty for new buyers). Extreme levels of loyalty may even elevate a brand into a *lovemark* (Roberts 2006).

Branding represents the process of turning a product into a brand; its application has been extended nowadays to apply to the marketing of businesses, not-for-profit organizations (Helmi & Mulyanegara 2011), as well as persons and locations (Caldwell & Freire 2004). Creating and sustaining a strong brand may actually help promote *any* project to the extent that the process ensures project acceptance and facilitates its completion in a timely and cost-efficient manner (Brown et al. 2011).

A locality *image* is formed through education, the media, travel, and purchases of products made in the place. However, some place images are stereotypes and clichés that may not conform to the contemporary reality of the locality.

On the other hand, locality *identity* is “what a place believes it is.” In fact, a locality’s identity is the reflection of cultural and discursive choices made by its government and its people (Webber 1998).

Therefore, a strong place *brand* should strive to strike a balance between a locality’s image and its identity, thus, connecting perceptions and expectations inside and outside the locality.

# Internal Buy-in A prerequisite for Successful Place Branding

A number of factors internal to the locality make place branding—to some degree—an unpredictable process. For instance, the lack of “a powerful and widely agreed *internal* brand, a sense of common purpose and common identity” (Anholt 2007) may weaken a locality’s branding effort.

Ideally, the place branding project should lead to “a lot of soul-searching” (Papadopoulos 2004) as concerned citizens, the locality’s business elite, and policy-makers, through democratic dialog, search for and eventually converge on a distinctive, commonly acceptable, and comprehensive vision that embraces the existing culture—the starting point of any branding effort. To ensure a high rate of buy-in by a wide cross-section of society, such a process must be authentic—governments should avoid staging what amounts to branding “theater.”

# Branding the Small, Unsung Locality

A small locality cannot simply try to replicate a larger locality's branding effort; it must develop its own unique brand drawing—realistically—on its comparative strengths and distinct past history (heritage, values, etc.). This process should start by asking some of the following questions: *“What is unique about our locality that sets it apart from other places of similar size and like reputation?”* *“What are some of the more remarkable achievements of our locality so far?”* *“What is genuinely real and authentic about our locality?”* *“What are some of the most compelling current stories about our locality?”*

Furthermore, a place brand—like any other brand—needs to define the nature of the relationship the locality has (will have) with present and potential future “customers” i.e., investors, visitors, and other stakeholders; it also needs to adopt an effective *tone and manner* of presenting the locality to its target markets (DDB 1997). Thus, when deciding how to brand and communicate the essence of what the small, lesser-known locality should stand for, the question to ask is: *“What do we want to come to mind, when one thinks of our place?”* Identifying primary categories about a locality and properly positioning it along a number of critical dimensions is crucial for both evaluating its current brand status (to the extent that it exists) and designing appropriate strategies for the future.

For small localities, this is undoubtedly a major challenge since they need to simultaneously appeal to a wide variety of target audiences, e.g., international tourists, key investors and traders, who are likely to perceive them very differently depending on their own goals, as well as their diverse economic, social, political, and individual background.

# Place Branding Experience & Branding Barriers

With few exceptions, most smaller localities typically tend to under-invest in place branding.

In fact, smaller, lesser-known localities face a number of real and/or perceived *Brand Barriers* that inhibit them from undertaking serious branding. For instance, they may (believe that they do) not possess enough time or financial & human resources to conduct branding activities in the midst of an economic or other crisis. Moreover, the majority of a locality's stakeholders may view (some aspects of) place branding as unbecoming of their locality's traditions, history, etc. In other cases, though, a small locality's elite may simply not believe that their present, generally non-offensive (*de facto*) place brand—needs to be systematically re-evaluated and re-positioned/re-marketed.

# Selecting the Right Branding Strategy

Smaller, lesser-known localities with generally limited budgets may find a differentiated marketing approach i.e., one that aims at marketing different comparative advantages or brand components to a large number of diverse audiences too expensive and/or risky; by necessity, therefore, they may be forced to either pursue a ***focused*** approach (which concentrates resources on one or a few well-defined market segments) or simply rely on a simplistic, unrefined strategy that seeks to take advantage of an existing strength (e.g., low cost) in order to stimulate demand and increase market share—a short-term oriented approach to the extent that the competition may easily replicate it.

For such localities to break the constraints of relative anonymity and establish a sustainable competitive advantage, identifying an **idea-driven differentiation** and creating a compelling brand story i.e., a supportive narrative that speaks to both the rational and the emotional needs of the targeted audiences is an indispensable first step (Simons 2002). Over time, this new place brand would need to be properly managed and maintained; in other words, the new place brand cannot not be considered a “fossilized” identity. Instead, it should be viewed as a living, changing cluster of themes that continues to evolve as a result of ongoing influences both within the locality and the outside world.

# CONCLUSION

In general, branding has not been systematically studied in the small place context; thus, the main objective of this presentation is to understand the role of branding in smaller, lesser known localities.

A place brand synthesizes the sum total of perceptions, images, and expectations the locality generates in people's minds, especially those that distinguish it from its economic, political, etc. rivals around the world. *Ad hoc* brand campaigns cannot be counted on to produce meaningful, long-lasting gains. In particular, smaller, lesser-known localities, which generally possess limited resources and past branding experience, while facing high branding barriers, need to take a longer-term, investment approach to place branding; they should pursue a focused approach (which concentrates resources on a few, well-defined market segments) capitalizing on existing as well as created assets to organically build and communicate an authentic, yet evolving, brand concept that is embraced by all major stakeholders in a proactive way.

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