

Twenty Benefits of a City Branding Strategy

by Bill Baker, Total Destination Marketing

While many regard branding as simply creating a new look and tagline, if done correctly a genuine brand management strategy should positively influence all aspects of a city's marketing, sharpen its focus, unify stakeholders, optimize available resources and lead to much greater marketing effectiveness and efficiency. In tough times this is strategic imperative.

The use of the term 'branding' in relation to cities and regions is sometimes confusing to some. Another way to consider branding is as a framework to shape and proactively manage the city's reputation in regard to key audiences. Its reputation relates directly to how it is perceived and its capacity to compete for visitors, investors, talented people, and relevance. In this context the benefits of branding become more apparent.

The reputation of the cities we visit and in which we live, work, and study matters. An attractive and distinctive identity makes it easier for a city (and its citizens) to be preferred in any competitive setting because the place is seen to have qualities that resonate positively with key audiences and can enhance the well-being of its citizens.

While cities may start a brand planning process with a clear set of objectives, the experience often brings many unexpected bonuses, even before the brand is launched.

Some cities have found that short-term tactical decisions are driving their marketing programs and realize that it's time for the strategic discipline of a brand strategy. The strategy should organize, focus and refine those disparate activities and make the most of scarce marketing resources.

It may be a matter of hit and miss as to whether there is cohesion and consistency in the design, content and messages emanating from the city. So often, the "ad of the month" syndrome is at play where marketers constantly change their communications in the hope of finding a message that will strike the right chord.

A brand strategy is the ideal way to avoid this kind of marketing schizophrenia where there is

a lack of consistency or clarity. The strategy provides the beacon to direct the city's marketing investments. It should be customer-focused to define the most potent positioning, benefits, messages, designs and product strengths that will resonate with key audiences and avoid waste. This should enable the city to stand apart from alternatives and simplify the choice for customers.

The Benefits for City Marketers

City, tourism and economic development marketers and their partners.

1. Provides a strategic focus based on competitive advantage and how to bond with key audiences.
2. Fosters a unified and cooperative approach to build the city's reputation and create a prosperous business climate within the city.
3. Provides a decision-making framework to build a strong, consistent identity for the city and avoid contradictory and randomly changing messages and images.
4. Results in a higher return on investment (ROI) from marketing investments.
5. Captures the strengths and personality of the place in ways that enables all stakeholders to use similar, consistent and compelling messages.
6. Provides a unifying theme to create product and business development opportunities for city businesses.
7. Because of the laser-beam focus on positioning, target audiences and the steps to satisfy customer needs and desired, waste marketing efforts are minimized.

The Benefits for External Customers

Visitors and relocation prospects

1. Provides peace of mind by increasing trust and reducing uncertainty in their decision-making.
2. Establishes a clear and valued point of difference in the consumer's mind.
3. Saves time and effort in making choices.
4. Reflects well on customers for being associated with the place.
5. Taps into, and connects with customer needs and desires, and delivers highly desired added value and benefits.

The Benefits for Your Community

1. It should create a unifying focus to aid all public, private, and non-profit organizations that rely on the reputation and image of the city for all or part of their livelihood.
2. Generates increased respect and recognition from being associated with the place as a resident, visitor, businessperson or student.
3. Corrects out of date, inaccurate or unbalanced perceptions.

4. Improves stakeholder income, profit margins, and tax revenues.
5. Increases the ability to attract, recruit, and retain talented people.
6. Enhances civic pride.
7. Expands the size of the "pie" for stakeholders to get a larger share, rather than relying on pricing alone to steal share.
8. Gets everyone on the same page in conveying focused and consistent messages about the city.

An added benefit is that a healthy city identity and reputation can aid citizens being welcomed in the "right" circles, gaining seats on influential committees, attract awards, win bids to host events, and attract conferences.

A genuine brand management strategy will bring increased effectiveness and efficiency to the city's marketing investments and provide many unexpected benefits for a wide variety of stakeholders.

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Destination Branding for Small Cities by Bill Baker is drawing praise from industry leaders, marketers and academics worldwide. It's a must read primer that demystifies city branding and provides affordable, proven tools, templates and checklists to build a successful destination brand.

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