

Branding Communities Calls for a Different Approach

The path to revealing a community-based brand usually involves a multitude of stakeholders and may depart somewhat from that generally followed for branding corporate products and services. One reason for the variation is the composite nature of communities which are a compilation of many independent and competing businesses, products, and experiences that may be owned and managed by many different organizations with no single management team or brand custodian.

For most cities, the challenge is to orchestrate cohesive brand messages and experiences through the commitment of many local players, including neighborhoods, attractions, hotels, tours, real estate agents, and restaurants that may also be competitors to each other.

Unlike a consumer product, such as a soft drink, cities are not discrete or independent entities. A city is much more complex and cannot be reformulated or terminated if it is not popular or is under-performing. Nor can it introduce different products under different names, as Black and Decker has done with its DeWalt line of tools.



A problem for many city brands is that some important leaders frequently do not have strong marketing credentials, nor do they have a customer-focused perspective, yet they sometimes exert considerable influence over the process: and these days, every citizen weighs in with their opinion as well! Authors Morgan and Pritchard pointed out, “If a city brand is to be developed as a coherent entity, participants in the process must be aware of the potentially destructive role of politics.”¹

¹ “Destination Branding” Morgan & Pritchard, Butterworth Heinemann



While a corporate brand may need to be approved by a marketing team or board, the city brand may have to be endorsed by the City Council, and other organizations in which political players may never see eye-to-eye. The city brand has to be an exception, overcoming enmity, and above politics. While most political leaders may not be marketing gurus, except when it comes to their own political campaigns (where some are brilliant at positioning themselves), their support is vital and must be nurtured. It is important to gain their endorsement and understanding of the branding assignment.

Cities generally have extremely limited marketing budgets compared to the marketing resources of many consumer and service brands. Exacerbating the situation is the pressure from city stakeholders and the challenge of developing a simple positioning message that will resonate with customers yet capture the diverse nature of city attributes.

Community-based brands often have to withstand a level of political and public debate that consumer brands rarely have to undergo. A city brand has to be able to stand the test of time, public debate, political scrutiny, media questions, and the analysis of marketing partners. The best way to insulate the brand from this scrutiny is to generate community buy-in and involvement from the start, through an open consultative process.



Brand planning for places usually requires an approach that is more conciliatory and inclusive than that found in the branding of most consumer products. For instance, being very specific with the positioning may unintentionally alienate many groups and cause controversy. Conversely, the trick is to not dilute the positioning to the point where

the place loses its strongest competitive edge, and ends up being seen as meaningless or irrelevant.

Our name reflects our mantra. Quite simply, we believe that successful destination brands are built around the customer's total destination experience - before, during and after their visit.

We work with ambitious cities, counties, and regions to establish them as compelling destinations for visitors, new businesses, talented people, and to generate community support and pride.

The guiding principle of our proven 7A approach is that it takes local people to breath life into a community's brand and to take responsibility for the its ongoing vitality. We create customized strategies, designs, educational programs, and tools to ensure that each city brand has a 'soft landing', is well received, endorsed, and adopted by key partners and residents, and increases the marketing performance of all brand partners.

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