

A City Brand Isn't a Magic Wand!

By Bill Baker, Total Destination Marketing

I recently had a conversation with the president of an East Coast DMO who was being pressured by some of his lodging partners because the community's brand strategy, which had been revealed three months earlier, had not generated an increase in business for them. While we at TDM didn't develop this strategy, it did seem to be a fairly robust document.

While there may be some short-term increases in visitation, the real benefits of branding won't be apparent overnight. If this DMO wanted to increase heads in beds, perhaps they should have invested more in their tactical marketing and sales. Even then, it takes time to break through the clutter of competing messages, build awareness and convert interest into actual bookings.

We are living in an era in which some brands like Facebook and i-Phone can become household names overnight. On the other hand, others have soared and then crashed just as quickly. Do you remember World Football League, Webvan.com and eToys.com? Cities are different. Their identity and image have usually been established over a very long period, they almost always have small marketing budgets, need to overcome generations of preconceived thoughts and opinions, and must mobilize myriad stakeholders to adopt and use the brand accurately and consistently.

A place brand is the totality of perceptions, thoughts and feelings that customers hold about the location. Considered another way, branding involves delivering on a valued promise, and if you are not organized in a way to communicate and deliver what you have promised, your

brand will fail - and quickly. It's much more than a tagline, logo or the theme of the newest advertising campaign.

Here are some points to consider:

- A brand management strategy is a strategic business tool! It provides the leadership, framework, designs and decision-making tools to ensure more focused targeting, more potent positioning, the ability to hit customer hot buttons, helps prioritize product development investments, and is the means to amplify the co-operative energy and resources of the city's partners. All of this has to be delivered through the actions of possibly hundreds of players to shape the most competitive and distinctive identity for the city.
- It's difficult to change perceptions and views in the short term. After all, it took years to shape the city's current image. And we know that the "old brain" is much stronger and inflexible than the "new brain" when it comes to replacing old images and stereotypes. For instance, we know of many post-industrial cities where their smoke stack industries closed decades ago, yet those cities are still regarded by some as "grimy" industrial cities. Similarly, if a city wants to reposition itself to be known for something different to the past, prospective visitors won't catch on to this overnight unless you have a huge budget.
- Branding can, and does, bring short-term benefits, but the true value is long-term and cumulative. Successful place branding is achieved with lots of

small victories, again and again. A city's image is the result of hundreds and hundreds of influences and influencers over an extended period. On the other hand, a "Grand Slam" approach to branding a place is a sure fire way to blow the budget with little long-term impact. True success will only come from the consistency of messages and experiences from many sources hitting their mark again, and again, and again.

- Rolling out and implementing a city's brand strategy may have to be managed over several budget cycles and be calibrated to match staff resources and the replacement of the DMO's marketing materials.
- Harnessing the power of the many messengers within the community to get everyone onto the same page and

create a powerful symphony that conveys consistent messages takes a lot of collaboration. One of the hallmarks of successful place branding is creating healthy alliances and partnerships between public, private and non-profit sector organizations. Again, this takes time!

The benefits of city branding are considerable, however they will not materialize overnight because it will take time for the brand to gain traction within the community, among key partners and with key markets. From the outset, you must be sure that the objectives are clear and realistic, programs are well funded and that there is an understanding of what branding is and isn't. This includes ensuring that no one expects a magic wand. And when the brand strategy is finally revealed, that's when the hard work really begins.

Bill Baker is the founder and President of *Total Destination Marketing*. TDM is a team of destination branding and tourism planning specialists. Bill is recognized internationally as an expert in developing brand strategies for destinations and communities of all sizes. He is a popular speaker and author of *Destination Branding for Small Cities*.

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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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