

# ALL CARDS (MAPS) ON THE TABLE: OPENLY ABOUT PLACE BRANDING (1)

Place branding – a hot discussion topic and a playing field for experiments. Some consider a country or a city brand a “must have”, and rush to create it “from scratch”. Others thrash around in search for the perfect image – “do we belong to the pretty ones or smart ones?” (2)

Branding of places, geographic definition of which spans anything really from countries to town districts, existed in that or another form forever. Early tribes sporting wild animal totems scratched out drawings of those on any available visible surface next to their dwelling sites. Ancient Greeks have openly advertised their grapes (wine) and their hetaeras, Romans – their gladiators, legionnaires and imperial might.

For ages place branding was based on actual capabilities and unique opportunities. The modern ‘marketing’ universe, however, has turned place branding into a peculiar idée fixe. Arguments around the concept are heated and never-ending, while a lot of non-professionals perceive

Index and State Brands Index, precisely defines the issue: “Every year, hundreds of cities, regions and countries waste millions of Euros of taxpayers’ money on futile propaganda without any proof that it can achieve any difference in their reputation, and without any attempt to measure its success. So every example of this kind of activity is a failure, and they fail because the task is basically impossible”.

His thinking is supported by Oliver Loode, Managing Partner at Consumetric, Tourism development and place marketing consultant: “Any place that attempts to repair its image via a face-lift while not addressing root causes of its poor or weak image. It would be equivalent of Zimbabwe launching an

and nation branding specialist, author of How to brand nations, cities and destinations, advisor of Nation Branding project in Finland: “The models developed for branding physical products or services do not work at all or are seriously limited in the context of cities/countries. The most important differentiating features are the fact that there’s no owner - there’s stunning amount of owners, combined with significant lack of control”.

Soft drinks, sports shoes – these are products with a finite number of basic characteristics. Target audience can sample these products with ease. At the same time, a place is a multi-element object. It is difficult to get a quick and easy “taste” and evaluation of a geographic territory. Target audience inertia in this case is incomparably larger. You cannot sell a buyer a whole “portfolio of brands” in one go using just a standard-issue advertising campaign – because that results in...

## 4. Excessive focus on external marketing communication tools

“There is often the belief that the creation of intangible values and bonds between consumers and a place-brand is only achieved through advertising. The main argument against this vision is that brands exist with or without advertising. The brand building process is not about advertising or communication but about what the product can offer”, — believes Joao Freire, Brand Strategist at Brandia Central, Editor of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy for EMEA.

As a matter of fact, perceptions of a place, feelings and thoughts related to the brand, are formed thanks to a complex and multi-dimensional “communication experience” with the territory. “It is incumbent upon all destinations wanting to build a strong brand to ensure that they delight their customers at every point or moment where they meet, — muses Bill Baker. — Advertising doesn’t need to be their first and dominant marketing investment. In

Diplomacy, called Wales (walesthebrand.com) an excellent example “for its strong focus on brand values (not logo’s and slogans) that are rooted in local identity and an implementation that does not restrict itself to communication. They also choose not to complain about misperceptions and shouting out their aspirations, but to take slightly negative perceptions and give them a positive, often original and humorous twist. This is very powerful as it fits peoples brand associations and therefore messages are easily accepted and remembered”.

Teemu Moilanen highlights three countries for demonstrating an ability to form a country brand within a relatively short period of time. “Spain transforming from a poor European backwater nation to a modern, civilized country and a significant European player; the transformation of Ireland from a fringe area to an IT centre; and Croatia’s conversion from a theater of war to an interesting tourism destination and area of business”.

work of San Antonio TX which is tying itself strongly to the essence of the Texan character and uses the tagline, “Deep in the Heart”, capturing the feeling of a popular song about the state”.

Oliver Loode gives his vote to the city of Rakvere (Estonia): “Previously a rather boring provincial town has positioned itself as a “crazy city” that is “full of force”, organizing sumo world championships, punk music song festivals and other “crazy” stuff like that”.

It becomes obvious after just a while that all successful examples are built on unique features and historical conceptual associations of respective territories-“objects”.

Maybe Ukraine should also take note of some of similar approaches. In any case, if you decide to involve yourself with this fascinating task in practical terms, pay attention to the expert consensus “7 Rules of Successful Place Branding” – that just might be a first step on the road to your

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place branding as a panacea for mitigating negative place reputations. That situation is instigated to a large extent by the fact that the stakeholders of the specific place – the government, business, various advocacy groups – are not in coordinated agreement over the perception and representation of the strong points of their place; thus they often act separately on pure inspiration. Results of such experiments vary from successful discoveries to outright “epic” fails.

## Traditional pitfalls

### 1. An attempt to mitigate bad image without eliminating underlying causes

Founder and legend of the field Simon Anholt, an independent government advisor who previously advised governments and heads of state of 43 countries, 26 cities and 12 regions on these matters and coined the phrase ‘nation brand’, author of Anholt Nation Brands Index, City Brands

image campaign without improving the human rights situation first. While it may be a convenient thing to do and it may even have some limited success, overall such superficial attempts are bound to fail”.

Essentially, an attempt to “whip up” a territorial brand without an underlying comprehension of day-to-day work with reference points of strategic territory development (or a lack of willingness to do so) – of economic, cultural, political nature – is usually a road to station “Nowhere”. Moving from general to specific, the first pitfall leads to the second:

### 2. A belief that place and product branding are essentially identical

Unfortunately, way too many marketing specialists share a belief that country/city branding is plain sailing – just transpose the existing product experience to another scale. However, as stated by Teemu Moilanen, CEO Imagian Ltd, city

### 3. Replacement of comprehensive brand strategy with logos and slogans

“There are many of these “brand hangovers” every year, where cities set out to develop a brand strategy but end up with a mediocre logo and a tagline based upon some warm and fuzzy notion that it is a great place to live”, — notes Bill Baker, president of Total Destination Marketing, a company that specializes in place branding, author of Destination Branding for Small Cities.

Slogans like that can be “stamped” on hundreds, thousands of other cities. These include, in Robert Govers’ view, such ‘masterpieces’ as «Manchester, a mature city», «Munich loves you» or «Only Lyon». Brands of such cities simply lack competitive positioning. Hence, reluctance of key decision makers in dealing with development of territorial branding strategy multiplied by an eagerness of hired marketers to simplify their own task

addition to experiences at the destination, other factors such as word of mouth, social media, personal recommendations, and public relations can have a far greater influence on destination choice than advertising”.

Experts have also mentioned a number of other often-noticed mistakes:

- Expectation of results from city/country branding within just 2-3 years;
- Focus on the tourist sector only;
- Absence of solidarity and tuned internal communications between the “owners” of the brand (governments, business, community).

## Pleasant exceptions

We offered the experts to list successful examples of city/territorial branding. Robert Govers, Co-founder of Place-brandz.com, author of Place Branding, Member of the editorial board of the Journal of Place Branding and Public

Another call by the expert is Las Vegas for its thought-through approach to the brand image: “At some point their gambling related brand started to be outdated and a bit seedy, and they decided to expand their market and to change the brand -image more appealing to families. They built required infrastructure and after a decade found out that basically it had worked well, but the brand image has moved too much towards the families, and at the same time had lost some important elements of excitement and danger. They worked on that and successfully brought back some slightly darker, more adult oriented shades to the brand image of Las Vegas”.

Bill Baker, meanwhile, accounts for lesser known cities: “The reality is that there are hundreds of much smaller places that are going about establishing competitive identities for themselves without being in national or global spotlights. I like the

little personal panacea?”

## 7 Rules of Successful Place Branding

1. Identify the genius loci — “spirit of the place” — and incorporate it into the overall brand identity, presenting its strong sides in the best possible light.
2. Identify the objectives, key segments, then begin to create a strategy.
3. Gather a wide circle of stakeholders, establishing clear cooperation models and utilizing all the resources of the network.
4. First approve the brand strategy, and only then begin to identify and select advertising and PR agencies, web designers etc.
5. Monitor consistency, coherence and integrity of the communication strategy.
6. Support the brand with innovations, investments, events and symbolic actions.
7. Follow the developments closely and remember that brand creation is a painstaking perennial work. It’s a long-term war, not a stand-alone battle – you cannot win it based on tactical approaches only.

The following footnotes do not appear in the original published version of the article and are for your benefit only:

(1) There are two translation nuances in the title. a) “Cards on the table” is a sustained Russian idiom meaning “open discussion”; b) The word for “card” (as in “playing card”) and “map” in Russian/Ukrainian is the same - thus, there is an intended pun referring to geographic locations rather than “cards” in the original idiom

(2) This refers to a cult Russian joke about a stupid ugly monkey, who’s very fond of itself, and thus is undecided, whether it belongs to the “pretty” animals or the “smart” ones