

# Why City Brands Run Out of Steam And Yours Doesn't Have To

by Bill Baker, President, Total Destination Marketing

*Adopting a city brand offers tremendous rewards if done correctly. However, sometimes these well meaning efforts introduce levels of complexity and pitfalls which could easily have been avoided if leaders had understood the nuances of brand planning for cities.*

Many city branding projects get off to a great start with a lot of publicity and energy, only to soon run out of steam. Their momentum starts to lag, fresh ideas are not as frequent, designs start to miss their mark, and suddenly the brand has faded, it is confused, and becomes very vague to customers and stakeholders. There are many issues that contribute to a failed city brand. Here are some of the common pitfalls that can contribute to failure.

## 1. Insufficient Understanding Of Branding

A local government entity or destination management organization (DMO) with a board, staff and partners who have an understanding of brand management, and the concepts and techniques needed for a successful brand has a much better chance of defining its strongest positioning and brand elements.

Some community branding projects fail to gain funding support or become mired in controversy because key opinion leaders had not been briefed about what the project is and isn't. Briefings should be built into the planning phases to ensure that stakeholders are well informed about the strategic nature of branding and its benefits. Central to this is an understanding that branding is much more than a new logo, slogan or advertising campaign. At this point it is also important

to convey the benefits of the project to residents and what it can mean for them.

## 2. Lack of Stakeholder Buy-in

Sustaining the brand requires the broad adoption and correct usage by all stakeholders who can influence the most important points of contact with city customers. If the brand is only used visually through advertising and stationery, its impact will be limited. It's best to build stakeholder buy-in from the earliest stages of the planning process and continue to engage them throughout the project in order to deliver superior communications and experiences.

## 3. Failure to Grasp the Scope of Branding

This might also be referred to as logo and tagline fixation. Many communities forget to ensure that they can orchestrate outstanding visitor experiences before they roll-out their publicity and advertising campaign. Branding is all about delivering on a promise by orchestrating superior experiences. Branding is much more than a creative discipline - its management and strategic!

Branding is about differentiation, focus, and organizing. And you really can do it on a shoestring budget by optimizing the use and performance of all resources, messages, and customer contact points.

#### **4. Focusing On Short-Term Results**

“Heads in beds” is vitally important to the viability of cities and their tourism partners. However, when setting brand objectives, focusing on short-term traffic alone is unlikely to support the long-term health of the city’s brand image.

An over-emphasis on price-driven initiatives restricts the communication of the core brand messages which shape perceptions and positioning as an attractive place to visit (for other than price-based reasons). It takes time to build positive awareness, associations, name recognition and reputation. There no silver bullet!

#### **5. Forgetting The Customer’s View**

Two of the greatest obstacles to successful community branding are insufficient customer focus and undue political influence and self interest. The preference for some political and opinion leaders to adopt risk averse, parochial, inclusive, self interest, or popular positions can run counter to the best interests of a city’s economic development. The focus should be on distilling the single strongest competitive advantage that will resonate with the external audiences. Too many city branding efforts fail because they are based on what locals like and how they see themselves, rather than on what will be meaningful and valued by their external customers.

#### **6. No Clarity on What is Being Branded**

What are the boundaries? Is it just the downtown or the entire city? Is it the overarching brand for all communications efforts on behalf of the city? There is a delicate balance in the geographical and political scope of a community-based brand. If the brand tries to cover too wide an area and address too many different

audiences, it may become diluted. This can happen by relying on weak points of commonality in order to gain agreement.

From the start everyone should be clear about the parameters of the assignment, ensure that the correct problems are being solved, and be prepared to pay attention to the underlying issues. Without this clarity, the exercise can quickly descend into confusion, ambiguity and controversy.

#### **7. Insufficient or Irrelevant Research**

While it is occasionally necessary for some places to advance through its brand planning without substantial customer research, it is not the desired option. Research, particularly consumer perceptual research, will provide a far more insightful view in determining attitudes and the strongest competitive positioning. Importantly, you need to know how prospective customers view your city compared to that of other choices and how their perceptions match their needs. Too frequently, cities are lured into research that simply delivers unnecessary, “nice to know” information. Instead, they should zero in on the information that’s really essential for action and strategic analysis for building the city brand. Don’t spend too much time and money analyzing the demographics and buying behavior of locals when the real audience is outside of the city.

#### **8. The “We Have It All” Trap**

Don’t try to be all things to all people. At some point during every workshop we conduct, someone says “We have it all!” or “We are the gateway to everything”. When conducting the process themselves, far too many cities make the mistake of thinking they have hit pay dirt at this stage. Claiming that your city or region has it all may feel warm and fuzzy, appease various local groups and avoid the tough decisions,

but it invariably leads to very weak positioning. Failing to base the brand on its strongest and most distinctive benefits from the customer's perspective will result in a weak and irrelevant proposition.

## **9. Not Following the Strategy**

When no one has been given the responsibility to actively manage or protect the brand, the effort can be patchy and will usually stray from the prescribed strategy and guidelines. Successful brands are closely managed and protected, but responsibility for this is sometimes not well defined. If the brand blueprint is not closely followed, the strategy will be launched, implemented and adopted in an ad hoc and inconsistent manner.

The worst result of all is when there is insufficient will to implement the strategy and “the bad old ways” are never left behind for fear of upsetting somebody. So much of city branding is about change management, partnerships and transitioning to a more effective focus for leadership, communications, resources, and behavior. It's not going to happen automatically!

## **10. The Lure of “Bright Shiny Objects”**

Advertising can be important to some cities, but designing a brand with an over-emphasis on an advertising theme is a recipe for failure. Allied to this pitfall is the mistake of selecting a brand planning consultancy on the basis of their attractive advertising examples. The selection of the best advertising agency should be made when you have the strategy set and are at the implementation phase. Your first task is to get the strategy right, so that you lead the advertising in the right direction. Of course, that also depends upon whether you have a budget sufficient to support an advertising campaign. It's amazing how many communities are lured by a

consultancy/agency's attractive advertising examples when the city only has a tiny advertising budget. Beware of bright shiny objects!

## **11. Forgetting About the Brand Experience and Your Reality**

Your brand is your promise of performance! It must be grounded in truth and reality. Therefore, like all promises, if you don't live up to it, you will have a weak and unsustainable brand. An integral component of your brand management strategy must be dedicated to the essential actions and behavior needed for partners to collaborate in communicating and delivering the brand experiences that underpin the Destination Promise™.

## **12. Neglecting to Pass the Baton**

From time to time pivotal people who are essential to the vitality of the brand move on. They might be the head of the tourism organization, elected officials, board members and key partners. This is when it is important to ensure that there is continuity in understanding, knowledge and energy in regard to the brand strategy. It pays to conduct an intensive brand workshop every day or so to introduce the brand to newcomers and to refresh and invigorate it for others. Without this attention, we have seen the brand investments made by some cities become diluted and gradually fade away. Usually, all that remains is a lonely logo searching for meaning and relevance.

## **13. Unhelpful Mindsets**

We find that those places which are most prepared to “think outside the box” are the likeliest to develop the most potent brand positioning and outcomes. Creating community-based brands is most effective when participants have an open and collaborative attitude in contributing to the common good. Individuals who have

entrenched or parochial mindsets are usually unable to move beyond their own self-interest to embrace other perspectives. It is much more rewarding for all to strive toward collective results because these always prove more powerful than individual efforts alone.

#### **14. Brand Fatigue**

It is an old marketing truism that we get tired of our marketing long before our customers do. Some organizations ever so slightly depart from their brand strategy a small step at a time because they get tired of an aspect of it and quickly become considerably off strategy. An important key to successful city branding is to encourage partners to focus on the Destination Promise™ and consistently use it in all creative executions and in collaborating to deliver brand experiences.

Branding is long-term and cumulative. It is an ongoing organizing and management framework that requires continued focus to shape and deliver the brand over time. You can't afford to get comfortable or complacent. It involves a constant battle to remain relevant and attractive. It doesn't take long for what may have been a thriving location to lose favor or momentum and fall victim to trends that it did not pay attention to or fail to inspire ongoing innovation and creativity. This is also why we repeatedly say that it's much more than a logo and tagline!

#### **15. Going It Alone**

Cities sometimes call on us to lead their brand planning after they have attempted to do it themselves. They found it too difficult without the objectivity, experience, and knowledge that a group of experienced specialists can bring. Not to mention the time savings. Some try to develop the brand by engaging a local graphic designer or pr agency. This is a case where buying local can harm the

community. They usually don't have the experience, objectivity or perspective. There can possibly be a role for them later in the implementation phases. Others try to reveal their brand by assembling a local committee to do the audit and strategic analysis. Too often the group lacks objectivity and falls into the trap of simply making locals feel good warm and fuzzy, while forgetting about the realities of the marketplace and what will resonate with customers. Even though engaging outside professionals may mean paying more, the overall results for the city and its reputation will more than pay for itself.

#### **16. Trying To Be Something That You're Not**

A brand must always be truthful, meaningful, and deliverable. Otherwise it will be based on hype and have an extremely short life. The chances are that locals will also reject it if they do not identify with it or if it doesn't match their values and vision for their community. Local 'traction' is essential to create and deliver a successful community brand.

#### **17. Failing to Engage Specialist Skills**

An outside agency or consultant can guide the group through all of the difficult analysis and decisions that may be overlooked or glossed over by locals. Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) highlights this in their publication, *Destination BrandScience*, which states:

*“Qualified, skilled brand expertise in strategic development is not easy to come by and even harder to identify. Typical RFPs use the words ‘agencies’. While agencies may provide some of the services required for developing a strategy for*

*destination brands, it may be a conflict of interest for the company currently doing the advertising or promotional campaign to do the assessment and create the promise.*

*Many advertising agencies or graphic design firms believe that they are in the business of brand development, and indeed some are. However, the real question to ask is: What is the vendor selling - advertising, graphic design or strategy? Ask yourself, if you were developing an RFP for a large bridge project, would you solicit construction firms to do the engineering? Of course not. You want the expertise of an independent expert to design the critical elements for success. True brand strategy requires the same high level of expertise.”*

If you are considering appointing an agency or consultancy to develop your brand strategy, ensure that they have a specialist background in brand planning for cities and regions. Also take the time to thoroughly search online for media reports regarding prospective agencies and their senior executives to see if there has been any controversy from their previous assignments.

Those cities that take steps at an early stage to avoid these and other potential pitfalls are in a much better position to develop a brand strategy that will unify and energize stakeholders and improve the city’s economic development and tourism performance, and enhance the city’s social capital.

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	<p><i>Destination Branding for Small Cities</i> 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.</p>	