Practitioner's perception on the Essence of Place Brand Management

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Abstract: This research aims to complement current theoretical concepts of location branding suggested by previous research and provides a practitioner concept of location brand management. Fifteen location brand practitioners operating in 15 different geographical areas and in different destination management organizations were asked to comment on what they understood by local brand management as part of a larger study on location brand management. This is the first research to capture and incorporate the opinions of professionals on the nature of location brand management. The research creates a multi-faceted concept that focuses on the identification of the place, experience of the place, participation of stakeholders, and the leadership role of the location brand practitioner in positioning and promoting the proposal and experience of the location.

Keywords: Brand management, Place branding, Brand definitions, Reputation, Market issues.

INTRODUCTION

The brand definition has a long history, and in modern times it is associated with the production of packaged products, such as Quaker Oats and Gillette, in the nineteenth century. Although locations have always advertised their attractions and photos and competed with each other for investments from tourists, residents, staff, companies, industry and export markets, and have always had names that could be similar to a brand, there is a more recent interest in applying branding to the location of the entity [1].

Destination management organizations (DMOs) are also increasingly aware of the need to control their place's brand, reputation and positioning in order to succeed in a global market place. As a result, there are slowly evolving mutual understandings of the essence of position branding. Place branding has a burgeoning scholarly literature [2]. It indicates, however, that 'it's hard to see how a field of study or practice can mature unless some kind of consensus on the meaning of the field is reached, so the problem is long overdue for resolution.

Therefore, for the advancement of theoretical principles and structures in the field, and for the benchmarking and promotion of good practice, a degree of consensus on the meaning of place branding or place brand management is central. In response to the demand for more analysis, this article explores the nature of position branding [3]. This article is specifically focused on interviews with 15 professionals and reports on their perspectives on the answer to the question, unlike most other on-site branding exhibitions: What do you understand by place brand management?

In contrast to similar concepts such as location and destination branding, the article first sets the context with an analysis of current meanings of brands, location brands and location branding, and location branding positions [4]. First, it explains the methods for this research. The results, which end with a suggestion of a practitioner-informed concept of place brand management, follow this. The discussion compares the existing definitions and the proposed practitioner-led definition. Finally, conclusions and recommendations for further development of the understanding of the essence of place brand management are proposed.

BRAND AND PLACE BRANDING DEFINED

To develop an understanding of place branding, there needs to be an understanding of what a brand is and what place branding involves. As a starting point for discussions, the well-known and much-cited concept of a brand given by the American Marketing Association is sometimes used. Nevertheless, research into scientific discussions of brands indicates that no agreed paradigm exists [5]. While there is a consensus in support of Jacobsen, that the importance of brands exists primarily in the mind of the customer, not in the manufacturer's factory, evoking a strong emotional connection with products, facilities, people or locations.

As such, it is argued that the concept of brands as socio-psychological constructs prohibits signs or trademarks from restricting brands. Instead, the brand construct focuses on the expectations of the customer (image) and the entity's self-perception (identity); and the interdependencies between the two. In the case of place branding, the entity is the venue, and its different stakeholders formulate different perceptions of the location. Similar to the lack of consensus on a 'brand' definition, Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005) argue that there is no single agreed location branding definition [6]. There is some consensus that place branding is a mechanism by which a new identity of the place is acquired by incorporating measurable, cultural, social and economic meaning.

It has been proposed that there is a danger that position branding, sponsored by marketing communications, is too frequently seen as a limited mechanism associated with livery enhancement and coordination. He notes that many governments end up thinking that this basic design and printing method relates to the tradition of place branding, but they somehow also believe that its effect would be to make the place more popular [7]. Instead, experts say that the role of marketing communications is to generate interest, resulting in sales or other interaction, which in turn contributes to customer experience of the product or venue, resulting in brand equity if it is satisfactory and shared.

Experience, then, is essential to branding placement. Experience is impacted by the infrastructure of the location and its stakeholders, and as such, position branding must embrace the growth of the location. Such claims are in clear contradiction to previous notions of place branding that regarded it as a wide variety of attempts to promote the places and industries they serve made by governments and business groups. This emphasis on the experience centre co-creates the experience of the venue. An expert suggests that such co-creation does not always have a positive effect on the brand, which poses challenges for place brand managers.

Baker claims that branding is the entirety of the customer's expectations and feelings about a location that is constructed at any point of interaction with the consumer through the provision of outstanding interactions that do not depend solely on the location's physical characteristics and image projection [8]. He believes that in identifying and fulfilling the promise that is inherent in the brand, each experience has a vital role. There is now proven literature that argues that places that want to succeed must provide their target audiences with distinctive, convincing, unforgettable and satisfying experiences [9].

There is therefore a need for location branding to expand beyond the emphasis on image development to an awareness of the implementation of the experience promised. This stance is echoed by Zenker and Braun (2010), who describe a location brand as a network of customer mind associations focused on the visual, verbal, and behavioural representation of a place expressed by the stakeholders' priorities, communication, values, and general culture of the place and the overall location design.

DISCUSSION

The question of terminology in place branding is a vexed one with no term seeming more problematic than place branding itself. In an attempt to resolve the confusion arising from the myriad of definitions, interviews were conducted with practitioners leading to the development of a more detailed and comprehensive definition of place brand management. The proposed concept of place brand management establishes general principles that place branding is the practise of applying brand strategy and other marketing strategies and disciplines by providing greater visibility into the components and goals of the place brand management process.

The term indicates that the management of the location brand should strive to fuse stakeholder interests to increase the appeal of the location product, thereby raising the pride and trust of stakeholders and improving how the location is perceived internally and externally. It defines the role of leadership in bringing stakeholders together and engaging them, taking into account the development and projection of identity and local stakeholder experiences. The proposed definition recognizes that it is important to understand that location brand management is more than a marketing campaign or brand launch in order to create positive customer experiences. It acknowledges the value and restoration of infrastructure and, in general, the development of existing properties [10].

This focus on the contribution of experiential attributes referring to the place experience is consistent with previous literature. For example, Baker (2007)and Wagner and Peters (2009) suggest that the place constitutes more than just its physical characteristics and consider intangible attributes, such as stakeholder behavior and service delivery associated with the various interactions that consumers may have with a place. Similarly, some experts privilege the importance of experiential attributes while recognizing that these attributes are grounded in both physical and service attributes.

CONCLUSION

By offering a practitioner-informed concept of place brand management, this study adds to the literature. The concept that emerges takes a process-based view of place branding and signals the acute knowledge of the meaning of place branding by practitioners, and an appreciation of its complexity. The multi-faceted essence of the method is more poignantly captured by practitioners' perspectives on site brand management than many of the current theoretical concepts. Practitioners conveyed an understanding of the centrality of stakeholder engagement, while also recognizing that marketing communications are an aspect of the process. The significance of the place experience and the need to develop infrastructure to enhance that experience was also acknowledged.

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