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Abstract

Brand management is now being applied to places to stimulate economic and social development. While the literature advocates the benefits, it suggests that the process of implementation is not understood. Referring to the corporate brand-place brand analogy and the important role of senior management in corporate branding, this paper examines the role of community leaders, as the senior management equivalent, in two cities which have implemented a place brand strategy. This paper provides an insight into the importance of community leaders as drivers of the place brand as well as the cultural change which may be required to ensure the desired outcome.

Keywords

Role, Community, Leaders, Senior, Managers, Place, Brand, Implementation

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The Role of Community Leaders as 'Senior Managers' in Place Brand Implementation

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Abstract

Brand management is now being applied to places to stimulate economic and social development. While the literature advocates the benefits, it suggests that the process of implementation is not understood. Referring to the corporate brand-place brand analogy and the important role of senior management in corporate branding, this paper examines the role of community leaders, as the senior management equivalent, in two cities which have implemented a place brand strategy. This paper provides an insight into the importance of community leaders as drivers of the place brand as well as the cultural change which may be required to ensure the desired outcome.

Introduction to Place Branding

The application of brand techniques to places has been described as a new field within the discipline of marketing with Anholt (2002 p. 232) identifying place branding as "marketing's chance to create a lasting and significant future role beyond its traditional boundaries". An issue often misunderstood is that the name of a place is a brand; a brand being defined as a name, term, or symbol that identifies and differentiates (American Marketing Association, 2005). A place name complies with this definition as it identifies and differentiates one place from another. It is the meaning and communication of the place brand that can be managed. Importantly, as Gilmore (2002) claims, it is now a risk not to apply a brand strategy to a place name. She suggests that locations that do not seek to brand manage themselves run the risk of being positioned by competitors or other interest groups.

The Development of Place Branding

Place branding has been influenced by the practices of destination branding and corporate branding. Destination branding is related to marketing a place as a tourism destination and although some of the principles are the same, place branding takes a more holistic view (Kerr, 2006) and seeks to appeal to a broader range of markets such as new residents, investors, new businesses and corporate headquarters (Kotler, Haider and Rein, 1993; Lodge, 2002).

In addition to the influence of destination branding, many of the studies into place branding have drawn from the literature on corporate branding. A number of authors (e.g. Olins, 1999; Anholt, 2002; Trueman, Klemm and Giroud, 2004; Kavartzis, 2005) have recognised that there are similarities between the corporate brand and the place brand and that those researching the newer domain of place brands can learn from the more extensive literature and practice in corporate brands. The common features identified by Kavartzis (2004) are that both have, multidisciplinary roots, address multiple groups of stakeholders, have a high level of intangibility and complexity, and have a need to take into account social responsibility and need to deal with multiple identities. Olins (2002) recognises that although branding businesses and nations do have a lot in common it is dangerous to take the analogy

too far. Green (2005 p. 280) states that while working with stakeholders is a familiar concept, “the stakeholder matrix is considerably more complex in a place branding project.” Places do not have the same rigid control mechanisms which exist in organisations (Hankinson, 2001). Further, when compared to corporations, places are less able to exclude groups of users or stakeholders (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007).

The Corporate Brand-Place Brand Analogy

Notwithstanding the additional complexity of place branding, the relevance of corporate branding to place branding has been established (Olins, 1999; Anholt, 2002; Trueman, Klemm and Giroud, 2004; Kavaratzis, 2005). Kavaratzis (2004 p. 66) states that “...there are common characteristics ... that support the suggestion that the framework for understanding city brands is provided by corporate brands and their management.”

In the corporate realm, Wood (2000) suggested that the management of brands is a high-level function. Uncles, Cocks and Macrae (1995 p.3) insist that, "if brands do have value, then the way a company uses its portfolio of brands is a top management decision." Leitch and Richardson (2003) see the corporate brand as the responsibility of the CEO and should be created and managed within the context of the organisation's strategic plan. Balmer and Greyser (2003 p.7) suggest that corporate level marketing “will be multidisciplinary in scope and will have a more strategic/senior management role.” Senior management are faced with the challenge to clearly define and communicate the brand values internally (de Chernatony, 1999; Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). King and Grace (2005) found that managers have a role in helping to guide employee behaviour to deliver a service that is aligned with the brand.

This study responds to Anholt's (2002) call for research into the internal processes associated with place branding and examines the proposition that like a corporate brand, for a place brand to be successful, it needs a high level of support from internal stakeholders. This research draws on the corporate brand–place brand analogy and proposes that community leaders in a place equate to its senior management and that the effective implementation of a place brand is more likely to be achieved if the community leaders support the initiative.

Methodology

The main objective of this study was to explore the involvement and support of community leaders in cities which had recently implemented a place brand strategy. As this was an exploratory study, this involved semi-structured in-depth interviews with persons identified as community leaders such as the mayor, the general manager of the council, the tourist officer, the economic development officer, school principals, president of the business chamber, local members of parliament, trade union leaders, and the editor of the local newspaper.

Two cities were selected on the basis that each had recently implemented a place brand strategy and represented an appropriate unit of study. In total 24 interviews took place in the two locations in the offices of each participant with the interviews lasting, on average, one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed. The cities are not named in this paper as to do so could identify some of the respondents with anonymity a condition of reporting the findings of this study. Open-ended interviews were considered the most appropriate method as this allowed the respondents to express their own opinions and allowed the researcher to

individually investigate and clarify the responses in a topic that as Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2007 p. 16) state “suffers from a lack of clear and unanimous definitions of its components.” Data was analysed using the approach applied by (King and Grace, 2005) who researched the role of employees in the delivery of the corporate brand. An interview framework was developed to ensure that the research proposition was addressed, and that there was some consistency between interviews to provide a chain of evidence. This “bureaucratisation of fieldwork” (Miles, 1979) assists with the coding and analysis of data as well as a replication of the process if required (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri, 2005). The data was thematically analysed with a focus on the identification of 'key issues' which were emerging (Patton, 2002).

Findings

The Role of Place Branding in the Management of Cities

In the cities being the subject of this study, the brand strategy was an adopted response to a problem; being economic decline and related social problems in one city and a lack of economic growth in the other. In both cities considerable resources were allocated on the part of their local governments. These resources included engaging consultants, employment of staff and promotional funding.

The Loss of Momentum

The consensus of those interviewed in both cities was that the brand strategy, despite a launch and extensive initial promotion, had stalled in one case and lost momentum in another within a time frame of a few years. The number of community leaders supporting the brand initiatives waned over a short period of time. It seems that the ‘place brand lifecycle’ of the cities being the subject of this study is in a downward trend with only a few community leaders remaining committed to the brand.

The Barriers to Implementation

Despite the identification of a marketing approach as a 'turnaround strategy' to address economic and social issues in the cities being the subject of this research, this study suggests that there are a number of barriers to implementation that need to be understood and addressed if a place brand strategy is to be successful. Such a challenge has similarities with other domains of marketing when the 'what to do' might be established, but the 'how to do it' may be in need of attention (Bonoma, 1985). This work has identified some of the barriers that may need to be addressed if the implementation of a place brand is to be successful. Although further research is likely to uncover other issues, this work has a focus on the role of community leaders in the place brand implementation process and some of the key themes that emerged from the analysis are provided below. The order of presentation does not imply levels of importance or relationships between the themes identified.

Support of Community Leaders for the Place Brand

In both cases there was a diverse range of support and opinions on the part of the ‘senior management’ of the city towards the place brand. As can be seen from the comments provided below, the opinions towards the place brand ranged from being positive, to simply

aware, to openly critical. In the corporate studies referred to earlier on, the ideal is to have the senior management team, and eventually employees, supporting the brand.

- The Positive *“Enormously. I love the concept.”*
 “Very much so.”
 “Yes it certainly is.”
- The Aware *“I think it is still going. You see it around ... I think they took it to one level and then did not go on with it.”*
 “...we are probably not using it to the extent it could be considering the work that we put into it.”
- The Critical *“From the point of view of things happening and businesses using it, it never happened.”*
 “I think it is quite dull actually. I think it lacks any imagination. To me it was never really thought through.”

The likely implication of these comments is that the success of a place brand could be threatened if there is not strong support from community leaders. What chance exists of local residents accepting and supporting the place brand strategy if this is not forthcoming from community leaders? An implementation strategy for a place brand may do well to recognise the need to assign a role to community leaders as supported by the findings presented below.

The Role of Community Leaders

In addition to varying levels of support on the part of community leaders there was evidence to suggest that there was not ownership of the place brand. Even a leader supportive of the brand *“I think that they took it to one level and then did not go on with it.”* claimed:

The word ‘they’ in this response displayed a lack of ownership or involvement in the place brand on the part of the community leader. Another response supports this finding.

“... the leadership in the community wasn't backing... [the person charged with the management of the place brand strategy.]”

These comments indicated that some community leaders saw the place brand as an initiative of the local council, and some saw the place brand as the sole responsibility of one person within the council. As Swystun (2005 p. 21) points out, “the brand does not live in one government department.” Not only was there an assumption on the part of some community leaders that the place brand was a council project, some council officers were critical of the lack of support on the part of community leaders as evidenced by the following.

“The Chamber of Commerce, all of them were very supportive; they didn't actually do anything, but they were very supportive,”

While this criticism of the community leaders may have had some substance, it also seemed these community leaders were not assigned a role. The implication is likely to be that not only do community leaders need to have ownership of the place brand; it is unreasonable to expect them to do anything if they are not asked to! Not only is there a likely need for community leaders to be advocates of 'their' place brand, but to be aware of what the brand strategy is trying to achieve - in these cities economic growth and social change.

The Place Brand and Place Culture

The corporate brand literature recognises the alignment which should exist between corporate culture and the brand strategy (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; de Chernatony, 1999; King and Grace, 2005). An issue which emerged on interviewing community leaders in both cities was the existence of what de Chernatony (1999) refers to in corporate studies as the brand-culture gap. Despite a desire to have the brand as being symbolic of economic growth and social change, in both cities there was an admission that there was a culture of government dependency and resistance to change.

Similar comments came from leaders in both cities:

"I think also because we have been a government town, ... government money keeps us going; ... there is an acceptance that the government will always come forward and help us out."

"it is a ... community that is used to getting, and relying on, state, federal and local government assistance/handouts."

Based on the literature on corporate brands, it would seem that a place brand strategy seeking economic and social improvement in a city which has a culture of 'government dependency' and 'battles with change and new ideas' is likely to struggle. A reluctance to change was identified in both cities as shown by the following comments.

"... is a fostering caring society ... that might be a sweeping statement because sometimes we battle with change here"

"We're not a hungry city. We are not really trying to be open to ideas."

Conclusion

There are limits to this study and no generalisations can be made. However, despite the growing interest in applying brand principles to places, the findings do suggest there can be complex barriers to the effective implementation of a place brand. This exploratory study suggests that there is an important role for community leaders as 'senior managers' in the context of implementing a place brand. As 'senior managers,' community leaders are likely to be moderators in any success that emanates from the implementation of a place brand strategy both as 'brand champions' and 'drivers of change'. Figure No. 1 illustrates this likely influence



Figure No. 1: Proposed Moderating Influencers for the Success of a Place

Finally, despite Olins' (2002) caution of not taking the corporate brand-place brand analogy too far, it is considered that there are benefits to be gained by reviewing the literature on organisational change and internal marketing and relating it to place branding. Combining this knowledge with the findings of this research, further studies should be undertaken with the aim of developing a framework of implementation of a place brand which will contribute to the better management of cities and in doing so provide new opportunities for marketing academics and practitioners - the application of brand principles to places.

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