

# CITY BRANDING: AN EFFECTIVE ASSERTION OF IDENTITY OR A TRANSITORY MARKETING TRICK?

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## ABSTRACT

Cities throughout Europe are increasingly importing the concept and techniques of product branding for use within place marketing, in pursuit of wider urban management goals, especially within the new conditions created by European integration. However, there is as yet little consensus about the nature of city branding, let alone its role in public sector urban planning and management. This exploratory paper will first, use contemporary developments in marketing theory and practice to suggest how product branding can be transformed into city branding as a powerful image-building strategy, with significant relevance to the contemporary city. Second, it will define city branding, as it is being currently understood by city administrators and critically examine its contemporary use so that a framework for an effective place branding strategy can be constructed.

**Key words:** Place marketing, city branding, brand components, corporate branding

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## FROM PLACE MARKETING TO PLACE BRANDING

Places have long felt a need to differentiate themselves from each other, to assert their individuality in pursuit of various economic, political or socio-psychological objectives. The conscious attempt of governments to shape a specifically-designed place identity and promote it to identified markets, whether external or internal is almost as old as civic government itself. Thus, any consideration of the fundamental geographical idea of sense of place must include the deliberate creation of such senses through place marketing.

City 'boosterism' as described in the many historical cases in Gold & Ward (1994) and Ward (1998) was not a new idea in the nineteenth

century but a reaction to the growing competition between places occasioned by the nationalisation and globalisation of markets. However it was not until around 20 years ago that there was a general acceptance that promotion (largely treated as a synonym for advertising) was a valid activity for public sector management agencies (Burgess 1982), and that the systematic application of marketing was relevant to collective goals and practices and thus an essential component of the study of places and their management.

The transition from the random addition of some often crude and disembodied promotion to the existing tool box of planning instruments to a more far reaching application of marketing as a means of viewing and treating places as a whole was neither smooth nor complete. However by the beginning of the 1990s there was a

serious attempt to create a distinctive place marketing approach (e.g. Ashworth & Voogd 1990; Berg *et al.* 1990; Kotler *et al.* 1993).

Since then a number of paradoxes have become evident. On the one hand marketing specialists have continued to refine their concepts and ideas and place marketing has become a commonplace activity of cities, regions and countries. On the other hand very few marketing specialists have given much thought to its application to places, treated as products, and, if they do, they too easily assume that places are just spatially extended products that require little special attention as a consequence of their spatiality. Equally public sector planners have long been prone to the adoption, overuse and then consignment to oblivion, of fashionable slogans as a result perhaps of their necessity to convince political decision-makers who place a premium on novelty, succinctness and simplicity.

It is not surprising therefore that despite the appearance of a small number of publications on the topic of city branding in the last few years (Ashworth 2001; Hankinson 2001, 2004; Trueman *et al.* 2001, 2004; Hauben *et al.* 2002; Rainisto 2003), there is a recognisable gap in the literature with regard to the branding process of cities in general (Hankinson 2001) and real case studies in particular (Anholt 2002; Rainisto 2003). 'This is in contrast to the increasing evidence in the press that branding, at least as a concept, is increasingly being applied to locations' (Hankinson 2001, p. 129).

Place marketing has been facilitated by theoretical developments within the marketing discipline that paved the way for an understanding of marketing implications for urban planning and management (Ashworth & Voogd 1990). The transition from city marketing to city branding is facilitated not only by the extensive use and success of product branding, but also by the recently but rapidly developed concept of corporate branding (e.g. Balmer 2001; Balmer & Greyser 2003).

The purpose of this paper is not to re-examine the extensive literature on corporate and product branding but to focus specifically upon the self-conscious application of branding to places as an instrument of urban planning and management. The application of place marketing is largely dependent on the construction, communication and management of the city's image, because, at its simplest, encounters between

cities and their users take place through perceptions and images. Marketing therefore cannot other than be 'the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation' (Firat & Venkatesh 1993, p. 246), which in turn is the starting point for examining place branding.

One of the cornerstones of marketing thought is undoubtedly consumer orientation; thinking about the product, the company and the way we 'do business' from the consumer's viewpoint. In city marketing and especially in the case of the city's existing residents, consumer's orientation would have to be how the residents encounter the city they live in, how they make sense of it, which physical, symbolic or other elements they evaluate in order to make their assessment of the city. The field of cultural geography has dealt with such matters and has developed an understanding, which is useful at this point.

In general, people make sense of places or construct places in their minds through three processes (see e.g. Crang 1998; Holloway & Hubbard 2001). These are first, through planned interventions such as planning, urban design and so on; second, through the way in which they or others use specific places; and third, through various forms of place representations such as films, novels, paintings, news reports and so on. It is generally acknowledged that people encounter places through perceptions and images. As Holloway & Hubbard (2001, p. 48) describe, interactions with places may be 'through direct experience or the environment or indirectly through media representations'. However, what is critical is how, this information is processed, via mental processes of cognition, to form stable and learned images of place, which are the basis for our everyday interactions with the environment. It is the mental maps that individuals create that allow them to navigate through complex reality, because 'our surroundings are often more complex than the sense we make of them'.

Branding deals specifically with such mental images. Place branding centres on people's perceptions and images and puts them at the heart of orchestrated activities, designed to shape the place and its future. Managing the place brand becomes an attempt to influence and treat those mental maps in a way that is deemed favourable to the present circumstances and future needs of the place.

## WHAT IS PLACE BRANDING?

The easy answer to this central question is that place branding is merely the application of product branding to places. This substitutes the question, what is a product brand and what is the process of product branding? How is it different from product differentiation, product positioning within competitive situations or just the unique selling proposition of a product; all of which are well known and easily understood concepts. Unfortunately there is no single accepted definition and the marketing experts have often compounded the problem by their attempts to elaborate. Currently, there is at least a general agreement in the marketing literature that the brand is more than an identifying name given to a product. It is also not (as some marketing commentators seem to be suggesting) a synonym for a single catchy slogan, however much this might embody the aspirations of the city authorities. Places do not suddenly acquire a new identity thanks to a slogan and a memorable logo. This would imply that what gave meaning and value to the paintings of Pablo Picasso was the characteristic signature he used and not the innovative ideas and style of his art. Slogans and logos may be useful practical instruments in a place branding strategy but they are not the strategy itself.

A brand embodies a whole set of physical and socio-psychological attributes and beliefs which are associated with the product (Simoes & Dibb 2001). It is more than the shaping of distinctiveness: it is the forging of associations. '[A] brand is a product or service made distinctive by its positioning relative to the competition and by its personality, which comprises a unique combination of functional attributes and symbolic values' (Hankinson & Cowking 1993, p. 10). Branding is a deliberate process of selecting and associating these attributes because they are assumed to add value to the basic product or service (Knox & Bickerton 2003). From this value stems a series of consequential and important attributes about the nature of the product, of its marketing and of consumer behaviour towards it.

## THE COMPONENTS OF THE BRAND

De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley (1998) identify 12 perspectives on the definition of the

brand found in the literature. After a critical examination of those perspectives, they suggest that 'the brand is a multidimensional construct whereby managers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognise and appreciate these values'. The boundaries of the brand construct are, on the one side the activities of the firm and on the other side the perceptions of the consumers. The brand becomes the interface between these two.

A number of elements lie at each end of the boundaries of the brand construct. For the brand owners, these elements are the features and beneficial attributes imbued in the brand. In addition, marketers may chose to stress symbolic, experiential, social and emotional values (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998), creating the brand identity. But these elements are not enough by themselves to construct a brand, as the brand relates to quality and values as perceived by the consumer. Branding is a mode of communication and communication is always a two-way process. From the consumer's side, central to the concept of the brand is the brand image, which incorporates perceptions of quality and values as well as brand associations and feelings.

In summary, brand identity, brand positioning and brand image are related as in Figure 1:

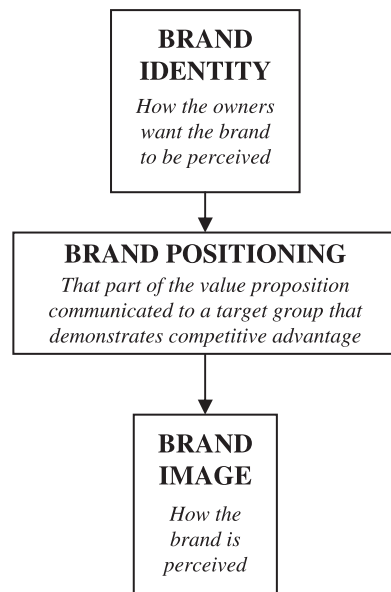


Figure 1

**The product** – A branded product requires a *brand identity*, a *brand differentiation* and a *brand personality* (Aaker 1996). These are not so much separate attributes as re-statements of the same feature from different perspectives. Identifying and clarifying the brand identity, or the *core identity*, is in itself an instrument of differentiation of one product from another and recognising its *brand positioning*, that is its relationship to competing products within a defined competitive arena. The process of *product branding* is both creative initiation and careful maintenance. This *brand management* is thus both strategic and tactical although disproportionate attention in the literature is generally paid to the former (Keller 1998, p. 594). The objective of the process and method of measuring its degree of success is the increase in *brand equity* which is the extra benefit enjoyed by the consumer above the bare utility value of the product. Such equity in turn is composed of the two elements of *brand value* (i.e. the associations themselves) and *brand awareness* (the strength of the recognition of such associations).

**The producer** – Product marketing and specifically product branding has shifted much of the focus of its attention recently to the nature of the producer and specifically the idea of corporate level marketing, and thus *corporate branding*, which is a development of traditional product branding, necessitated and, at the same time, enriched by the rise of other corporate level concepts, such as corporate image, corporate identity and corporate communications (e.g. Balmer 1998; Balmer & Greyser 2003).

Product branding is now generally subsumed into the branding of the organisations that make and sell them. The *corporate brand* has been defined as the ‘state of will of the organisation and the active part of the image building process’ (Kapferer 1992). It is the expression of a corporate identity, which ‘articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment’ (Van Riel & Balmer 1997, p. 355). ‘The associations represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organisation’ (Aaker 1996) or even an explicit ‘covenant’ (Balmer 2001) between an organisation and, not only its customers, but also its key stake-

holder groups. This links the integrity of the product brand to the organisation and people behind the brand: ‘a corporate brand is the visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organisation’s unique business model’ (Knox & Bickerton 2003, p. 1013). The brand is expressed through the company’s mission, core values, beliefs, communication, culture and overall design (Simoes & Dibb 2001). Crudely expressed, our products are different because we are different and they have added value because we have such value.

The difficulties, limitations and vulnerability to unpredictable and unmanageable events of a corporate brand as so defined have been widely noted. ‘[A]lthough prevailing corporate thinking considers identity to be a monolithic phenomenon, this premise is narrow and inadequate’ (Balmer & Greyser 2002). It seems so self-evident as to be not worth stating that organisations are not a single organism but are a composite of individuals and thus inevitably possess multiple identities. These may ‘co-exist comfortably within the organisation even if they are slightly different’ (Balmer & Greyser 2002, p. 16) but equally may not and organisations manage their multiple identities to avoid potentially harmful misalignments.

**The consumer** – Branding is not only a differentiation of the product; it is also a differentiation of the consumer. The objective is *brand equity*, loosely defined as the extent and nature of the consumers’ knowledge of the brand, which is the sum of *brand value*, *brand awareness* and *brand loyalty*. The first is the balance of positive or negative associations, the second, the degree of recognition of the distinctiveness of the brand and the third, the consistency of these variables over time.

Each could be further refined and linked to *brand image* as ‘the perception of the brand in the minds of people . . . it is what people believe about a brand – their thoughts, feelings, expectations’ (Bennett 1995) or ‘*brand identity* as the creation of a relationship between the brand and the customers with a value proposition that consists of functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits’ (Kapferer 1992). It perhaps needs reiterating here that although branding is performed by producers for their advantage, it is also in the interest of consumers

in so far as it facilitates consumer decision-making. Brand equity simplifies choice by allowing consumers to rapidly identify products whose supply is guaranteed, quality controlled and stabilised (Kapferer 1992, p. 9).

Brands are not only considered as valuable assets of a company, but furthermore, as some experts believe in post-modern consumer culture, brands play a vital role in the construction of consumer identity (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998). Furthermore, brands are said to possess a 'linking value', which links the brand users into groups or communities (Cova 1997). Certainly there are links between the adoption of life-styles as group identifiers and the strong association between these and specific brands to the extent that groups themselves become branded with the product (the 'Armani set'). Much brand management in practice is an interaction between such life-style brands and the products they feature with producers attempting to exploit, create or, on occasion, eschew such associations.

### FROM PRODUCTS TO PLACES

Places can be easily assumed to possess the above characteristics of identity, differentiation and personality and can thus be managed to maximise equity, value and awareness. However, whether the terms suffer a significant shift in meaning when applied to place products remains to be considered.

The importance of the image for the consumer or user of the place is what connects city branding to cultural geography. It also focuses upon the ever-necessary consumer orientation. We think of the place from the viewpoint of the end user; in terms of the way they sense, understand, use and connect to the place.

An immediate, persistent and convincing objection to this whole line of argument is that places are just too complex to be treated like products. This would explain Hankinson's (2001, p. 129) comments that 'in contrast to the marketing of locations, there are relatively few articles to be found in the academic literature with regard to the promotion of locations as brands. This is in contrast to the increasing evidence in the press that branding, at least as a concept, is increasingly being applied to locations'. Place branding, like place marketing in

general, is impossible because places are not products, governments are not producers and users are not consumers.

Our contention however is that place branding is not only possible, it is and has been, practiced consciously or unconsciously for as long as cities have competed with each other for trade, populations, wealth, prestige or power. In the marketing literature, it is acknowledged that the brand and the product are not synonymous. At its simplest, the difference refers to the added values that branding attributes to the product. Jones (1986) defines the brand as 'a product that provides functional benefits plus added values that some consumers value enough to buy'. This is the augmented product, well known in various marketing articles. The novelty is that branding attempts to market this augmented product. It is the added values that provide the guidelines for the construction of the functional benefits and not vice versa. All branding tries to endow a product with a specific and more distinctive identity (Cova 1996) and that is, in essence, what most city marketing seeks to do for cities. A place needs to be differentiated through unique brand identity if it wants to be first, recognised as existing, second, perceived in the minds of place customers as possessing qualities superior to those of competitors, and third, consumed in a manner commensurate with the objectives of the place. Thus identity, differentiation, personality and thereby positioning in competitive arenas are all transferable concepts as long as the implications of this transfer are fully understood. By this we mean that we can accept places as brandable products if their intrinsic and distinctive characteristics as place products are understood and a special form of marketing developed which accommodates and utilises these characteristics. Much of the literature from marketing specialists is not encouraging in these respects.

There have been numerous studies of the promotion of individual and groups of places, since Burgess' (1982) pioneering account of promotional media used in UK local authorities. Almost 20 years later Hankinson (2001) studied the practice of branding in 12 English cities, discovering that it was both widely used and little understood, which was a not altogether startling or indeed very helpful conclusion but is all too typical of many such investigations. Trueman

*et al.*, (2001, pp. 8–13) struggled with this problem of transfer of conventional product brand analysis to places, concluding that it was possible, ‘provided sufficient weight is given to different stakeholders’. This is no more than a recognition that places have more varied ‘users’, ‘owners’ and ‘governors’ than do commercial corporations and thus not only are the products more varied, so also are the goals of the producers and the utilities of the consumers. The two intrinsic weaknesses of stakeholder approaches, namely that the list will never be all-inclusive and the weighting between them crude, are so more evident with places than with commercial products as to effectively admit that the conditions can never be met.

The similarities between corporate branding and city branding have occurred to many observers therefore shifting from the commercial corporation to the public sector agency seems a logical extension of the idea because ‘place brands resemble corporate umbrella brands to some extent’ (Rainisto 2003, p. 50). Both have multidisciplinary roots (e.g. Ashworth & Voogd 1990), both address multiple groups of stakeholders (e.g. Kotler *et al.* 1993; Ashworth 2001), both have a high level of intangibility and complexity, both need to take into account social responsibility (e.g. Ave 1994), and both deal with multiple identities (e.g. Dematteis 1994). However it is far easier to state these similarities than to measure them, let alone accommodate them in applications of place branding. In addition public place management corporations may have considerable difficulty in projecting a single clear corporate identity because most democratic political systems encourage the open expression of alternatives rather than concealing them within a spurious communal unanimity.

There are at least three different sorts of place branding which are often confused in the literature, but which are really quite different operations conducted by different types of producers for widely different objectives. The first is geographical nomenclature, the second, product-place co-branding and the third, branding as place management.

Geographical nomenclature is merely where a physical product is named for a geographical location. The archetype is the sparkling wine ‘Champagne’. This is not place branding as we

mean it here. It is merely a copyrighted brand name, legally preventing other places from adopting the word but not the ‘champagne method’ and presumably preventing other producers in the location naming their different products with the same place title. There is no conscious attempt to link any supposed attributes of the place to the product, which gains nothing from the association, which is only an historical-geographical accident, which could conceivably have been somewhere else without loss. A place becomes only a name for a specific brand or, in other instances, a generic name for a production process. The place has no other significance and neither determines the locus of production or any other transferable characteristic: Parma ham receives nothing from Northern Italy nor muslin from Mosul. However there are many instances where it would be difficult not to name the product from its location, as the geographical location is an important part of what is being sold. Property agents and tourism promoters come immediately to mind as they are unavoidably selling actual locations. Here the typology begins to move away from the first category towards the second and third especially when sellers begin to select, modify and manipulate geographical nomenclature creating in effect their own geographies. Place branding, however, is not about using the qualities of the place to promote local products in national and international markets. Branding Brussels as the hometown of sprouts is very different from branding it as the capital of Europe. On the contrary, part of place branding is about using the qualities of local products to ascribe meanings and associations to the place.

Co-branding is common enough among physical products (‘fish and chips’ would be a textbook example. Co-branding of product and place, attempts to market a physical product by associating it with a place that is assumed to have attributes beneficial to the image of the product. An example often quoted in the textbook is ‘Swiss watches’. This is a different use of place nomenclature than ‘Champagne’ because the objective is to transfer characteristics of reliability, fastidiousness and meticulousness assumed to be associated with the Swiss people or the country Switzerland, to watches for which these are assumed to be desirable attributes. This is an intrinsically dangerous practice if only

because place images are both multifaceted and unstable. The above characteristics of the Swiss assumed to be beneficial to the product could be substituted by the much less helpful, and equally assumed, characteristics of parsimony, parochialness and creative dullness. Equally such place associations can change quite rapidly, shifting from positive to negative associations.

Third, place branding can be treated as a form of place management. At its simplest level much place management depends heavily upon changing the way places are perceived by specified user groups. For instance, 'urban renewal includes the creation of an identity with its own experiential value, which is profoundly original and uncopiable. This touches upon such points as structure, programming, functions, the sort of actions and activities that characterize the image of the city, events and in the last resort the chemistry of the people who operate there' (Florian 2002, p. 24). The creation of a recognisable place identity, little more than a sort of civic consciousnesses, and the subsequent use of that identity to further other desirable processes, whether financial investment, changes in user behaviour or generating political capital. It should be clear from the above definitions that this is more than the creation and promotion of place images as part of place management.

The question we have to answer is, can the city's brand (or even only examining and thinking about the city as a brand) operate as an umbrella that can cover a multitude of stakeholders and audiences? Can city branding create in the mind of people who encounter the city the feeling (or even illusion) that they are dealing with an entity, with one thing, with which they could have a relationship?

In theory, and also in practice, the answer is yes, as long as the values that are developed as the core of the brand are bound together by a vision which gives them meaning, impetus and direction (De Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998). But then we need to develop an integrated framework that will clarify all aspects of developing a city-brand and give guidance for managing it.

What if the answer is no? Should we dismiss city branding as a misleading irrelevance? Even if the city brand cannot work as an umbrella to cover all aspects of life and activity in the city, then it might be worth breaking it down into

its components in terms of the major audiences it addresses. This is what has been practiced within city marketing. The city is simultaneously a place of residence and a place of work for the people that live in it, a destination for the people that visit it (or plan to do so), a place of opportunity for the people who invest in it. Can we, then, develop different brands for each of those audiences? Practice shows that we can. So the city becomes a multitude of brands, a brand line similar to a product line. This logic stems from product branding. It is a city marketing approach, where market segmentation, separation and targeting are the critical activities. We plan, create and sell different products to the various segments.

The main suggestion of corporate branding is that the whole organisation is branded, not each product. Each product can enjoy the benefits of belonging to the corporate brand family. That is not to say that market segmentation has lost its meaning or usefulness (although some post-modern commentators do argue that). But it is not used for the corporate brand. The corporate brand is attached to more universal values, such as social responsibility, environmental care, sustainability, progressiveness, innovation, trust, quality, etc.

Applying corporate branding to places demands a treatment of the place brand as the whole entity of the place-products, in order to achieve consistency in the messages sent. At the same time it demands associating the place with 'stories' about the place not by simply adding them next to the name or trying to imply them by isolating beautiful images of the place. First, the 'stories' need to be built into the place, not least by planning and design interventions, infrastructure development and the organisational structure and, subsequently, they can and must be communicated through the more general attitude of the place and through promotional activities (Kavaratzis 2004). When this is achieved, place marketing will be able to effectively deny the accusations of selective manipulation of meanings (Griffiths 1998), creation of inauthentic traditions and irrelevant cultural motifs (Kearns & Philo 1993) and exacerbation of social inequalities and unrest (Griffiths 1998).

It is not the main purpose of this brief paper to outline in detail the practical techniques

used by places to brand themselves. Suffice it to say here that the three main techniques currently fashionable among urban planners have been listed as 'Personality branding' (or 'The Gaudi gambit' after the success of its Barcelona application), 'Flagship construction' (or 'The Pompidou ploy' after the *grands projet* on the Paris Beaubourg) and 'Events branding'. All are designed to not only attract attention and place recognition (thus *brand awareness*) but also to raise associations between the place and attributes regarded as being beneficial to its economic or social development (thus *brand utility*).

### PLACES, PRODUCTS AND BRANDS

This paper began with the assertion of the existence of a gap between two approaches and usages of place branding; that of the public sector place managers and that of the commercial producers. This gap has not been bridged here but its dimensions have been specified and some of the confusion resulting from two quite different approaches can, to an extent at least, be ordered.

The Kotler *et al.* (1993) approach, shared implicitly by most of the marketing science experts cited here, stems from the standpoint and experience of commercial product marketing. Here, there is no logical or practical difficulty in transposing physical and place products, commercial and public corporations, customers and place users. Place branding becomes the use of place names as products and the use of place attributes as associations for products.

In contrast our approach stems from the viewpoint and experience of place management, where marketing terminology, techniques and philosophies have been used for at least a decade as part of public sector management for collective goals. In so far as brands are assets, which are expensive to create and manage, it is not surprising that brand owners endeavour to protect them from predatory competitors. It is perhaps a significant distinction that copyright law rarely applies to place products. (The 'champagne' type case copyrights the nomenclature as product name not the place product in our sense of the word.) The disputes that have occurred, such as the 'battles' between spatial jurisdictions for 'Robin Hood Country'

or 'King Arthur's Camelot' have not resorted to judicial resolution, which indicates a number of significant differences between place products and other products.

Place branding from the standpoint of the place recognises that place products remain places with the distinct attributes that accrue to places, such as spatial scale, spatial hierarchies, resulting scale shadowing, the inherent multiplicity and vagueness of goals, product-user combinations and consumer utilities. All these and more (as outlined in Ashworth & Voogd 1990) make places distinctive products and thus place branding a distinctive form of product branding. If these distinctions can be recognised and incorporated into the process then it becomes a valid and effective form of management: if not, it is an irrelevant distraction.

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