



## **An Introduction to City Branding**

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## Introduction

Increasingly, cities compete with other places for attention, investment, visitors, shoppers, talent, events, and the like. Accelerated and intensified globalisation has led to a situation where the main competition is no longer the city down the road or the town across the bay, but where competitors are places half a world away. And this global competition is no longer limited to the big cities that compete for the HQs of multinational corporations and UN bodies, or for large sports events. Thanks to technological advances and market deregulations, even smaller places can suddenly be confronted with competitors located on another continent. Entire towns in Italy have lost their *raison d'être* as their furniture making industry clusters are wiped out by towns in China who produce the same products at much lower costs. Alicante in Spain struggles to compete with sunny beach destinations ranging from Antalya in Turkey to Pattaya in Thailand. Bordeaux and its region face stiff competition from South Australia and the South African Cape Region for its traditional position of prime and premium winemaker. Traditional car making centres such as the West Midlands, Detroit, Stuttgart and Nagoya feel the heat from Bratislava and Shanghai.

How does a city cope with this new multitude of contenders? Competing on tax breaks, tax credits, free land, soft loans and other financial incentives to attract investors and to shore up local industries is clearly a race to the bottom and one that is impossible to sustain. Advertising on CNN and sending trade missions into the world to flog the existing offer of the city is both ineffective and a waste of precious financial resources. Shoring up the city's current offer with some new commercial, industrial or cultural development is not likely to turn the tide either (and perhaps Bilbao is the exception that proves the rule).

What is needed is a frank rethink about what the city offers and will offer in future. What can be created that is so valuable about the city that its businesses, institutions and residents want to remain, that will attract investors, visitors and talent, and that will make commentators and influencers recommend the city? Your city's brand is the promise of that value. City branding is about deliberately creating, developing and demonstrating that value through appropriate 'on brand' actions, which consist of investments, physical and economic plans, attraction programmes, events, communications, and the like. City branding is not something that is the sole preserve of local government or any of its departments or agencies. It is a shared responsibility and practice of the city's main stakeholders. What is more powerful than having the stakeholders jointly define and realise the brand of their city, using their own particular strengths to ensure the world receives a compelling, joined up and consistent message about the city? For this to be effective city branding requires new forms of leadership, strategy and creativity.

## Leadership

### **Partnership: Who Are The Stakeholders?**

For city branding to be successful, it is necessary for its key stakeholder organisations to come together in partnership. This is not your usual public-private partnership or a committee of wise men and women. This is a formal or informal body in which the key stakeholders jointly develop, create and lead on the implementation of the brand of the city, under shared responsibility. Creating such a partnership is the first step in changing the way the city operates, because it simultaneously crosses divides such as those between town and gown, government and business, arts and sports, and commerce and culture, the public

and community sectors. The partnership should be one of equals between those stakeholders that can realise the brand of the city through their actions, investments, decisions and communications.

### **All Partners Are Equal**

City brand partnerships are not like central government departments, or local government or private companies or voluntary, community and charitable organisations. They are a hybrid form of organisation. Their characteristics are determined by those who set them up, the purpose for which they were created and by those who lead the work of the partnership. The form of partnership organisation and operation is rarely a given. It has to be negotiated and agreed by those who are going to be involved. All too often such partnerships are led by those with the largest chequebook or the most power. Such partnerships are rarely as effective as they could be. And in many respects they are not truly partnerships at all, merely collections of organisations who are working together to gain access to funding or to wield power. What is required is a partnership where all of the key stakeholders regard each other as equals, regardless of their power or resources, where their individual contributions are valued because, without them, the city will not realise its full potential.

### **Shared Leadership**

Once the partnership is created, the challenge is to make it work effectively. The representatives of the stakeholder organisations that constitute the partnership have their own agendas and motivations for participating, as well as their own ways of working, of making decisions and of getting things done. They need to devise a whole new way of working together to reconcile their goals and practices and to make the partnership an effective vehicle for enhancing their city's competitiveness, taking the lead on finding or creating the resources required. If a partnership knits together diverse interests to undertake projects that they cannot do by themselves, then the way they are run and who participates are of profound importance. Shared leadership in a brand partnership requires a far greater degree of common understanding and joint thinking than traditional forms of leadership in the public and private sectors.

### **Keen, Eager And Willing To Work Together**

During the city brand strategy development process, the members of the brand partnership need to understand and reconcile differing policies and strategies, decide on what the future of their city will look like, what it will offer of value to consumers, how it will be experienced and what it is they can jointly do to make that future a reality. This requires a willingness to come together and work through these matters even when that may be difficult due to conflicts of interest, different opinions, differing timescales and sometimes even personal dislikes. All in one common cause: to make the city better able to compete for the things that will make it a better, a more sustainable and a more competitive place.

### **Brand Management Organisation**

Once the city brand strategy has been agreed by the partnership, its task changes to ensuring that the right actions are taken to make the brand come alive. This requires decisions on how best to manage the city brand, taking into account that the required actions, policy changes, investments, attraction programmes, events and the like will be the responsibility of various city stakeholders, some of whom may not even have been represented on the original brand partnership and now need to be brought on board. Every city devises the brand management organisation that it needs to implement the brand strategy. However, there are a few lessons that can be applied in most places.

## Brand Management Lessons

**one** The first lesson is that the partnership cannot simply dump full responsibility for the city's brand on one of its partners or on a newly established entity. Once the strategy is agreed, the partnership must not consider its work as done. This is an on-going responsibility. A brand management organisation can be tasked to do (part of) the implementation, coordination and communications, but it is an executive body that cannot take important decisions in the way that they city's key stakeholders can.

**two** The second lesson is that the brand partnership should be open to new members. As the brand is taking shape, new and different partners will emerge to play a vital role in its realisation. A brand partnership should not be an "Old Boys Club", or the "usual suspects" of the city's establishment, but a body that responds to change by changing and reinventing itself.

**three** The third lesson is that the partnership must continuously reappraise the brand strategy: is it on course, is it doing what we expected it to, does it need adjustment? This means that both the brand partnership and its brand management remain attuned and responsive to changes in the city's environment and its offer.

**four** A fourth lesson is that the partnership needs to mobilise a large proportion of the community of the city to carry the message about its brand and to ensure that its local citizens remain aligned with and supportive of what the brand is designed to achieve.

## The Author

Sicco van Gelder is founder of Placebrands a company dedicated to helping cities, regions and countries develop and implement their brand strategies. He has been instrumental in developing the theory and practice of place branding. Sicco has advised places such as Amsterdam, Botswana, East Africa, Malaysia, Southampton and The Hague.

Sicco has lived, worked and travelled across five continents. His exposure to the great diversity of these continents has helped him to develop his understanding of and sensitivity to differing cultural, motivational, economic, social and competitive issues.

Sicco has (co)authored several books, among them:

- Global Brand Strategy – Unlocking Branding Potential Across Countries Cultures and Markets (Kogan Page, 2003)
- Beyond Branding – How the New Values of Transparency and Integrity are Changing the World of Brands (Kogan Page, 2003)
- New Age Branding (ICFAI Press, 2003)
- City Branding – How Cities Compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Placebrands, 2006)
- Global Branding Perspectives and Challenges (ICFAI Press, 2007)