NOT DESTINATION BRANDING, BUT PLACE BRANDING

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Abstract
Even though destination branding has received increasing attention, both in practice and in academia, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, there is still a lot of confusion about what it is and what it attempts to do. This paper argues that destination branding is actually a misnomer and that the only right thing to do is to look at places as brands in their entirety, not just as investment, tourism or export brands. Several arguments to support this claim are presented; i.e. the nature of image; the need for cooperation and the non-demand-driven nature of place branding.

Keywords: destination/place/city/nation/regional branding, tourism, brand equity, image, reputation.

Both the practice and study of destination branding, place branding, city branding, nation branding and regional branding has grown rapidly during the first decade of the twenty-first century, but a lot of confusion about definitions and performance measures remains. In a 2011 editorial for our quarterly journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy I argued for making a clear distinction between place marketing and place branding; how the one is demand driven and the other shouldn’t be (Govers 2011). By extension, in this paper, I will argue that ‘destination branding’ is nonsense and we should focus on ‘place branding’. To the superficial observer and even some academic authors, this just seems to be a discussion about words, but I will show that it is much more fundamental than that.

Branding is about reputation management, or, more specifically, about managing brand equity. Even in the academic literature, it is very popular to use the definition of brand as supplied by the American Marketing Association (American Marketing Association 1995): “A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. From this, many policy makers, practitioners and even some commentators distil that ‘place branding’ is about designing logos and slogans for places, while forgetting that the essence of it is to make something identifiable as distinctive. The name or logo is the tool for identification and recognition, but the core of branding is to make sure that consumers attach distinctive associations to this entity (building reputation). Since places already have names and landmarks, the amount of time and investment generally spent on designing logos and slogans as opposed to actual reputation management for places, seems to be a waste. At the same time, the fundamentals are often ignored. In commercial branding logos, slogans and design
are relatively important for consumers to recognise brands in a retail environment in which they have to make quick decisions. However, one doesn’t find places offering their ‘services’ in the supermarket. Hence, the focus should not be on branding providing means for recognition, but on managing distinctive image associations.

Based on Aaker (2001; Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000), we have defined place brands as “representations of place identity, building a favourable internal (with those who deliver the experience [i.e. public, private and civil society actors]) and external (with visitors [incl. tourists, investors, traders, migrants]) image”, leading to brand equity; i.e. brand satisfaction and loyalty; name awareness; perceived quality; and other favourable brand associations (i.e. positive image and reputation) (Govers & Go 2009: p. 17). If the essence of branding is to acquire brand equity (notably brand awareness and reputation), it seems logical to do this at the level of place as a whole. Some might argue that place brands are umbrella brands, and that investment opportunities, the tourism product or exports of places can be branded as product brands. Destination branding would be one of these, as the use of the word ‘destination’ implies tourism. Destinations only reside in the minds of tourists, so destination branding automatically implies tourism branding. However, from a brand-equity building perspective, does this make sense?

It seems to me that this could only work if either the product brand or the umbrella brand is stronger than the other and hence attracts most brand image associations. In corporate branding this is referred to as brand extension versus multi-brands strategies. Virgin applies a brand-extension strategy where all product categories apply Virgin labels. Procter and Gamble or Unilever apply multi-brand strategies with a vast array of different brands under their corporate umbrella. However, the Unilever and Procter and Gamble corporate umbrellas have little meaning to most consumers, as the product brands carry the brand equity. More importantly, in corporate branding, product categories and their brands can be managed almost completely independent from each other without anyone necessarily knowing that multi-brands belong to the same owner or portfolio. It is very hard to imagine this happening in cities, regions and countries as places are geographically connected and economic activities take place in a shared environment. Even the most touristic city is more than just a tourism product. People live there; it has a political dynamic; and economic activities besides tourism. Hence, it seems almost incomprehensible how the tourism offering of a place can be branded without taking account of the wider environment in which it operates. Anholt (2010b) therefore refers to place brands as normative brands, i.e. assuming brand awareness, people tend to have rather fixed mental associations that will surface in any commercial interaction with place, be it as a tourist, investor or migrant.

Supporting arguments
A lot of this has to do with the concept of image; the thing that branding tries to influence (Anholt 2010a, c). Brand images consist of networks of associations about places, products, objects or other people, referred to in psychology as schemata (Atkinson et al. 1987). These are complex and destination image
Research shows that perceptions of tourism destinations include non-tourism associations and even inferences that we cross-link from somewhere else. For instance, in Govers & Go (2009) it is shown that people might have heard of Dubai as a cosmopolitan modern city (hence they linkup these associations in their schemata for Dubai), but they also might know that Dubai is located in the Middle-East and hence, if they have not been to Dubai yet, they might still infer that one will not see many women in the streets or driving cars (even though these various associations seem to be contradictory, possibly creating mental conflicts). This is actually how stereotypes are created of people and places we do not know; we classify them in a particular category and assume that the category associations that we hold also apply to each member of the group. So images are interlinked networks of associations that will lead to inferences as soon as links are evident to people. This would generally apply to cities and regions within countries or product brands (destination brands or appellation d’origine) within places, as they would be much harder to separate than multi-brands within corporations with weak corporate brands in the minds of average consumers.

There are just so many channels that influence peoples’ perceptions: direct experiences or those of relatives and friends, mainstream media, social media, or popular culture, one needs an overall coordinated strategy to cut through. In Govers & Go (2009) 1,100 respondents were asked about their free associations with seven places they had not visited before. To provide some examples: for Dubai respondents commented on issues concerning oil resources and the position of women in Muslim societies; Wales is partly about sheep; Flanders is linked to European institutions; and Singapore is perceived as a busy modern city. Neither of these associations can clearly be linked to relevant tourism or export products, but they will come up when potential consumers think about travelling to these places or buying products from there.

So to think that just a destination branding programme can change place image altogether, is rather ambitious and in fact, it is hard to imagine that the position of women in Muslim society will be addressed in Dubai’s tourism branding. The fact that destination branding is widely practiced though, is not a surprise. There is a long tradition of academic research into ‘destination image’ and tourism marketing practitioners have known since long that it is virtually impossible to attract tourists, even with a good product and attractive promotions, if people hold a negative image of the location they are expected to travel to. However, many of the negative image associations involved might have nothing to do with the tourism product or industries in the first place (perceived instability, safety issues, or governance) so understanding this is one thing, but to think that tourism logos and advertising can change this is overambitious to say the least.

Destination branding is a misnomer, because the destination only exists in the minds of (potential) travellers (which is really image). The term does not seem to take account of the local residents, public and private actors, or civil society. Branding is about telling the world what or who you are, so it is largely supply driven as opposed to market driven and therefore the term place branding is much more
appropriate, as destination branding is market-driven by definition. It is not surprising that in practice, many destination branding initiatives are received with scepticism and even antagonism by local residents, interest groups and stakeholders. In order to avoid this, it is important to create the conditions for local brand ambassadorship by building the brand based on the sense of place and identity of the local population and societal actors. The latter is also important in creating a brand promise that is credible and sustainable. Raising false expectations will lead to brand failure as tourists, but also investors or expatriates will experience place for themselves.

Cooperation is therefore essential. This has already been reported as a major challenge in destination branding (Cai 2002; Hankinson 2004), which is not surprising, as there is no such thing as a tourism industry. Accommodation providers are often the ones to demand a destination brand from the tourist board, but when looking for other public, private and civil society actors to support such an initiative, it becomes challenging as none of the other actors are depending on tourism as much as accommodation providers are, if not indifferent or even hostile to tourists. For instance: public transport providers or cultural institutions, essential elements of a tourism offering, are not always willing to be actively involved in tourism policy, as they do not see foreign visitors as one of their main markets. Such issues are much less of an obstacle when managing place brands as umbrella brands, as such branding initiatives involve many sectors as well as residents, hence, justifying wide stakeholder involvement.

Conclusions

Branding reflects identities; and places, I would hope, are never just about tourism. Identity also refers to local people, culture, heritage, symbolism, a cooperative sense of belonging, and not to what the tourist wants from the ‘destination’. The above arguments support the notion that building place brand equity (name awareness, image and reputation) starts with an overarching place branding strategy. Those who argue that place branding is impossible and that places should conduct investment branding, destination branding and export branding, and measure the effects on actual tourism, investment and export performance (Torres 2011) are not talking about branding at all, they are talking about marketing. The practice of destination branding in general is mostly marketing really. It is about advertising the tourism product to target audiences. The relevance of having a fancy logo for this escapes me, but it is harmless. There is also nothing wrong with communicating to tourists; in fact, it is essential for a good tourism strategy. However, by calling it ‘branding’, tricking policy makers into the idea that they are influencing the international reputation and image of their city, region, or country, is dangerous, because it does not (Govers et al. 2007) and it diverts the attention from the bigger fact that much more needs to be done in order to effectively manage the place brand. Hence, please stop branding destinations and start branding places.

References