Place Branding: a Useful Approach to Place Management?

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The purpose of this review is to sketch briefly the history of place marketing from its origins within marketing science, geography and public sector place planning to its present applications in the Western city and its emergence most recently as place branding. The questions posed are, 'what are we doing and why are we doing it?' and, 'is it both theoretically valid and practically effective?'

From marketing to place marketing

The terminology, concepts and, to a more capricious extent, philosophy of marketing was imported into geography and spatial planning as an instrument for the description, analysis and planning of places during the course of the 1980s. The reasons for this can be traced to developments in marketing, geography and public sector spatial planning.

Marketing had been developed, largely in the inter-war period as a technique for selling physical products by commercial enterprises for the clear purpose of profit in competitive markets. However the introduction of the three concepts of social marketing (i.e. where the objective is not the selling of physical products but influencing customer behaviour for social purposes), non-profit marketing (i.e. marketing by non-commercial enterprises for reasons other than direct monetary gain), and image marketing (i.e. where the product is an intangible perception or feeling unrelated to a physical product) made possible a transference of the marketing approach to the public sector management of places.

Similarly geography almost since its inception as a self-conscious academic discipline has had an interest, bordering at times on an obsession, with the idea of 'sense of place' (Ashworth & Graham, 2005). Places had a 'genius', a 'habitus' that was more than the sum of the natural or human features of which they were composed. The French concept of 'pays' or the similar German concept of 'landschaft' open up the possibility of treating places as products, for they assume that places are more than locations for phenomena or arenas for activities but are creations of the human imagination. It is not remarkable therefore that geography eventually embraced marketing: it is only remarkable that it took around a century to do it. Admittedly Ratzelian concepts of 'Heimat' (Ratzel, 1898) conceived of places as creatable, promotable and thus unstable, polysemic, imagined entities which were 'sold' by authorities with an interest in their 'consumption'. However, it was another 100 years before academic geography became comfortable with the idea of places existing only in the mind. In the course of the 1970s the attention of geographers began to focus on three topics relevant to this argument. First, there was the geography of perception, encapsulated in the well-known work of Lynch (1960) and many less well known precursors, such as Tolman (1948). Secondly, there was the realisation that the nineteenth century exploration of semiotic metonyms allowed places to be treated as languages conveying deliberately inscribed messages for reading by their users (Ashworth, 1998). Thirdly, the geography of decision-making directed an emphasis upon how decisions that shaped places were made and indeed who made them and for what implicit or explicit reason. Taking these three, originally quite disparate, ideas together, it is only a short remaining step to the manipulation and management of these perceptions through the encoding and decoding of messages, in order to exercise influence upon this decision-making for some predefined purpose.

However these developments would have had little effect upon the management of places if there had not been in the same period a vaguely felt but widespread disillusionment with the effectiveness of the traditional regulatory instruments of urban and regional planning, by the political and professional managers of places. For a variety of largely unconnected and diverse reasons relating to changes in fashionable political approaches, especially the rediscovery of markets in the 1980s, together with the failure of governments to make notable inroads into the deep-seated problems of regional economic disparity, multiple economic and social deprivation and exclusion, and urban poverty, dereliction and even governance. Numerous books and reports appeared in the 1980s which regarded cities as being merely assemblages of unsolvable economic problems, seedbeds of social malaise and increasingly ungovernable. Place marketing offered a new, if largely untried, possibility that was thus eagerly embraced for its promise and its novelty. It was not that 'city boosterism' was a new idea (see the nineteenth century historical cases described in Gold & Ward, 1994 and Ward 1998) but that 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. 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, if not a complete theory, at least a serious attempt to create a distinctive place marketing approach (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Berg et al., 1990; Paddison, 1993; Borchert, 1994; Ashworth, 1994; Ashworth & Voogd, 1994; Grabow , 1998).

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 an understandable result perhaps of their necessity to convince political decision makers who place a premium on novelty, succinctness and simplicity.

From marketing to branding

A currently prevalent manifestation of place marketing is the advent of conscious place branding. Like place marketing, of which it is only a part, branding has its origins in the competitive selling of physical products by commercial enterprises. It must first therefore be explained and then its application to places by public sector agencies for wider economic or social purposes can be assessed.

What is branding?

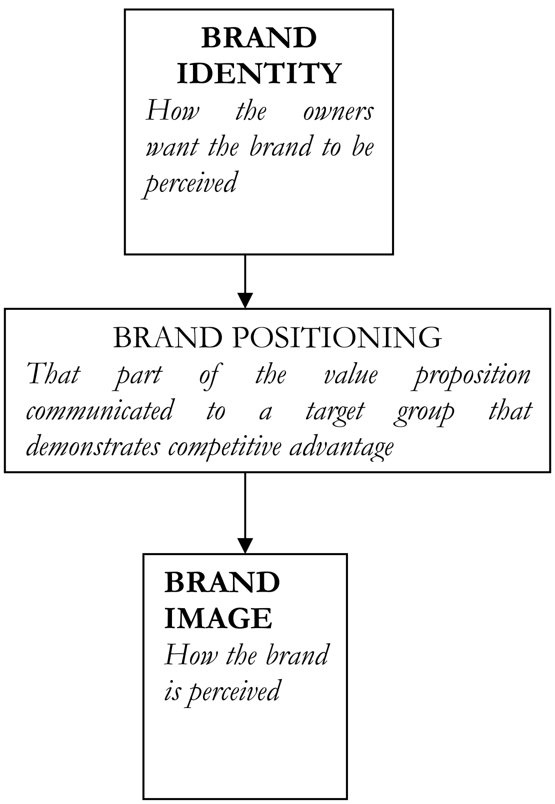
The central question is, 'what is a product brand and what is the process of product branding?' How is it different from product differentiation, product positioning within competitive situations or just the unique selling proposition of a product: all of which are well known and easily understood concepts? Unfortunately there is no single accepted definition and the marketing experts have often compounded the problem in their attempts to elaborate (Rainstro 2001). 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 Kotler et al., 1999, seem to be suggesting) a synonym for a single catchy slogan, however much this might embody the aspirations of the city authorities. 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: 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

The product

A branded product requires a brand identity, a brand differentiation and a brand personality (Akker, 1996}. These are not so much separate attributes as restatements 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 involves both creative initiation and subsequent careful maintenance. This brand management is thus both strategic and tactical although disproportionate attention in the literature is generally paid to the former. 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).

In summary, brand identity, brand positioning and brand image are related as in the diagram below.



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, linked to other corporate level concepts, such as corporate image, corporate identity and corporate communications (e.g. Balmer, 1998; Balmer and Greyser, 2003; Balmer & Gray, 2003).

Product branding is now generally subsumed into the branding of the organisations that make and sell them. The corporate brand can be defined as the state of will of the organisation. It is the expression of a corporate identity that "articulates the corporate ethos, aims and values and presents a sense of individuality that can help to differentiate the organisation within its competitive environment" (Riel and Balmer, 1997: 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 enterprise and, not only its customers, but also its key stakeholder 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 and Bickerton, 2003: 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. "… although 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: 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 consumer's knowledge of the brand which is composed in turn of 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 which is the perception of the brand in the minds of people and 'brand identity which is the creation of a relationship between the brand and the customers through a value proposition which may be functional and emotional. 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 .

Brands are not only considered as valuable assets of a company, but furthermore in a post-modern consumer culture, play a vital role in the construction of consumer identity (Eliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998). 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 (e.g. compare the associations evoked by the 'Armani set' and the 'Lonsdale 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 even on occasion eschew such associations.

From products to places

What is place branding?

The simple answer is that place branding is merely the application of product branding to places. However 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, but interestingly enough, a copy-righted 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, muslin from Mosul nor sprouts from Brussels. 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 geographical 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 in an attempt to enhance the product with spatial associations.

Co-branding is common enough among physical products (it could be labelled the 'fish-and-chips' phenomenon). 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. Again the example often quoted in the text-book 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 presumed to be desirable attributes. The product's value is thus increased. 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. Consider the quite different associations implied by the place co-branding of Belgian beer, chocolates and lace.

Thirdly, place branding can be treated as an instrument of place management. At its simplest level much place management depends heavily upon changing the way places are perceived by specified user groups. The creation of a recognisable place identity, little more than a sort of 'civic consciousness', can be subsequently used to further other desirable processes, whether inward 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: it is attempting to add value by moving perceptions of defined user groups from the generic to the brand.

Are places place-products?

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: 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". The conclusion of this argument is that place branding, like place marketing in general, is impossible because places are not products, governments are not producers and users are not consumers.

However, 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. All branding tries to endow a product with a specific and more distinctive identity (Cova, 1996: 1997), which 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; secondly, perceived in the minds of place customers as possessing qualities superior to those of competitors; and thirdly, consumed in a manner commensurate with the original objectives. 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. Places can be easily assumed to possess the 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. 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 particularly encouraging in these respects.

There have been numerous studies of the promotion of individual and groups of places, since Burgess' pioneering account of (1982) promotional media used in UK local authorities. Almost 20 years later Hankinson (2001: 127-140) 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 nor indeed very helpful conclusion but is all too typical of many such investigations.

Trueman et al. (2001: 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 (see the arguments in Kavartzis, 2004; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005). Both have multidisciplinary roots (e.g. Ashworth & Voogd, 1990), both address multiple groups of stakeholders (e.g. Kotler et al, 1999; 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 must be remembered that public place management corporations may have even greater difficulties than commercial companies in projecting a single clear corporate identity. Indeed most democratic political systems encourage the open expression of alternatives rather than concealing them within a spurious communal unanimity.

How can we brand places?

Finally the 'how' question can be considered although in most planning studies this would be the first, and often only, consideration. It should be evident from the arguments above that the instrumental choices are dependent upon answers to the preceding conceptual questions. You cannot answer, 'how' without obtaining prior answers to 'what' and 'why'.

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 recall here that the three main techniques currently fashionable among urban planners can be listed as 'personality branding', 'signature building and design' and 'hallmark events branding'. All are intended 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).

'Personality branding' (or 'the Gaudi gambit' after the success of its Barcelona application), depends upon the simple reality that people are unique individuals and this unique quality can be transferred to a place, if a place and person can be rendered inseparable. Artists as diverse as Mozart, Presley, Macintosh, Wagner, or Dudok are now associated through personality branding with cities as varied as Salzburg, Memphis, Glasgow, Bayreuth, and Hilversum, such that the place becomes inseparable from the creative work. The process is neither automatic nor necessarily beneficial. The more distinctive, indeed eccentric, and more visual the personality, the more easily it transfers to the place. Rotterdam's current attempts to become the 'City of Erasmus' raises the obvious difficulties of not only an absence of global recognition of the person and his works but the near impossibility of linking a philosophical idea with a physical location. Perhaps 'Kant's Königsberg' (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000) is exceptional. Similarly much personality branding is unintentional and even damaging. The Florence of Savaranola or even the Braunau of Hitler are associations which many would regard as memorable but on balance undesirable.

'Signature' or 'flagship' building is hardly new: the Coliseum, Rome, Parthenon, Athens or Hanging Gardens of Babylon were all deliberately and spectacularly noticeable structures, intended both to house cultural activities but also be in themselves clear statements that the city in which they were located, and probably the governments that created them, were associated with wider desirable attributes. This process might be called the 'Pompidou ploy' after the grands projet on the Paris Beaubourg (Hamnett & Shoval, 2003). Flagships depend for their success on dual notoriety. The structure must be stridently noticeable, and the creator must score highly in the celebrity architect status scoring system. Functionality and aesthetic quality are largely irrelevant. Public museums, galleries and space for podium arts are a favoured function but private non-publicly accessible functions for such buildings are not uncommon (London's Lloyds Building, Groningen's Gasunie). A city with a genuine Rodgers, Libeskind, Gehry, Foster, Koolhaas et al. in its possession has acquired recognition and status by that fact alone.

The third technique is the hallmark event, which is a regular or spasmodic cultural, economic, sporting, political or other occurrence that renders the place notable and confers upon it some desirable associations of patronage in some field. The established world renowned cultural festivals such as Edinburgh, Bayreuth, Stratford or even Glastonbury, Woodstock and Oberammergau support substantial profitable tourism industries but more important contribute more generally to the ambiance and character of the place which may well have numerous beneficial spin-off effects in other economic sectors. This alone explains the fevered competition between cities for such designations as 'European City of Culture' or for hosting major sporting events.

Three caveats must be mentioned to dampen any undue enthusiasm that such branding is a panacea for urban strategic planning. First, linking a particular city with a particular creative artist, signature design or cultural activity is a potentially dangerous strategy if only because culture, art and design are fashion driven activities in which today's renowned celebrity is tomorrow's forgotten nonentity. The Nazi era Kunsthaüser or Soviet era 'Palaces of Culture' now embarrassingly litter German and East European cities. Secondly, success in branding is more than the effective creation and propagation of a brand. Branding is only a means to an end and the attainment of that end may depend upon the operation of a much wider range of variables. In Bilbao, for example, the 'Guggenheim effect', has resulted in a global notoriety and an increase in short stay cultural tourists intent only on visiting a single museum. It has not however stimulated local cultural activities nor contributed much to the solution of the structural economic problem that was its original purpose. Thirdly, place branding is a cheap and seemingly simple activity. It can be performed almost anywhere and takes little investment. A game that anywhere can play is one that everywhere will attempt. The competition is likely to be intense and only the particularly skilful or fortunate will succeed.

Places, products and brands

This paper began with the assertion of the existence of a gap between two approaches to place branding, that of the marketing specialists familiar with commercial products and that of the public sector place managers. This gap has not been bridged here but its dimensions have been specified and some order has been brought to the confusion resulting from two quite different approaches.

What can be termed the Kotler approach, from its most well known proponent, which is implicitly supported 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 the approach advocated here 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 that are expensive to create and manage, it is not surprising that brand owners endeavour to protect them from not least 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 'ownership' of Robin Hood Country or King Arthur's Camelot have not resorted to judicial resolution, which points up 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 (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). 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 a fashionable irrelevance.

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