

A practitioner's viewpoint in integrated Place Branding: four principles and some thoughts

Descrizione

Recent literature on place branding has (fortunately) become very differentiated (s. for example Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2010). Though part of it still deals with the very important issue of trying to understand what place branding is through disambiguation and conceptualization (Scaramanga 2012; Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2008), others tackle issues of process, analysis and implementation (Zenker 2011; Giovanardi 2011), a third group, usually from a more critical stance, looks at the political context and consequences (Hospers 2011; Pasquinelli 2012), while still another is mostly concerned with methodologies of assessing impact (Zenker and Martin 2011; Zenker, Petersen and Aholt 2012). This article suggests that this thematic specialization is very useful, but that there is a need to bring all these strings together in regular intervals and check them against practical experiences (s. a similar approach in Hankinson 2010; Braun 2011). Here I take the viewpoint of a practitioner, trying to reflect at the importance of all the above in day-to-day work and extract a series of principles that can serve as reflection.

The first contact with a client is usually one of the most crucial moments of the whole place branding process. How does it take place? Usually through one of the three options: a) The consultant participates in a pitch, b) the consultant comes up with a scheme that he or she presents to the client and c) the client contacts the consultant directly. The common problem in all three cases is that usually it is not clear what place branding is about so that a) pitches on place branding are usually about the creation of logos and taglines (including of course the strategy to position them), b) the client has the impression that the consultant is trying to sell him or her something he or she does not grasp or need and c) although the city official is informed and convinced, his or her colleagues and partners are not. While the services of, let's say, a lawyer are quite straightforward, those of a place branding consultant need explanation. This is not secondary to the success of the venture. As Braun (2011) suggests, understanding and agreeing on what place branding is about, is a very crucial factor to its success. If this is not clear enough from the beginning, it may

cause false expectations that are bound to lead to disappointment. Experienced consultants know that a disproportionately large part of their work is trying to convince the client and/or his or her colleagues that they have made the right policy choice. In this sense, disambiguation, conceptualization and the like are not simple intellectual ivory-tower pastimes, but a basic precondition for our work. Principle number one could thus run as follows:

Principle No. 1: Consultant and client should take time to agree on their understanding of place branding and on what they can expect from it.

Let's suppose, for the argument's sake, that client(s) and consultant have reached an agreement on what place branding is and what can be expected (in reality, this agreement is never reached, rather, it is an ongoing process of expectations, disillusionment and reconfirmation). The consultant is often confronted with a very different type of dilemma: on the one hand we are here to do business, which includes, but is not limited to making money, and on the other you can not but sometimes wonder at the motivation behind your client's decision for a place branding strategy. There are many different reasons why place managers may want to brand a place (i.e. change its image): The most common reason is that they want to attract tourists and investment (Kavaratzis 2004). But it may also be because they feel that the residents do not identify with their place, that they don't respect nor love it. It may also be that they want to give people their dignity back: the place's bad reputation may have personal consequences on anybody associated with it; people may be systematically discriminated against, just because they (are perceived to) come from there (Kalandides 2011b). They may also want to improve a place's image because they want to attract more or a certain type of residents. But there may be more pragmatic reasons: they may have a mayor who wants to be re-elected, or they may simply be going with the trend: they do it because others do (Colomb and Kalandides 2010). I have argued before (Kalandides 2012) that probably the best reason to (re-)brand your place is when there is a discrepancy between what you think it is and how it is perceived by others. In most cases the motivation is a combination of some or all of the above possibilities. Yet, it is absolutely necessary to clarify that and to try to understand the politics behind the contract you're so happy with. The reason behind it will affect the level of local support for or potential resistance against your work and will help you recognize hidden agendas. In spite of "political unity" ideas (e.g. Rainisto 2003, p. 68), place branding takes place in a place governance context (s. also Braun 2011), it is loaded with conflict and is thus deeply political. Dealing with it from a

purely managerial angle risks obfuscating its complexity.

Principle No. 2: The motivation behind place branding needs to be as transparent as possible.

The political nature of place branding becomes apparent at several levels. Branding places always includes a series of choices. Take for example the analytical phase. This is supposed to reveal a place's identity, a very basic task that the consultant needs to perform if he or she wants his or her strategy to be "genuine and credible" (Braun 2011, p. 7). Already the choice of a particular analytical methodology is bound to reveal certain aspects of the place and obscure others. Analysis will show a complex and often contradictory picture, since this is part of what places are (Boisen, Terlouw, and van Gorp 2011). Yet, the consultant will make choices in order to focus in and build a strategy, choices of what to highlight and what to leave out, favouring a particular group and its interests while ignoring another. All of these are *political* choices, in the sense that they are based on a certain understanding of what society is and how it works.

It can be fatal to underestimate the analytical phase or its inherent difficulties. Place identity is an elusive concept, it includes notions of what a place *is* and how it is *perceived*, it is both stable and evolving, unique and interconnected (Kalandides 2011a). Without a robust conceptual and methodological tool for the analysis of place identity, that is able to pay tribute to the complexity of place, analytical results will be seriously flawed. Taking time to put together the tool, adapting existing methods, but mistrusting recipes, is essential to the serious work of the consultant. And yet, even though robust analysis takes time, the client will rarely give it to you. Clients need fast visible results, they are under pressure themselves to prove that they were not wrong to go for place branding or to chose the particular consultant.

Principle No. 3: Consultant and client need to find a compromise between the need for fast visible results and a robust analysis that pays tribute to the complex and political nature of place.

The "client" is rarely a single person. Rather, it will be some kind of place management body, either part of the administration or some outsourced entity that is

assigned with the task of developing the place. Although the consultant is accountable primarily to his or her client(s), his or her work is both impossible and illegitimate if he or she is not able to open up the circle and include a large number of stakeholders (s. Kalandides 2011b; Kavaratzis 2012). It has been a kind of leitmotiv in place branding literature, that places are not commodities the same way that products or even businesses are. Although there is a broad agreement that product or corporate branding can offer useful insights for place branding (e.g. Trueman, Klemm and Giroud 2004; Kavaratzis 2009) authors are careful to point out basic differences. One of them is that places are populated, rather, in the relational understanding of place, they only exist *through* social relationships. There are several consequences of this understanding that need to be pointed out here: First of all it means that places can not be sold or bought, except in the metaphorical sense. People engage in intricate relationships that include, but are not limited to, the market. A product, even a corporation, may cease to exist, while a society cannot, but through the force of some serious calamity. Secondly, if places are made up from social relations, between individuals and groups interacting with each other, then anybody meddling with places is first and above all accountable to these actors. In that sense a consultant may have a contract with some place manager, but his or her work is supposed to benefit the people who are involved in that place (s. also Sevin 2011). Thirdly, knowledge is not limited to a closed circle of experts, but is shared among everybody participating in that particular society. Fourthly, the implementation of any kind of policy depends on the consensus of the largest possible number of stakeholders, if it is not to be reached through coercion. And finally, policies are supposed to benefit the people, inside and with the limitations of a democratically functioning framework – they are not an end to themselves.

The above has several serious implications for place branding. Once again, it influences the analytical methodology which needs to adapt, open up and include as many voices as possible. This can be done through surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups etc., depending on the budget, time and scope of the research. The same goes for the design of the strategy (visions and strategic goals). In both cases (analysis and strategy) the consultant needs to balance the disadvantages and advantages of being external, i.e. between lacking insider knowledge and having enough of a “healthy distance” to the phenomena he or she is researching. Still, it should not be forgotten, that from the moment a consultant is involved, he or she becomes an “inside outsider” and he or she can hardly claim the benefits of detachment. It is the

implementation phase of the strategy that will show how successful consultant and client have been in involving a broad range of stakeholders. Building strong partnerships, both with a broader audience and with particular stakeholders is crucial to the success, but also to the ethics of the job: place branding is not supposed to benefit just a small minority, but should aim at making places and people's lives better.

Principle No. 4: A place branding strategy needs the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders and the formation of strong partnerships.

The above principles are by no means a guarantee that a place branding strategy will succeed, nor are they supposed to function as guidelines – even less as recipes. Rather, they are prerequisites, i.e. place branding either cannot succeed without them or/and its ethics will be more than questionable. Furthermore, these principles are supposed to offer space for reflection. As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, I am consciously taking the viewpoint of the practitioner who constantly questions his work and cannot always find answers.

References

- Ashworth, G.J. and Kavaratzis, M. (eds.), 2010, *Towards Effective Place Brand Management: Branding European Cities and Regions*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham and Northampton
- Braun, E., 2011, "Putting city branding into practice", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 257-267
- Boisen, M. Terlouw, T. and van Gorp, B., 2011, "The selective nature of place branding and the layering of spatial identities", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 135 – 147
- Colomb, C. and Kalandides, A., 2010, "The 'be Berlin' campaign: Old wine in new bottles or innovative form of participatory place branding?", in Ashworth, G.J. and Kavaratzis, M. (eds.), *Towards effective place brand management: branding European cities and regions*, Edward Elgar Cheltenham and Northampton, pp 173-190
- Giovanardi, M., 2011, "Producing and consuming the painter Raphael's birthplace", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 53-66
- Hankinson, G., 2010, "Place branding research: A cross-disciplinary agenda and the views of practitioners", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 300-315

-
- Hospers, G.J., 2011, "Four of the most common misconceptions about place marketing", *Journal of Town & City Management*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 167-176
- Kalandides, A., 2011a, "The problem with spatial identity: revisiting the 'sense of place'", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 28-39
- Kalandides, A., 2011b, "City marketing for Bogotá: a case study in integrated place branding", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 282-291
- Kalandides, A., 2012, "Place Branding and Place Identity. An integrated approach." *Tafter Journal*, Nr. 43, January 2012, available at <https://www.tafterjournal.it/2012/01/03/place-branding-and-place-identity-an-integrated-approach>
- Kavaratzis, M., 2004, "From city marketing to city branding: towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 58-73
- Kavaratzis, M., 2009, "Cities and their brands: Lessons from corporate branding", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 26-37
- Kavaratzis, M., 2012, "From 'necessary evil' to necessity: stakeholders' involvement in place branding", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 7-19
- Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G., 2008, "Place marketing: how did we get here and where are we going?", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 150-165
- Moilanen, T and Rainisto, S.K., 2009, *How to brand nations, cities and destinations. A planning book for place branding*, Pelgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke
- Pasquinelli, C., 2012, "Competition, Cooperation, Co-opetition. Unfolding the process of inter-territorial branding", *Urban Research and Practice*, Vol. 5 No. 2, pp. forthcoming
- Rainisto, S., 2003, "Success factors of place marketing: A study of place marketing practices in northern Europe and the United States" doctoral dissertation, Helsinki University of Technology, Institute of Strategy and International Business, Helsinki, Finland
- Scaramanga, M., 2012, "Talking about art(s). A theoretical framework clarifying the association between culture and place branding", in *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 5. No. 1, pp 70-80
- Sevin, E., 2011, "Thinking about place branding: Ethics of concept", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 155-164
- Trueman, M., Klemm, M. and Giroud, A., 2004, "Can a city communicate? Bradford as a corporate brand", *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, Vol. 9 No. 4,
-

pp. 317-330

Zenker, S., 2011, "How to catch a city? The concept and measurement of place brands", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 40-52

Zenker, S. and Martin, N., 2011, "Measuring success in place marketing and branding", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 32-41

Zenker, S., Petersen, S. and Aholt, A., 2012, "The Citizen Satisfaction Index (CSI): Evidence for a four basic factor model in a German sample", *Cities*, advanced online publication, doi:10.1016/j.cities.2012.02.006

Campi meta