

Find a vision and dump the spinning

The image projected by a city, an area or a region can be a crucial element in its striving for economic development and renewal. Too often, however, places rely on public relations gimmicks and other hackneyed publicity techniques, which at worst are nothing more than spin, to try to convince the world how great they are.

Getting the right branding and image for a place must involve a unifying vision and strategy shared by all the key stakeholders - people, companies, organisations and institutions - and effective leadership from its champions and advocates, says Malcolm Allan, founding director of Placebrands Ltd. The brand, moreover, should be authentic by being based on what a place is good at or what it does best.

"In place branding," argues Allan in this month's Opinion article, "the role of

communications is not primarily a method for telling the world about a place, but a method for making the world aware of the actions a place performs which best exemplify what kind of place it is and how well it operates."

"It combines the use of brand strategy, public policy, economic development and other commercial disciplines, such as marketing and investment promotion, to achieve development goals in a faster, more effective, more sustainable and more complete way than traditional disjointed development approaches."

It is, he adds, an approach that "enables a place to build on all of its strengths and to make sense out of the often chaotic and contradictory mosaic of its current identity and desired future reality."

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Why brand places?

Malcolm Allan is a founding director of Placebrands Limited (www.placebrands.net), and the former CEO of the Learning and Business Link Company of Kent.

In traditional approaches to local and regional economic development, developing a brand for a place is still seen too often in graphic design and slogan-led marketing terms, involving the design of an attractive logo and the coining of a catchy phrase. Rarely has the brand of a place been recognised as the summation of the way it operates, how it behaves and what it aspires to be and do. Even more rarely has branding a place been recognised as a key component of its overall economic development strategy to maintain its competitiveness and as a tool to help develop its people, companies and institutions.

Given the limitations on resources and in an increasingly globally-connected world, every place must compete with every other place for its share of the world's wealth, talent, and attention. Just like a famous company, a famous city, region or country finds it much easier to sell its products and services, attract the best people, visitors, investment and events, move in the right circles and play a prominent and useful part in national or international affairs. But, it is all too easy to become famous for the wrong reasons. A place's reputation needs to be built on qualities which are positively memorable, attractive, unique, sustainable and relevant to many different people around the world. A place brand strategy requires a realistic, competitive and very compelling strategic vision for a city, region, or country, and needs to ensure that it is supported, reinforced and enriched by *every* act of communication between that place and the rest of the world. Every government and municipal department or local agency, local people and local companies must consistently communicate and demonstrate the same carefully developed brand.

The process of creating the brand must be led at the highest level and have the personal endorsement of the 'Chief Executive', whether this is the Prime Minister, Mayor or the leader of the municipal authority. To be effective, the process also needs to be inclusive and actively involve the key stakeholders of the place, including residents, workers, employers and key institutions. They need to be involved in, or represented on, a partnership of the key stakeholders who lead the development and management of the brand. The place brand needs to be the focal point for all the actions.

A place brand is a tool for the effective development of a place. It is an expression of how a place currently operates and behaves or, more often, of its desired future reality, often expressed in a visionary but realistic strategy, the key development actions to achieve the vision, and effective and memorable communications that record progress on the strategy for target audiences.

In this way, place branding becomes a process of creating value for a place by unlocking, developing and communicating the potential of its people, companies, organisations and institutions. From our research we know that most places communicate through the six channels which form the "Place Branding Hexagon" (for more explanation see www.placebrands.net). These can vary slightly depending on the level of place being developed. In the case of a city they would be municipal policy and external relations, the pattern of investment and settlement, culture heritage and landmarks, people and education, tourism and events, and the private sector and institutions.

Place branding involves aligning development actions with communications



Malcolm Allan

through these channels in accordance with a clear and powerful long-term, strategic and realistic vision for the desired future of the place. It combines the use of brand strategy, public policy, economic development and other commercial disciplines to achieve development goals in a faster, more effective, more sustainable and more complete way than traditional disjointed development approaches. It places equal emphasis on visionary strategy, implementation of the development proposals that achieve the vision, and communication of progress on the strategy. It also combines new leadership and partnership development practices with a creative approach to international relations, public diplomacy, municipal policy making and public consultation.

Many regions, cities and local municipalities undertake marketing to promote their areas. It is rarely co-ordinated, is often disjointed and unrelated to the overall vision and strategy and is therefore confusing.

One of the things which distinguishes place branding from more traditional and unimaginative promotion approaches is that it uses brand strategy to drive and inspire consistent and on-brand *behaviour* by local residents, workers and employers, not merely communications. In place branding the role of communications is not

primarily a method for telling the world about a place, but a method for making the world aware of the actions a place performs which best exemplify what kind of place it is and how well it operates.

Unlike traditional municipally-led economic development, building and managing an effective place-brand requires full partnership and shared leadership. It requires a partnership of the key stakeholders of the place to lead the activity of creating, building and managing the place brand, who will be its champions and advocates. These include the municipal authority, representatives of the private and community sectors, the media and others (including higher level authorities such as the Regional Development Agency and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) whose resources may be required to make a reality of the vision. This partnership must provide effective leadership in the community on the creation of a vision for its future – the future of the place – that commands widespread support and which is credible and realistic. It needs to lead the process of consultation on that vision, turn that vision into a brand for the place and assemble and create the resources required to invest in the developments that will create the future place and to market and promote the brand.

From my own experience in economic development two examples of what we now term place branding can be cited in support of the above arguments. In 1987 the Department of Economic Development in Northern Ireland wanted to change the perception of the Province, in the minds of both its resident population and employers and potential external investors, from that of a declining economy to a place that was thriving on entrepreneurial behaviour. It had originally conceived that this could be done through a media advertising campaign but quickly realised that few would believe in or take the messages seriously unless there was tangible evidence of change taking place. What emerged was the “Enterprising

Northern Ireland” campaign - a series of action programmes to change the attitudes of local people to business creation, to promote the value of entrepreneurship in the education system, to create a sophisticated business support infrastructure and to address equality of opportunity issues in gaining access to such resources. There was also a closely aligned programme of media promotion.

In 1996 in Kent the County and District Councils and the Training and Enterprise Council got together with local enterprise agencies, chambers of commerce and local schools, further education colleges and its universities, to agree a new vision and image for the future of the county. To implement this vision the partners created twin strategies to boost investment in the county under the theme of “Invest in Kent”. The place brand message was that investing in Kent would generate a good return and that Kent was a good place to live and work. It was aimed as much at existing employers, workers and residents as it was at inward investors. It was implemented through the twin strategies of “Kent Prospects” which was the economic development strategy and “Kent Learning – Our Future” which was a life-long learning strategy. Both had detailed action plans with budget allocations to ensure that key developments took place. These were paralleled by an extensive programme of communications to report on progress.

These case studies exemplify the key elements of what we now term “place branding”:

- A unifying vision created by and championed by a partnership of the key stakeholders who lead the creation and management of the place brand.
- A detailed strategy to realise the vision and implement the brand.
- A set of funded actions to exemplify the changes taking place and the progress towards the vision.

- Changed behaviour by stakeholders, residents, workers and employers which exemplifies the new ways in which the place is operating.
- Promotion and reporting of the progress in relevant media.

Overall, a place brand enables a place to:

- Differentiate itself from its competitors based on its human, physical, cultural, heritage and relationship capital.
- Plan its future economic, human, social and cultural development.
- Retain and refresh its human capital assets.
- Develop and capitalise on its cultural, heritage and sports facilities and attributes.
- Attract major investment and activity assets, which define or re-define its brand, such as cultural festivals (e.g. Glasgow and Liverpool) art galleries and museums (e.g. the Guggenheim in Bilbao), and sports events (e.g. the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona).
- Define or redefine what it does and is good at (eg San Francisco's and Seattle's move from port-based economies to knowledge industries).

AGENDA wants to hear your views on local economic development. If you have strongly held views, share them with us for publication. Send your articles and comments to the editor, Malcolm Patterson (mpatterson@ntlworld.com).