

## **My City – My Brand:**

### **The Different Roles of Residents in Place Branding**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** – This paper deals with the importance of residents within place branding. It examines the different roles that residents play in the formation and communication of place brands and explores the implications for place brand management.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper is based on theoretical insights drawn from the combination of the distinct literatures on place branding, general marketing, tourism, human geography, and collaborative governance. To support its arguments, the paper discusses the participation of citizens in governance processes as highlighted in the urban governance literature as well as the debate among marketing scholars over participatory marketing and branding.

**Findings** – The paper arrive at three different roles played by the residents: (1) as an integral part of the place brand through their characteristics and behavior; (2) as ambassadors for their place brand who grant credibility to any communicated message and (3) as citizens and voters who are vital for the political legitimization of place branding. These three roles make the residents a very significant target group of place branding.

**Originality/value** – Residents are largely neglected by place branding practice and that their priorities are often misunderstood, even though they are not passive beneficiaries but are active partners and co-producers of public goods, services and policies. This paper highlights that only meaningful participation and consultation can produce a more effective and sustainable place branding strengthening the brand communication and avoiding the pitfall of developing ‘artificial’ place brands.

**Keywords:** Place branding, place marketing, internal branding, stakeholder participation, residents, brand management

**Paper type:** Research paper

## Introduction

As identified in the earliest literature on place marketing and branding (e.g., Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Van den Berg and Braun, 1999; Kotler *et al.*, 1993), the three main target groups are *residents*, *companies*, and *visitors*. Although reasonable, this assertion inappropriately limits the role of residents to merely target markets, and may even incline some marketers to only consider new residents as target markets of place branding. However, residents could also be vital participants in the place branding process. They are not just passive beneficiaries or place customers, but could be active partners and co-producers of public goods, services and policies (e.g., Freire, 2009; Hospers, 2010; Olsson and Berglund, 2009). Thus, a critical analysis of the potentially different roles of residents in place branding is needed and it is contended here that residents have a more active role to play, since the participation of and the dialogue with stakeholders in place branding is extremely relevant (e.g., Bennet and Savani, 2003; Braun, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2012).

This resonates with most of the literature on urban governance highlighting the importance of participation of citizens in governance processes (e.g., Garcia, 2006; Bingham *et al.*, 2005; Zenker and Seigis, 2012) as well as the debate among marketing scholars over participatory marketing and branding. The participatory approach to marketing and branding highlights the significance of internal audiences (Ind and Bjerke, 2007) and positions the branding process as a dialogue between stakeholders (Hatch and Schultz, 2009). *Internal branding* strategies, for example, try to increase the brand commitment among all of a company or institution's internal stakeholders (e.g., Burmann and Zeplin, 2005) in order to make them true brand ambassadors.

Theory and practice of place branding show considerable shortcomings in considering the role of the residents in the place branding process. Hence, the aim of this paper is to

analyse the multifaceted role of residents in the place branding process and to explore the implications for place brand management.

### **Place Branding and The Different Roles of Residents**

The branding of places (and cities in particular) has gained popularity among city officials and academics in recent years, as illustrated by popular city brand rankings such as the *Anholt-GMI City Brands Index* (Anholt, 2006), or the first meta-analyses of the academic field by Gertner (2011) and Lucarelli and Berg (2011). Multiple definitions for place branding have arisen and several scholars note that no single accepted definition currently exists (e.g., Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Hankinson, 2004). In light of this, some have proposed that the essential feature of a brand is “nothing more and nothing less than the good name of something that’s on offer to the public” (Anholt and Hildreth, 2005, p. 164). Fundamentally, this ‘good name’ or reputation exists in the minds of the consumers in terms of brand knowledge and could be seen as a network of associations in consumers’ minds (Keller, 1993; Keller and Lehmann, 2006). Similarly, Zenker and Braun (2010) focus on a *place brand* as a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, behaviour and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design. This definition shows that brand perception can differ strongly between target groups because of varying knowledge levels possessed by the target audiences and the different demands for a place (Zenker, 2011). More importantly, it highlights the role of all stakeholders, their behaviour and their culture, as well as the need to avoid an overly heavy focus on external target groups in place branding.

Amongst the few contributions that have actually addressed the residents in the place branding process (e.g., Olsson and Berglund, 2009; Insch and Florek, 2010), especially the

studies of Bennett and Savani (2003) and Merrilees *et al.* (2009) illustrate the need for a closer examination of the role of residents. The study of Bennett and Savani (2003) showed that residents were not considered to be an important stakeholder in the (re)branding of places: “new brand identities were determined in a top-down manner by local government authorities. In reaching strategic brand identity decisions a local authority would consult extensively, systemically and formally with business interests and owners of property in the area. Conversely, consultations with existing residents were irregular and usually ad hoc” (p. 81).

The findings of Merrilees *et al.* (2009) reveal a “vacuum of previous research in fully understanding the antecedents of city brand attitudes” (p. 365) indicating that consulting residents more could improve place branding theory and practice. They found that the most important community attributes influencing residents’ city brand attitudes are social bonding, a strong brand personality and business creativity, whereas nature, cultural activities and shopping - the most reported attributes in the literature – only came second. Below, we take a closer look at the contribution of residents and identify the three-fold role of residents in place branding.

### *Residents as Integrated Part of a Place Brand*

The first role of residents is as an integrated part of the place brand: This could be the result of a deliberate brand strategy, but it is more often a natural process steeped in the fact that residents are the ‘bread and butter’ of places. Residents and their interactions with each other and with outsiders obviously form the social milieu of a given place. According to Warnaby (2009b), it is the combination of the physical setting and this social milieu that facilitates the experience of a locale. Freire (2009) has discussed the role of local people in place branding, showing that they are indeed a critical dimension for the formation of place brands. His research on British users of the Algarve and Costa del Sol place brands

demonstrates that local people are used as an indicator for the evaluation of place brands, as a justifier for place brand consumption and as a differentiating factor between place brands. For instance, Freire (2009) reveals that the perceived degree of friendliness in local peoples' attitudes is a crucial element in destination evaluation. Also other researchers addressed this point of view, for example, Vanolo (2008) seeing the local people as one part of the creative image of the city of Turin. An interesting example in that respect is also the 'Be Berlin' campaign launched in 2008 by the German capital: As Colomb and Kalandides (2010) have analysed, the campaign (especially its early stages) has been a relative innovation in place marketing practices, "because it gave Berliners a voice in shaping the external representations of their city" (p. 187). The residents of Berlin had the chance to express their views on their city through the telling of personal stories that connected them to the city; some of these personal stories have been used in the city's promotional campaign. In this way, the representation of Berlin to the outside world, as well as the effort to form the new Berlin brand, started with the residents as an integrated part of the city brand.

### *Residents as Ambassadors for Their Place Brand*

The second role of residents is that of ambassadors for the place brand. In the city brand communication model developed by Kavartzis (2004), perceptions of cities are formed by three types of brand communication: (1) the primary communication, which could be described as the city's actions themselves, including the architecture and real place offerings as well as the city's behaviour; (2) the secondary communication, which includes formal communication like all forms of advertising or public relations; and (3) the tertiary communication, which refers to the word-of-mouth generated by the residents of a city. The perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of word-of-mouth again highlights the important role of residents in the place brand communication process (Braun, 2011). The views of residents are significant for external target markets as they are naturally considered informal,

authentic and insider sources of information about the place. One example is the very common feature of destination marketing campaigns, where celebrities born in the place are used to advertise the place. Examples range from opera singer Andrea Rost promoting Budapest, to Hollywood actors Ben Stiller and Kevin Bacon promoting New York City. However, the argument here is certainly not limited to celebrity-status residents. All residents are able to transmit these reliable messages about their place individually and collectively as a community, for instance, through social network sites, where residents have the chance to discuss their attitudes towards their place with other people, such as potential visitors and potential movers. This aspect of the residents' role in place branding has significant resonance with two general marketing notions: first, the notion of the customer as co-creator of value (e.g., Achrol and Kotler, 1999) or as co-creators of the whole place product (Warnaby, 2009a); and second, the notion of internal branding and the concept of 'living the brand', which supports the need to transform every member of the organisation into a brand champion (e.g., Elliott and Percy, 2007). This role of residents calls for involvement and participation in the place branding effort as such involvement increases the chance of becoming brand ambassadors. Strongly involved citizens, in contrast to mere residents, will demonstrate positive behaviour beyond their 'normal' duties defined by law and social norms (Katz, 1964). Involvement in the branding effort will lead to increased ownership of the brand and therefore more sense of responsibility for its development, management and external reputation.

### *Residents as Citizens*

The most neglected role in place branding theory and practice is the role of residents as citizens. Residents choose their local government officials, have political power and participate in political decisions. This participation is simultaneously a right and an obligation for citizens, meaning that it is also the obligation of place authorities not only to guarantee

such participation but also to provide opportunities for citizens to actively contribute to decision-making. The process of place branding implementation should not be an exception. This might be a challenge as branding needs a sharp focus in order to differentiate your offering from the offerings of competitors (Keller, 1993). Braun (2011) argues that the implementation of place branding requires striking a balance between a distinctive focus for the place brand and wider support in the place's communities. Riezebos (2007), admitting some level of exaggeration, asserts that applying branding and democracy are incompatible. This is a matter that has to do with the difficulties inherent in the attempt to impose a brand from the top rather than letting it grow from the bottom. In fact, this is a growing concern of several commentators regarding the same top-down approach commonly demonstrated in the corporate world (e.g., Hatch and Shultz, 2003). In the case of corporations, however, the normal organizing practices ensure that there is an 'authority' with the responsibility to develop and manage the corporate or product brand. It has the right to allocate necessary resources as requested and the power to impose the brand on employees (as part of the organizational culture). This is a reality with very little resemblance to place branding where political and democratic legitimization of brand values, brand policies and the necessary investment to develop and pursue those is vital. First, local authorities have to explain, justify and defend their place branding-related actions against several types of political control. Secondly (and perhaps uniquely in the case of place branding), the necessary coherency between the place brand, its values, its propositions and all measures that communicate the brand requires that local people support and assist in the process for place branding to be effectively developed.

The agreement, support and assistance of local people cannot be taken for granted, as evidenced by the so-called 'non-official' or 'counter branding' campaigns. These are grass-roots movements of citizens who group together to raise their voice against official place branding campaigns. In some cases these movements are limited to a series of discussions; in



others the citizens go further, suggesting alternative politics to local authorities and even arranging counter branding campaigns. For instance, when the organisation responsible for marketing the city of Amsterdam introduced the 'I Amsterdam' brand, a group of residents responded with an 'I AMsterdamned' counter suggestion. Perhaps the most documented case is the story of the McEnroe group that torpedoed the 'We are Up and Going' campaign of Marketing Manchester (Ward, 2000). This McEnroe group consisted of entrepreneurs, students, artists and other groups who collectively criticized the presented city brand as a poor reflection of the city and its people and their opposition ultimately ended the campaign.

## Discussion

The three roles described above, make the residents a vitally important target market for place branding. This is not common ground in the place marketing literature: Kotler *et al.* (1993, 1999) have advocated an economic and external focus for the target markets of places: visitors, business, and residents as employees. The 'marriage' of residents and employees reduces residents to productive workers and understates the role of residents as *the most important* place customers. Rainisto (2003) uses another externally oriented classification akin to Kotler *et al.* (2002), in which residents are limited to 'new residents'. We argue instead, that the existing residents should be prioritized as they form the most prominent audience for place branding. They may oppose place branding efforts aimed solely at potential new residents (e.g. Bennett and Savani, 2003), resulting in a feeling of alienation between residents and the communicated place brand. Additionally, the current residents and their characteristics form an integral part of the place brand in the mind of these targeted new residents; there is a clearly manifested and natural connection between residents being the target markets and the role of *residents as an integrated part of the place brand*. When the differences between the current residents and the potentially new residents produce what one

might call a *resident gap*, targeted new residents may very well avoid moving due to the inability to identify with the values, behaviour and culture of the current residents, while existing residents may find reason to leave the place. In this way, place branding extends beyond the visitor-friendliness of the local population that is so important for the tourism industry: the current residents also send messages to potentially new residents.

The abovementioned resident gap could also become apparent when particular resident groups within a city have very little in common with any of the other city's communities. This could lead to potential tensions between interest groups in the city with different perceptions of their place. Place branding could heighten inherent conflicts regarding the identification of different groups with the communicated place brand. Thus, place branding should be aware of those potential conflicts and also understand itself as a process of conflict management, with the aim of integrating as many residents as possible.

On a more positive note, new and existing residents who can easily identify with the communicated place brand will likely become ambassadors of the place brand. In their role as *integrated part of the place brand*, residents negotiate (intentionally or not) the meaning of this brand: They form the place brand to a great extent and this negotiated meaning is what might be broadcasted to the outside world. This makes the relationship between the role of *residents as integrated part of the place brand* and the role of *residents as ambassadors of the place brand* obvious. Place marketers should acknowledge the *role of residents as brand ambassadors* and aim to mobilise civic pride and the sense of belonging of residents as a means of communicating the place brand. If handled well, this approach can become a very powerful word-of-mouth tool for strengthening and communicating the place brand. Getting it right is no easy task, however, especially if policy makers do not see the relationship between this ambassador role and the other roles discussed. In other words, satisfied residents may become the most valuable ambassadors of their place, but dissatisfied residents will almost certainly become ambassadors *against* their place.

By far the biggest challenge for place brand managers is the role of *residents as citizens*, as they could ‘make or break’ the whole place branding effort. One should not expect residents to respond automatically to the place brand, as they could ignore it or remain indifferent. They also wield the potential power to challenge the communicated place brand, and have the right to invoke that power as the place brand owner. The role of residents as citizens is arguably a prominent role for the reasons outlined earlier: It is as citizens that residents legitimise the place brand efforts and actually ‘finance’ most of the efforts and expenses involved in place branding (Zenker and Martin, 2011). Failing to consider this role carries with it potentially significant consequences: residents may be unable to fulfil the remaining roles and find themselves feeling alienated from the meaning and essence of the place brand. If residents are not treated as citizens, it is very unlikely that they will respond positively to any targeting effort or expectation of them to act as communicators and ambassadors of the place brand.

### **Implications for Place Brand Management**

Even though participation is absolutely necessary for a successful place branding strategy, it is a very challenging task. Places in general are very complex constructs and the residents are organised in complex structures (e.g., with their different cultural backgrounds, values and beliefs, as well as their place demands). Offering participation to all those diverse groups of residents will be more demanding than a top-down approach, but engaging a main portion of residents in place branding could be beneficial as indicated above. In pursuit of this goal, place brand management urgently needs to strengthen the communication between residents and the city’s officials, as well as give more control to the residents themselves, planning for resident participation in every stage of the place branding process. Arguably, the significance attributed here to residents – and specifically the suggestion to consult them and

listen to them at all stages of the branding process – challenges place authorities. It is a very demanding exercise in terms of political will and risk-taking because place authorities may find themselves outside of what Ind and Bjerke (2007) call the ‘zone of comfort.’ A better understanding of the role of residents calls for a focal change from the communication-dominant approach to a participation-dominant approach. The investment needed for such an approach is not investment in communicating the place brand, but investment in its antecedents: it is an investment in sharing the meaning of the place brand, alongside its ownership and control.

This process is most important for the stage of defining aims and building a strong shared vision. As we pointed out with the third role of the residents, the legitimatisation of those aims is the crucial step for a successful strategy and a shared vision is the basis for further integration of residents in the process. The question, of course, is: how should place marketers stimulate genuine participation of residents in place branding? To find a shared vision, different approaches from the political and economic science have been introduced – for example the *Delphi* method discussed by Virgo and de Chernatony (2006) – but unfortunately these are not yet widely used in practice. The methods used in participatory action research and especially applied ethnography (see: Chambers, 2000) can also become tools for participatory place branding, especially since these are designed to inform policy making. Even a survey on the residents’ views and evaluations can be thought of as a participatory tool, or at least as an indication of good intentions. As the study of Olsson and Berglund (2009) discovered, the most preferred way of participation in the urban planning and management of the Swedish town of Arboga is “by being asked, for example via surveys” (p. 139).

On a related note, netnography (Kozinets, 2010) might also offer a reasonable method, at least for those parts of the city’s population who are actively involved in city-related online communities. In general, the advancement of online communication technologies radically

affects the roles that residents play in place branding and offers a multitude of opportunities for the integration of existing residents in place branding decision making. Via blogs, social media, online communities or simple comments in websites residents have the chance to contribute freely to discussions and either reinforce or reject messages. Furthermore, the increased literacy in these online communication media arguably increases the willingness to participate in such discussions. The online world also provides enhanced opportunities for place marketers to engage with all stakeholders and form essential relationships with them. As Warnaby *et al.* (2011) note, apart from the necessary relationships with place marketing actors, these relationships should extend to “residents within the area, in order to develop what mainstream marketing theory would call brand loyalty” (p. 258).

Interestingly, as already stated in the introduction, the importance of meaningful participation also entered the debate among marketing scholars. Two concepts developed within this participatory branding approach are of particular relevance for our discussion on the role of residents: The first is the concept of brand co-creation (e.g., Warnaby 2009a; Hatch and Schultz, 2010), which stresses the fact that brands are not formed through traditional communications, but are co-created by a multitude of people who encounter and appropriate them. The implication follows that official brand communication is inevitably only one of the inputs in this process of co-creation. The second concept is the call for greater involvement of stakeholders in branding (e.g., Gregory, 2007), which posits the need to empower the relevant stakeholders and allow them to participate freely in creating the brand. Both of those notions centre on the fact that stakeholders both receive and assume control of brand meanings (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2012), making them *part of the brand* (experience). The discussion about brand communities also takes this idea into account (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). A brand community – a social aggregation of brand users who share a strong relationship to a brand as well as other members of the brand community (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002) – is developed and altered by the brand users, since they become part of the brand and

as a result create additional value for the brand (Schau *et al.*, 2009). With their brand use and brand community engagement, those members also become *ambassadors for the brand* through word-of-mouth, social networking, and impression management (Schau *et al.*, 2009).

### **Concluding Remarks**

Surprisingly little theoretical or empirical evidence has been published on the role of residents in place branding. This article has attempted to establish the foundations of a ‘resident orientated’ approach to place branding.

The challenge, of course, is that the residents of places do not constitute a coherent group but include a multiplicity of groups of people that are bound to have varying and conflicting preferences, desires, or attitudes. For instance, local entrepreneurs who are also residents will be inclined to have different expectations from their place’s brand than people who are not economically active. Students living in the area will have a different set of desirable place attributes than residents in a different life-stage.

However, it is argued that a form of place branding that integrates the views, oppositions and desires of the residents is warranted. It is a very significant task for place branding to consider the three roles of residents and integrate the residents across every stage of the place branding process. Therefore, the article has also identified possible methods of action, which might enrich place branding practices with a more participatory spirit. Of course, all of these methods need to be tested in practice before a final evaluation can be undertaken. If such attempts prove to be effective, this might lead to a refined and, in our view, improved place branding approach. We hope that the exploration and clarification of the role of the residents that has been undertaken here will trigger a discussion and contribute to such an approach to place branding.

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