

ON THE REAL MEANING AND FUTURE PATH OF CITY BRANDING

Strategic Policy Statement

CityLogo has been an unusual experience for ten European cities who have interacted intensively over a period of three years to improve how they brand and market themselves in an integrated manner. Moreover, that cross-learning journey, comprised of thematic workshops, study visits, peer-reviews and reports, as well as action planning at local level, has been shared to a large extent with the Eurocities Working Group on City Attractiveness, resulting in over thirty cities being directly or indirectly involved in the experience.

Once this process has been finalized, the undersigned city representatives, along with the lead expert appointed for this large-scale initiative, are in a unique position to share with other cities our vision on the real meaning and scope of the so-called city brand strategies, as well as the value of strategic communication to those cities dealing, or aspiring to deal, with issues like positioning, attractiveness, reputation and global image. To that aim, we have unpacked the knowledge and experience accumulated into the following ten key findings and principles.

The need to re-learning city branding. For many place-branding is still about logos and campaigning, when actually it's about building and marketing smartly local competitive identities, through long-term initiatives and strategies. To some extent, the prevailing role of branding and advertising agencies helps to keep that incorrect focus, resulting in short-sighted practices, which automatically adopt concepts and techniques from commercial branding, ending only in circumstantial results and low appropriation by citizens and local stakeholders.

Narrative is the first and most fundamental. From a content perspective, city branding is about building up a unifying, comprehensive and updated narrative of the city. That is in essence the concept of brand when applied to cities and places. To do that, cities cannot rely only on branding and creative agencies. City development departments or the connection to local strategic planning are fundamental to conduct and facilitate this task, which in turn demands in-depth understanding of the urban question and the role of cities in today's world.

Cultivating uniqueness to avoid the lack of differentiation in today's city branding.

Lack of differentiation often has to do with an uncritical adoption of what supposedly the “standard modern city” should be: smart, creative, lively streets everywhere etc. On the contrary, distinctiveness emerges from the singular combination of different city assets and approaching the city narrative as an honest introspection, projected with healthy optimism into the future. This has, as always, much to do with local strategic planning.

Crowdsourcing the city story. Making the most of the local audience is definitively a new frontier in city branding. It increases authenticity, since it's more credible when third parties talk about the city rather than just official storytelling delivered by dedicated agencies and teams. Furthermore, this approach offers new solutions to keep the range of city stories updated and fresh on a permanent basis. There is certainly a growing active citizenship, digitally educated, able to personalize and share city experiences and visions, which is opening new exciting opportunities in many aspects of urban development. For the simple reason that social media is an effective channel to increase engagement and co-creation with the city's diverse target groups, notably its own residents and stakeholders, it will play a major role in tomorrow's place branding.

Logos & mottos can play a role, but not always, and never the main role. Logos & mottos attract the spotlight so powerfully that the more strategic side of city branding often remains overshadowed and underestimated. From a strictly visual communication point of view, the real challenge is to go beyond logos and promote more outstanding city imagery, a better visual culture when representing our cities, engaging audiences and local creatives in the challenge.

City branding is basically an organisational challenge. From a governance perspective, city branding is about creating a shared working area for the diverse entities in the city targeting and interacting with the different audiences. It should provide one single “control centre” for the city's interaction with the outside world, as a way to properly manage cross-sector issues like city image, global positioning and reputation. It is a response to the need for more strategic communication of the city.

There is no one single formula but some drivers to institutionalize such collaborative models. It may not be necessary to found new constituted bodies to deliver collaboration. What is relevant is to organise specific platforms, alliances or agreements involving the range of key stakeholders (including private ones if timely),

provide some leadership from the local government, at least in earlier stages (within a more relational, horizontal style of performing political power at local level), organize highly professionalized dedicated teams to run the day to day activities, and design new funding models.

City branding does not come to replace the different sector-focused city marketing practices. On the contrary, its reason for being is to give support to the operations carried out by the entities working in destination marketing, cultural events, inward investment... but also the political entities, local private companies open to the world, universities, airports, technology parks, etc. Those specialized marketing teams focused on concrete target groups should actively collaborate in the process of coordination and alignment. They certainly keep a vital role, within a new win-win context, where synergies can be now fully exploited and the range of city messages and stories will gain in consistency.

Branding the city might not be something disconnected to the local population. Branding is simply a question of internal marketing. Place-branding techniques can be used to socialize flagship projects and emerging processes in the city that need to be installed in the collective imagination, and increasingly can be seen as the toolkit for urban regeneration projects. If we address the field as a cohesive force and no longer as a matter of just logos and tag lines, then the resident's voice is fairly important as well as the voice from the local entities, firms and visitors.

Cities need to expand the concept of what communication action is. This is as a way to overcome an approach dominated by a campaign logic and to learn to promote cities with small budgets, if necessary. The impact of the digital shift has been profound and today urban identities must also be constructed at the digital level, and the experience of place often starts in a digital environment. However, the question of what mix of communication channels and actions to use in the city is not as simple as migrating to digital-based tools. Older formulas, duly revisited, still have a role to play undoubtedly: advertising and PR, ambassador networks, big events, new generation visitor centers, newsletters... The challenge for cities is to make a revised choice on their particular mix of communication tools in today's world.

We firmly believe that such conception of what city brand management means, will be central, if it is not already, to urban policies in the years to come. Efficiency in the way core European cities brand and communicate themselves internationally will have a direct impact in the positioning of Europe and the European Union worldwide.

Consequently, we should expect wider backing from the European Commission (through the diverse programmes focused on urban issues, territorial cooperation and competitiveness) to those strategies following the way of innovative city brand management, as conscious urban policies nowadays.

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