



BRANDING AND MARKETING THE CITY RETAIL PROPOSITION

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URBACT is a European exchange and learning programme promoting sustainable urban development. The URBACT Programme enables cities to work together to develop solutions to major urban challenges, reaffirming the key role they play in facing increasingly complex societal changes. URBACT helps cities to develop pragmatic solutions that are new and sustainable, and that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. The URBACT method enables cities to share good practices and lessons learned with all professionals involved in urban policy throughout Europe.



WHY BRAND A PLACE?

There can be many motivations to embark on place branding. These include cultural, political, and social considerations. However, the primary driver for place branding is linked to competition. Places all over the globe are competing for investment, visitors, talent and attention. There are some 500 regions and over 100,000 towns in the EU alone. This represents intensive competition. As intensive as any other business sector. In any competitive environment, having a clearly differentiated offer is key. Strategic place branding can help to identify and nurture this competitive difference.

A place's retail offer should be an important consideration in the place branding process. It is an attractor to the place, and it also represents an important touch point between the place and some of its key audiences. In some cases, the retail offer can be an important reinforcement and manifestation of the place idea.



PERSPECTIVES ON PLACE BRANDING

There is a lot of confusion about the term "branding". And it is no different when it comes to place branding. Furthermore, it is potentially problematic to make direct parallels between a place and a traditional brand. Some people, often including local politicians and citizens, find it difficult to think of their place as a brand. This can lead to scepticism on the role and the value of place branding. Moreover, there are important differences between the idea of place and perceptions of a conventional brand.

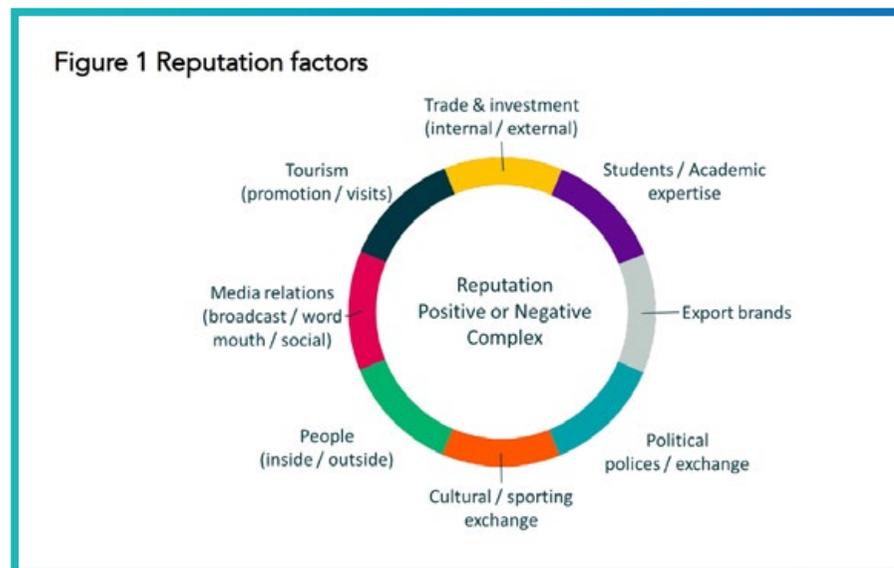
For example, one of the key attributes of a regular brand is consistency. Brand owners seek to ensure a consistently positive experience of their brand. They do this by exerting control over the brand - this is particularly true of product brands. However, in the case of place branding it is far more difficult to ensure consistency in the way people experience the "brand". Places are diverse and complex. They need to engage with a wide variety of different users and audiences, and it is impossible to ensure a uniformly consistent experience.

Some of the tools in a conventional brand owners' armoury are: brand icons, brand language, brand culture, brand values. When it comes to places these things already exist, they don't need to be manufactured. Thus, places naturally have many of the assets which brands seek to create, so **place branding can be thought of as the strategic process which manages these attributes in order to create competitive advantage.**

Other terms can be used which are sometimes more acceptable and more easily understood than place branding. One such term is "reputa-

tion". Reputation management is important for places. The term reputation is also more easily understood. Politicians, for example, are acutely aware of the importance of reputation. When people experience a place, they begin to form an opinion about it.

Over time these experiences begin to shape a places reputation. And experience in this sense does not always mean a physical experience. As Figure 2 below shows many things can shape a places reputation.



A places reputation is complex and can be positive or negative. It can be thought of as a kind of reputational balance sheet, with assets and liabilities. Place branding can be thought of as a process of managing these strengths and weaknesses.

There is little doubt that a places reputation powerfully affects the way people inside and outside the place thinks about it. The way they behave towards it. And the way they respond to everything which is made or done there. Thus, places with a positive reputation more investment, talent, visitors and so on.

"Destinations that identify and devote proper resources to building a strong reputation attract more tourists, more business investment and when the price is right, sell more products. Destinations, like businesses, need to pay attention to their reputation,"

Kasper Neilson - Reputation Institute

An understanding of reputation also suggests the need to think more holistically about the perception of a place. For example, previous studies have shown that, potential inward investors to a place take account of a wide range of hard and soft factors when considering candidate destinations. So, the most successful places blend soft factors like: architecture, culture, and environment with the pre-requisite economic, and financial criteria to create a holistic identity. In other words, a place where people want to be. These softer factors are more usually associated with the marketing of a place as a visitor destination rather than inward investment. This demonstrates the benefits of thinking about identity and reputation in a strategic and integrated way.

"If you build a place people want to visit, you build a place where people want to live. If you build a place where people want to live, you'll build a place where people want to work. If you build a place where people want to work, you'll build a place where business has to be. And if you build a place where business has to be, you'll build a place where people have to visit."

Maura Gast Destination Marketing Association International

Bringing all of these perspectives together I have created a definition of place branding as shown in figure 2 below:



This conveys that place branding has a dual role. Firstly, it can help to influence the development of a place internally – its key policies and strategies. The brand positioning should be one criteria that policy makers consider when making recommendations for the advancement of a place. Secondly it shapes the external marketing and identity of a place. Helping it to stand out from its competitors.

Basingstoke's participative branding follows up on a previous and broader investment strategy

Basingstoke coordinator, Daniel Garnier, offered a brief presentation on the branding strategy of the town and the use of Social Media as a tool to spread the word and for generating support and increase reputation.

Basingstoke has recognised the vital importance of creating advocacy from within the town. Although it's external reputation is mixed. People who live and work there have a fondness for

Basingstoke. So the strategy is to harness this support and to facilitate and encourage people to create content and express support on-line.

The town has initiated a social media campaign using the hashtag #LoveBasingstoke where anybody can participate by uploading pictures from any place/events in Basingstoke.



THE 5 TESTS OF AN EFFECTIVE BRAND POSITIONING

A place needs to take into account a number of different considerations, before determining the appropriateness and likely effectiveness of potential brand solutions.

The tests we recommend are:

1. Is it Different?

Every place in the world is different.

Even in the age of increasing homogenisation, there is always something about a place's location, culture, history or personality that make it special.

But few place brand solutions truly demonstrate this uniqueness. 'Our place is innovative' – it's easy to find somewhere with a better track record in innovation. 'Our place is accessible' – there is inevitably

somewhere better connected. Our place has a quality workforce - there is always somewhere that can trump you. **So, if your brand is built on rational benefits alone, it's hard to stand out.**

The specialness of a place is found in its stories, its people, its character and all of these are shaped by its location. A compelling place brand builds a narrative around these aspects and creates an idea; that little bit of magic that can bring the brand to life.

2. Can it Last?

There are many reasons why a place brand positioning doesn't last. Perhaps it was designed around a major event - then when the event is over, the positioning just doesn't seem right any more. Perhaps it's because the brand is associated with a particular political administration and when the administration changes, the brand changes. Perhaps marketers just become tired of it and seek to change things when there's no need to do so. Whilst brands need to evolve and adapt in a changing world, when creating a place brand you have to take steps to future-proof it as much as possible.

3. Is it popular?

Successful place brands are built on solid foundations. Unless the people, businesses and other stakeholders within the place support what is being said and done on their behalf, the foundations will inevitably be weak. You need their full support to build a compelling and distinctive reputation.

The people will become the ambassadors of the place. They will create content and will be part of the narrative. If the brand motivates your external target audiences, but does not resonate with your internal stakeholders ultimately it will fail.

4. Is it true?

Sometimes places can't resist stretching the truth - even if it's just a little bit. But, can every facility be 'truly world class'? And does every scenic view really offer 'incomparable beauty'?

When visitors or potential investors actually experience a place they'll soon know the truth. And now social media allows consumers to challenge places and answer back in an instant. **Social media has given the world a welcome dose of honesty that they need to embrace.**

In this new age of authenticity, brands need to be fit-for-purpose to thrive. They must be true in what they say and how they behave.

Honesty is essential, and the truth can be compelling.

Is it more than a slogan?

As discussed earlier sometimes it's hard to think of a place as a brand. **It's more like an experience or rather a collection of experiences.** And it is people's personal encounters with the place that directly affect their opinion of it. Together these opinions shape that place's reputation.

Logos, design and communication are important, but the most successful place brands go further. They directly influence strategy and behaviours. They help shape the way a place develops and interacts with its 'customers'.

It's important to consider how the potential solution can enhance the experience and add value at all points on the customer journey.

Hengelo DNA identity in a participative process

Hengelo's brand strategy has taken account of some of the 5 tests above in building its brand plan. It has sought to identify its DNA in other words the essence of what makes Hengelo different and what is true about the place. It has also done this in a very participative way. Involving stakeholders in the development of the brand helps to ensure that there is support for the brand after launch.

Hengelo plans to overcome any negative external perception by building on its shared identity and in creating a united front in the promotion of the city.

Besides the City Council, partners include the City Centre Management Foundation, property owners, the retailers, cultural sector, and many others.



PLACE DISTINCTION

Having taken account of the role that brand should play in place competitiveness and some of the widespread preconceptions around the term branding, I have developed the concept of Place Distinction. The concept seeks to evaluate how a place performs against some key characteristics or attributes. These characteristics reflect both the competitive challenges that every place is facing plus the changing marketing and communication landscape.

The term distinction has been chosen because of its dual meaning. In one sense being distinctive means being recognisably different. In this context it means a place has a clearly differentiated offer and identity. But distinction also implies quality or excellence in terms of performance. A successful place outperforms its competitors in key areas. Put another way, not only do places need to stand out from the crowd, they need to be outstanding in what they do.

In the concept of Place Distinction there are 5 key characteristics which help to determine how well a place is performing in terms of achieving distinction. These characteristics are: social capital, affinity, stature, identity and reputation. Auditing a destination against these criteria allows us to benchmark and understand its current position and the challenges that need to be overcome in order to reach the destination's objectives. Tracking a destination's performance against these criteria allows us to track the destination's progress towards becoming a place of distinction.

Before I go on to explain in a little more detail what I mean by these characteristics, it is important to state that in addition to these characteristics

any place will have certain assets, resources and strengths which directly impact on their performance. These hard factors and facts need to be taken into consideration when developing a place brand solution. The characteristics of place distinction, do not replace them. Rather the characteristics should be considered alongside the hard facts in order to develop a much richer assessment of place performance.

Let's now consider each of the 5 characteristics:

SOCIAL CAPITAL - When we associate ourselves with a place, it says something about us. Places of distinction have great shareability. We know our friends will be impressed that we've visited. We're proud to identify our businesses with the place. And because we know it adds value, we put "Made in This Place" on our packaging. Social capital is a judgement of the extent to which people see value in being associated with a place.

AFFINITY - Places are for people. And people have an emotional attachment to places. A place may have a high profile and a clearly differentiated identity, but without emotional attachment it cannot achieve distinction. Affinity is an assessment of the warmth of human feeling towards a place. **Do I understand and share the values of this place? Is this the place for me? Do I feel at home in this place?**

STATURE - Places can be leaders or they can be followers. Place which lead are confident. They have stature. Leadership means doing what's right for a place, not following in the footsteps of a competitor. Leadership means being the boldest, not the brashest. **Places with authority are places that wear their creativity on their sleeves. They show, not tell. Places with authority are outstanding. They stand out because there is quality and excellence in what they do.**

IDENTITY - Places of distinction have a clear identity - a strong culture and personality. It's an identity the people of the place are very comfortable with. One they are happy to assume and project. It's an identity that's apparent to visitor and potential investors. It's intriguing and attractive. Distinctive and accessible in equal measure. A distinctive identity also informs promotion. Places of distinction let their personality shine through in their destination marketing.

REPUTATION - This is an overall assessment of the credibility of a place: externally within target markets and internally among the people who live and work there. Credible destinations have stable and reliable leadership. They value and support education and opportunity. Their export products and services are sought-after. Their cultural contribution is acknowledged and valued. Their people are admired and welcomed elsewhere.

Albi

Albi is a French 50.000 inhabitants city in Midi-Pyrenees, was invited to present their brand strategy around the Episcopal City, inscribed in the list of World Heritage in 2017 and how the city has build their branding strategy around this fact.

Albi is a good example of a directional place brand strategy. In other words, it has focused very clearly on its ecclesiastical and spiritual links. World heritage recognition acted as a catalyst for this but it also provides international recognition. Another important aspect of the strategy is the creation of an ambassador network. This is a typical way of formally encouraging advocacy from within.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that building a systematic brand strategy for a place is an important way of creating competitive advantage. Branding is not just appropriate for larger cities. Smaller cities also have competitive challenges. And because successful branding is not just about, promotion it doesn't always need vast budgets to make it work. Every city large or small can apply the simple brand checklist discussed. Every city can work with its stakeholders and citizens to build advocacy. And every place is unique and has special characteristics, which can form the foundation of a brand. A positive reputation helps with engagement and buy-in and branding can play a role in reputation management.