Guest Editorial

From place marketing to place branding and back

As this is the author's first editorial as board member for this journal, it felt like an obvious duty to respond to Anholt's (2010a) open invitation to the journal's community to contribute to the discussion about the definition of the field. As a trained marketer, the author is hoping to contribute some valid arguments about why and how the field of place branding needs to be distinguished from place marketing in the following pages.

FROM PLACE MARKETING TO PLACE BRANDING

Anholt (2010a) correctly illustrates that place marketing has a long tradition, and that a case for looking at places as brands can be made using historical examples. The need for 'place branding', as it has surfaced over the last decade and a half, can also be explained as an evolution from place marketing. Indeed, places have been marketing tourism, investment and export products for long, and there is widespread appreciation that a positive place image is a prerequisite for successful tourism, export or investment promotion. Anholt states that '… there is no question that the concept of brand is relevant and useful to places, both at the sectoral level and in their roles as "umbrella brands" providing reassurance, glamour or status to the products and services that are marketed under their aegis. A positive place image, in short, makes it cheaper and easier for producers to export and attract'.

Many place marketers, however, reverse this logic and argue that in order for their marketing efforts to succeed, they need to improve their respective images and hence desire a 'place brand', with which they often mean to argue for a 'destination brand', 'appellation d'origine' or 'investment brand'. However, the author will argue in this editorial that this reverse logic does not apply, and that place branding, at a higher level, should be about creating an overarching brand strategy or competitive identity that reflects a nation's, city's or region's history, accomplishments and aspirations regardless of the markets to be served, that is, not to confuse place branding with place marketing.

BACKGROUND: BRANDING THEORY AS A USEFUL METAPHOR

While in the quote above Anholt refers to destination or export brands as 'umbrella brands' for the various hospitality providers, attractions, national carriers or exporters that operate within the country, region or city, an important case can be made for overarching 'place brands' as 'umbrella brands'. A useful metaphor is possibly that of the corporate brand versus the category or product brand.

Anholt (2010a) argues that great reputations can only be built through great products and services, and of course, undoubtedly, place brands will largely build their reputation by exporting quality products, providing great investment

opportunities and by getting tourists to create and share great travel stories. However, the author would argue that there might be more to it and that these processes of image-building based on product development and marketing cannot be seen as being isolated from each other and demand driven as a marketer would assume, in the same way that corporate brands are not necessarily just the sum of their various product brands.

There are many ways in which the consumer perceptions of corporations, in addition to the product and service brands that they own, can be influenced, such as by their leaders (for example, Richard Branson and Virgin or Michael O'Leary and Ryanair), their partnerships (F.C. Barcelona and UNICEF or Nike and Tiger Woods) or popular media (for example, the Dutch author and comedy performer Youp van't Hek singlehandedly brought down two major brands as Heineken had to pull its low-alcohol beer Buckler off the Dutch market after van't Hek mocked the brand (and its consumers) in a show in 1989 and recently he ruined the brand image of T-Mobile after a crusade against their bad customer service in his regular columns in a major Dutch newspaper and media appearances). Similarly, place brands can be influenced by their leaders (for example, the Obama effect on brand USA), partnerships (The Beckhams acquiring a house on The Palm Dubai) or popular media (for example, Borat and Kazakhstan).

However, it is much harder to control the product and umbrella brands of places, than it is for corporations. Unilever or Procter & Gamble can build corporate reputations by selling seemingly unrelated products. They make us believe that Bertolli produces authentic Italian culinary products or that Old Spice is a British fragrance introduced in the United States by sailors that crossed the Atlantic. Detached from investor or business-to-business perceptions of these corporations, many consumers are probably unaware of the fact that these products are actually produced by global conglomerates and not in the countries they are insinuating. This kind of strategy, what

is referred to as a multi-brand strategy, would seem virtually impossible for place brands. Flanders (Dutch-speaking Northern Belgium) tries to do this (not in the least for obvious political reasons) to clearly distinguish itself from Wallonia (French-speaking South). But it is hard to imagine how they can do this, when, assuming that audiences would be able to recognize and locate the region, will automatically revert to something they might know a little better, Belgium, and hence apply the national brand associations to the constituent parts automatically – the way this would happen for Virgin or Marlboro product brands, as they apply brand extension strategies, while possibly less so for Unilever or Procter and Gamble brands, that use multi-brands.

Anholt (2010b) refers to place brands as normative brands, that is, assuming brand awareness, people tend to have rather fixed mental associations that will surface in any commercial interaction with place, be it as a tourist, investor or migrant. Therefore, approaching place branding from a marketing perspective – that is, 'to influence target audiences to behave in some positive manner with respect to the products or services associated with a specific place' (American Marketing Association, 1995) – without seeing the bigger issues of overall place reputation seems rather ineffective. In a globalized world, more and more places compete more intensely, partly because, with increased tourism, migration and the global reach of media and technology, markets come into contact with places more frequently and at different levels, and therefore the 'corporate reputation' of places is becoming more important, particularly because of the product brands being inseparable – that is, places are automatically dealing with a brand extension strategy.

NO MARKETING APPROACH TO PLACE BRANDING BECAUSE OF THE CONCEPT OF IMAGE

The explanation for the inseparability of place brands is also partly covered in Go and Govers (2011). Brand images consist of networks of

associations about places, products, objects or other people, referred to in psychology as schemata (Atkinson *et al*, 1987). These even include inferences that we cross-link from somewhere else. For instance, in Govers and Go (2009) it is shown that people might have heard of Dubai as a cosmopolitan modern city (hence, they link up these associations in their schemata for Dubai), but they also might know that Dubai is located in the Middle East, and hence, if they have not yet been to Dubai, they might still infer that one will not see many women in the streets or driving cars (even though these various associations seem to be contradictory, possibly creating mental conflicts). This is actually how stereotypes are created of people and places we do not know; we classify them in a particular category and assume that the category associations that we hold also apply to each member of the group. Therefore, images are interlinked networks of associations that will lead to inferences as soon as links are evident to people. This would generally apply to cities and regions within countries or product brands (destination brands or appellation d'origine) within places, as they would be much harder to separate than multi-brands within corporations with weak corporate brands in the minds of average consumers.

There are just so many channels that influence peoples' perceptions: direct experiences or those of relatives and friends, mainstream media, social media or popular culture, one needs an overall coordinated strategy to cut through. This is supported by several articles in this edition, as they provide evidence that place images are influenced by TV comedy shows, science diplomacy, tourism advertising or public diplomacy. In Govers and Go (2009), 1100 respondents were asked about their free associations with seven places they had not visited before. For example, for Dubai, respondents commented on issues concerning oil resources and the position of women in Muslim societies; Wales is partly about sheep; Flanders is linked to European institutions; and Singapore is perceived as a busy modern city. Neither of these associations can clearly be linked to relevant tourism or export products, but they will come up when potential consumers think about travelling to these places or buying products from there.

Therefore to think that, for instance, just a destination branding programme (implying a tourism campaign) can change place image altogether is rather ambitious and in fact, it is hard to imagine that the position of women in Muslim society will be addressed in Dubai's tourism campaign. The fact that destination branding is widely practiced though, is not a surprise. There is a long tradition of academic research into 'destination image', and tourism marketing practitioners have known since long that it is virtually impossible to attract tourists, even with a good product and attractive promotions, if people hold a negative image of the location they are expected to travel to. However, many of the negative image associations involved might have nothing to do with the tourism product or industries in the first place (perceived instability, safety issues or governance), and thus understanding this is one thing, but to think that marketing campaigns can change this is overambitious to say the least (in fact, in many cases, one could argue that what is now labelled 'destination branding' is nothing more than plain tourism promotion, as it has been practiced for long; only the tags have changed).

This is linked to the issue of marketing communications not being the appropriate instrument for place branding – that is, reputation has to be earned and it is more about strategy, substance and symbolic actions (Anholt, 2008) than communications (even though the latter might serve its purpose as a way to raise brand awareness). However, the bigger issue is that marketing is not the appropriate paradigm altogether. The first thing a marketer will ask, and rightfully so, is: 'who is the customer and what are his needs and wants'. Yet, to ask this question while devising a place branding strategy seems wholly inappropriate, as the 'product brand' is always linked to the 'corporate brand' and the latter serves many purposes and markets. One cannot

build a separate brand for tourists, investors or migrants, as we always deal with the totality of brand associations in the minds of people and, what is more, a tourist might be an investor tomorrow and a new resident the day after.

INTERNAL BRANDING REQUIRES A NON-MARKETING APPROACH TO PLACE BRANDING

Also, an important prerequisite for successful place branding is a strong internal branding; that is, public, private and civil society actors 'living the brand' (Ind, 2004). Therefore, another reason not to confuse place branding with marketing is that whenever a city, region or country creates a brand from an external market perspective, one runs the risk of ignoring the fact that the shape and substance of places is still really produced by residents, local public and private actors, and civil society in general. To reduce place to an abstracted brand for tourists or investors, for instance, is likely to result in antagonism from certain local interest groups and probably leads to brand failure considering the negative 'internal branding'. In order to avoid this, it is important to create the conditions for local brand ambassadorship by building the brand based on the sense of place and identity of the local population and societal actors (that is why 'destination branding', according to the author, is ethically problematic and a misnomer, because 'the destination' only exists in the minds of (potential) travellers – which is image, really – and ignores the role of residents).

A MARKETING APPROACH IMPEDES COOPERATIVE PLACE BRANDING

A final argument why not to confuse place marketing and place branding is the need for cooperation for effective place branding, which is documented extensively. Places tend to cooperate easily and intensely on all kinds of issues (think of twin-city projects or clustered cities as regional brands), but when it comes to the perspective of the 'place as a product',

'destination' or 'investment location', they are less likely to cooperate, as they are suddenly competitors and want to be the 'final destination' that gets the overnight expenditure revenue, employment or foreign investment currency. The same accounts for cooperation issues within places as public and private actors compete. When just looking at branding from a demand perspective, many potentially useful contributors to the place brand in various sectors might be alienated, as brands focus on specific markets and sectors.

CONCLUSION, AND BACK TO PLACE MARKETING

The above arguments are cross-linked in the aspect of competitive identity (or sense) of place. Branding reflects identities; and places, the author would hope, are never just about tourism, export or real estate. Identity also refers to local people, culture, heritage, symbolism, leadership, a cooperative sense of belonging and heterogeneity. Building brand equity – that is, name awareness, image and loyalty – therefore has to start from an overarching strategy and policy that is supply driven, looking at competitive identity, as opposed to demand driven. Does that mean that the link between place marketing and place branding is lost? Of course not. Place branding should inform place marketing and function as a strategic compass. One needs to think about how tourism, export or investment policy can contribute to building a strong 'corporate brand'. While devising product-market combinations that build on the brand, it is probably a good idea to think about who might be interested and who is likely to listen to any messages that are sent out. That is good marketing: to think about what the target audience is, for product development, distribution and engagement, but maybe not so much at strategic level, when thinking about place brand purpose. Therefore, place branding is clearly linked to place marketing, but also a separate field of study and practice in its own right.

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