Destination Brand Building

May 30

2014

Certified Destination Management Executive Program
Final Exam: Investigative Paper
By: Leah G. Chandler

Leah Chandler
CDME Final Exam: Investigative Paper
May 30, 2014

Destination Brand Building

Introduction & Background

Building, growing, and maintaining a brand is a critical process for every business and organization. A destination is no exception. But what is a brand? What defines a brand? Who defines a brand?

Through my growing experience in destination marketing and extensive reading about and studying of the subject, I have learned that successful brands have many common traits. Regardless of industry, similar roadmaps are often used in achieving success as a brand. This report will examine the traits of successful destination brands, as well as the brand development and positioning process many destinations follow.

Even among destinations, there are several brand directions or routes that can be taken. A high-level, over-arching brand, or "place brand" is typically built and executed by a town or city, and is often used to identify many levels of city operation. A place brand could be used for tourism, but may also be used for economic development, education, transportation, etc. (Baker, 2012). An example of a place brand might be the state of Kentucky. Kentucky established a brand position through popular vote, building on the awareness of and existing equity in the state's horse racing heritage. The Commonwealth of Kentucky adopted "Unbridled Spirit" in 2004 and has incorporated it into everything from letterhead to state highway signage. (Kentucky Department of Tourism, 2013).

A destination brand, which seems to be the most widely executed type of branding in US destination marketing, is typically referred to as a "tourism brand." The intent of a tourism brand is to make a destination seem appealing to travelers, and build awareness in the minds of consumers. Tourism brands are typically the result of an organized effort to communicate a destination's unique selling point to potential visitors. A specific tourism brand is usually more successful in promoting a destination than a "place brand," because tourism brands can be focused and direct. There are many examples of tourism brands, both successful and disastrous. An example of a successful tourism brand might be Las Vegas, who, after a failed attempt at marketing the destination as "family friendly," repositioned the city more authentically as an oasis of adult freedom. (Baker, 2012)

In Baker's (2012) book, a "tourism brand," is described as the totality of thoughts, feelings, and expectations that people hold about a location. It's the reputation and the enduring essence of the place and represents its distinctive promise of value, providing it with a competitive edge.

In some cities, separate brands are developed for economic development, built to encourage business growth and investment. A "community brand" might also be a direction adopted by cities in order to grow or enhance community pride and local patronage.

And finally, "thematic branding" is another type of destination identification that typically caters to niche product or a niche audience. Examples of thematic branding might include a wine trail, a golf trail, or a historical district. (Baker, 2012).

Analysis

Mark and Pearson (2001) describe a brand as "a repository…not merely of functional characteristics, but of meaning and value" (p. 1). The authors go on to note that "Identities that succeed at striking an essential human chord affect the most fundamental economic measures of success" (p. 30). It is clear through these descriptions, and others that will be discussed later, that a brand is much more than a logo and a tagline.

An archetypal brand history is described and referenced by Mark and Pearson (2001) as being the first system ever for the management of meaning. This system, hardwired into our psyches, is borrowed from ancient Greek and Roman ideas, where archetypes formed the basis of myths, in which they were depicted as gods and goddesses. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, who developed the concept of archetypes, described them as "Forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as individual products of unconscious origin." (Mark & Pearson, 2001, p. 4). Simply stated, an archetype allows marketers to assign meaning and emotion to products, which can draw a clearer link to consumer motivation.

Archetypes described in "The Hero and the Outlaw," include Creator, Caregiver, Ruler, Jester, Regular Guy/Gal, Lover, Hero, Outlaw, Magician, Innocent, Explorer and Sage. These archetypes possess clear definitions that can be assigned to products, helping to mine out deeper meaning in those products. For example, the primary function of the "Innocent" archetype is to retain or renew faith. A product example of an Innocent might be Ivory soap, or Volkswagen. In the current brand repositioning process taking place within the Branson CVB, Branson as a destination has been identified as an Innocent. With Branson's reputation as a wholesome, family-friendly, faith-based, patriotic vacation choice – it is easy to see how this archetype was assigned. Another archetype described by Mark and Pearson is the "Outlaw," defined as a rule-breaker. Harley-Davidson would fall under this archetype. Las Vegas might be a destination that would be assigned the Outlaw archetype. These are only a few examples, illustrating how a

brand archetype goes beyond fulfilling rational needs for consumers, and instead, seeks to provide consumers with meaningful experiences in their everyday life, with everyday products.

The meaning of a brand is an irreplaceable asset that in many ways eclipses the function of a product, service, or in our case, a destination. Meaning sparks an emotional affinity, which allows rational arguments to be heard.

In the early days of consumerism, products were simply products. In Trout and Reis' book (2001), it was noted that supermarkets at that time had over 12,000 individual products or brands on display. Recent statistics from the Food Marketing Institute count the average number of items sold in a grocery store in 2012 at 42,686 (Food Marketing Institute, 2012). And certainly there are an untold number of products for sale on Amazon.com. The choices consumers have when purchasing a product (or choosing a destination) are seemingly endless, and continue to grow. How do we decide? While many consumers and travelers are driven by price, recommendation and convenience, they are also persuaded by how a brand makes them feel – the emotional benefits (real or perceived), that come with their choice.

When there were fewer products, it was easy to stand apart. A product used to have the luxury of being chosen based on its functionality only. As competition has grown – not only for physical space on a shelf – but for space in consumers' minds, it is becoming increasingly difficult for brands to gain traction.

One important distinction for marketers to make and share with their stakeholders is how a brand differs from a position.

How many times have we heard a colleague say, "We are going to rebrand our destination?" Or, "We're going through a rebranding." This is quite common. Branding is often seen as an activity you "do," as opposed to who you "are." Like the words "content" and "social," the word "brand" has been bandied about so carelessly, that over time, it has lost its meaning, and in many cases, has surely confused or misguided marketers.

As much as meaning and emotion define a product or destination brand, positioning sells it. The basic approach of positioning is not to create something new and different, but to manipulate what is already in consumers' minds (Trout & Ries, 2001). Put another way, positioning calls for not only manipulating consumer mindsets, but building memory structure (Sharp, 2010). Today's marketplace, specifically North America, is under a communication attack. In 2013, it was projected that total media ad spending per person in the US would reach $540, second highest in the world, only behind Norway (eMarketer, 2013). This makes a marketer's job increasingly difficult, and only underscores the importance of fostering a brand that is differentiating and positioned in a way that delivers the best chance for breaking through the clutter.

Creating a differentiated advantage for a brand is often thought to be the hallmark of successful branding. Because we live in a cluttered, over-communicated society, it is not enough for a brand to simply say it's different, it truly has to deliver a product, service or experience that can stand apart from the pack.

In destination marketing we find that many towns, cities and even states, want to be "all things to all people." This is a common trap in destination marketing. Not all aspects of a destination are going to appeal to every single person in a destination's target audience. Similarly, not all assets are going to resonate as important to local industry members. The key is to lead with the most compelling message that will best attract, motivate and satisfy the widest reach of the targeted audience. Marketing a destination as a catch-all not only waters down public perception of a destination, but in the long run, can seriously compromise the value of the brand overall.

Many destinations struggle with this component of branding. It is easy to understand why. As many destinations are not-for-profits, are funded through private partnerships, and/or are funded via public dollars, most destination marketing organizations (DMOs) serve multiple masters. Politics often play a large role in developing, positioning and launching a destination brand. In an effort to serve local politics, destinations sometimes end up diluting the message that the most important audience (consumers) were meant to receive. Additionally, destination marketers often attempt to reach a variety of audience segments. Some destinations claim to target Boomers, Girlfriends, Couples, Families, GLBT, and in some cases, even more audiences. This approach typically leads to spreading the brand message so thinly, that it becomes irrelevant to all audiences. Successful branding starts with a differentiated advantage that is highly relevant to a targeted market and is sustainable over time. (McGhie, 2012)

A destination's strengths or competitive assets can be both tangible and intangible. Tangible assets are the easiest to identify. One destination might have the world's largest rocking chair and another destination might have a world-class opera house. Other destinations can easily be called to mind as the "first," "best" or "only." However, many towns and cities might be known for the way they make visitors feel. While at first blush, these "intangibles" might not seem own-able, it is clear that many strong brands have been built on things like culture, heritage, traditions, and ambiance. Cities like Santa Fe, New Mexico and Austin, Texas come to mind when I think of these traits.

Understanding what makes a destination different may be simple in some cases. Some destinations possess unique attractions, may be known for something famous, or may be in a highly desirable location. However, as is probably the case with most tourism markets, further consumer research may be needed to mine out important insights that can help differentiate a destination.

Research is a critical component to better understanding a destination's brand, and ultimately, developing expressions of that brand (or a brand identity) that will resonate with the proper audiences. There is no silver bullet or magical formula when it comes to developing a strong brand. However, armed with relevant research, destination marketers can make balanced, educated decisions about the brand's ultimate direction. Research is a step that is often skipped because of perceivably small budgets and/or because marketers have already set their minds on a direction for the brand – a gut feeling. The decision to forego brand research has the potential to lead to backlash not only from local tourism stakeholders and consumers, but also from the media. Conducting research – both qualitative and quantitative, can provide much-needed ammunition for destinations when faced with questions (and in some cases, accusations) from these sources.

A destination does not choose what its brand is. A brand is decided by the marketplace. This makes consumers' opinions even more important. Several brand measurements can be gauged through research. Some primary research methods might include the following: 1) Assessing the value and equity of the current brand, 2) Measuring perceptions and attitudes about the destination from both visitors and non-visitors, 3) Understanding the competition, 4) Selecting and testing taglines and logos, and 5) Monitoring brand health and performance. Secondary research is also helpful, and is typically easier to collect and much more cost effective. Secondary research` might include: 1) Local, regional and national trends, 2) Relevant studies and statistics that might be available through media partners, and 3) Social media and user-generated sites. (Baker, 2012).

And while consumers' opinions and perceptions of a destination are imperative, it is also important to get the feedback and opinions of the local tourism industry and stakeholders. Ultimately, a CVB or DMO will need the buy-in from local stakeholders in order for a brand to succeed. This is easier to accomplish if stakeholders are involved in the process from the beginning and have had their voices heard. This type of information can be gathered via community or stakeholder "town hall" forums, or via surveys. Small stakeholder focus groups can also be useful during this step.

Communication to these parties must be clear, concise, and research-based if at all possible. Presentations, one-on-one meetings, and organizational communication vehicles (email blasts, web portals, etc.) are vital steps in educating these important constituents. Once a brand's direction is clear, it must also be communicated to vendors, partners, politicians and any other parties who might have occasion to interact with the brand, and more importantly, who may play a role in interacting with your guest.

A company or organization cannot expect a brand to thrive and survive in the public alone. A brand must be nurtured and activated internally if there is any hope that it would grow in the

minds and hearts of consumers. In McGhie's (2012) book, it is stated that a brand position "distills, focuses and bottles the essence of who and what you can be on your very best day" (p. 44). The brand must be authentic to the people who are expected to live it every day – those inside the organization. It must be believable and genuine – and more than a statement on a piece of paper handed out at a staff meeting. A destination's brand must be experienced, felt, and reinforced by those who are responsible for selling that brand to groups, individual tourists, meetings, conventions, sporting events and more.

An organization's internal culture must embody the brand. This is a critical component to receiving buy-in and adoption from internal staff, and even the local tourism industry. As with many new processes and programs, the brand must be championed by senior management and organization leaders. If the team at the top does not rally behind a brand and its meaning and purpose, it is unlikely that other team members will be convinced. It is even less likely that consumers will be convinced. Providing the necessary background information, clear direction, and helping team members understand their role in the process, will greatly assist in guiding an organization through this type of change (Heath, 2010).

McGhie (2012) notes that another step to activating a brand internally is "operationalizing the strategy." This is often a difficult component of internal brand adoption. Marketers tend to view most, if not all strategies through the eyes of consumers, anticipating their response and action. However, for a brand to truly take root, organizations must find ways to bring it to life in day-to-day operations. How is the brand expressed through the aesthetics of the office? How are the brand's characteristics built into hiring practices and annual reviews? How is the brand infused into sales efforts? These are just a few important questions that a destination organization must ask as a brand is developed and/or repositioned. Without answers to these and other important questions, it's easy to see how a brand could fizzle, or fail to catch on internally, which could lead to lackluster adoption externally as well.

A strong brand should have room to grow. While it must be true and genuine, it must also be positioned for future development and aspirations. Communities are constantly evolving. Like a product, a destination continually experiences changes, updates, and improvements. If a brand is developed with only the current customer and tourism product in mind, a destination will be forced to constantly reevaluate, reform, and reposition the brand. This would not only be monetarily costly, but would be costly in terms of brand awareness and brand equity, likely confusing consumers. When a brand is developed and fostered with the future in mind, there is room for trends and developments that could have an impactful effect on both the destination and the brand. (Baker, 2012)

Conclusion

Hundreds of steps could be listed that might lead to a successful brand. But in the end, the single key to a winning brand is connecting meaningfully with your consumers (Roberts, 2005). Studying the competition, conducting research, onboarding stakeholders, and hiring fancy agencies will only get you halfway there. Science is only part of the equation. Emotion is the second half. Understanding how guests feel about your destination, and imaginatively capturing that feeling in a differentiated brand, will create a message that truly rises above the noise.

Executive Summary

Thousands of books have been written on branding; several have been written specifically on destination branding. Within these resources, similar themes continue to resonate, and guide marketers in developing compelling brands. A brand must be authentic and genuine. Those closest to the brand must be able to honestly say, "Yes, that is us." The brand position must somehow differentiate a destination from its competition. The destination organization must be able to execute the brand consistently. And finally, the brand position must be sustainable, and stand the test of time.

Reference List

1. Baker, B. (2012). *Destination Branding for Small Cities*. (2nd ed.). Portland, Oregon: Creative Leap Books.

2. eMarketer. (2013). *US Stays Atop Global Ad Market, but Others Rank Higher per Capita.* Retrieved from http://www.emarketer.com/Article/US-Stays-Atop-Global-Ad-Market-Others-Rank-Higher-per-Capita/1010248

3. Food Marketing Institute. (2012). *Supermarket Facts.* Retrieved from https://www.fmi.org/research-resources/supermarket-facts

4. Heath, C., & Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard.* New York, New York: Broadway Books.

5. Kentucky Department of Tourism. (2013). *Kentucky Unbridled Spirit.* Retrieved from http://kentucky.gov/about/Pages/unbridledspirit.aspx

6. Mark, M., & Pearson, C.S. (2001). *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes.* New York, New York: McGraw Hill.

7. McGhie, A. (2012). *Brand is a Four Letter Word.* Charleston, South Carolina: Advantage.

8. Roberts, K. (2005). *Lovemarks: Future Beyond Brands.* Brooklyn, New York: PowerHouse Books.

9. Sharp, B. (2010). *How Brands Grow.* South Melbourne, Australia: Oxford University Press.

10. Trout, J. & Ries, A. (2001). *Positioning: How to be Seen and Heard in the Overcrowded Marketplace.* New York, New York: McGraw Hill.