

Place Branding: Are we wasting our time? Report of an AMA special session.

Dominic Medway¹, Kathryn Swanson², Lisa Delpy Neirotti³, Cecilia Pasquinelli⁴, Sebastian Zenker⁵

This is a pre-proof version of this accepted paper. The citation for the final version of the paper is: Medway, D., Swanson, K., Delpy Neirotti, L., Pasquinelli, C., & Zenker, S. (2015). Place branding: are we wasting our time? Report of an AMA special session. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 8(1), 63-68.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-12-2014-0028>

Manchester Business School^{1&2}

Booth Street West

Manchester

M15 6PB

UK

dominic.medway@mbs.ac.uk

kathryn.swanson@mbs.ac.uk

N.B. At the time of publication Medway was affiliated to Manchester Business School; he is now affiliated to the Institute of Place Management and Manchester Metropolitan University

d.medway@mmu.ac.uk

Department of Management, Tourism, Tourism and Hospitality Management³

The George Washington University School of Business

2201 G Street NW

Duquès Hall

Washington

DC 20052

USA

delpy@gwu.edu

GSSI Cities – Gran Sasso Science Institute⁴

Via Francesco Crispi 7

67100 L'Aquila

Italy

cecilia.pasquinelli@gssi.infn.it

N.B. At the time of the conference Pasquinelli was affiliated to Uppsala University, which funded the author's conference attendance.

Department of Marketing⁵
Copenhagen Business School
Solbjerg Plads 3C, 3rd floor
DJ-2000 Frederiksberg
Denmark
sze.marktg@cbs.dk

Pre-proof version

Preamble

On Saturday August 2nd 2014 a special session, entitled 'Place branding: Are we wasting our time?', was held at the American Marketing Association's Summer Marketing Educators' Conference in San Francisco. Taking a move away from the standard paper delivery format, the deliberately provocative title of the session formed the motion for an Oxford-style debate with two opposing teams of two persons - one team supporting and one team opposing the motion. The opening speaker on each team had ten minutes to put their case across, and the closing speaker eight. Teams took to the stand alternately, with opening speakers (Medway vs. Zenker) matching up against each other's arguments, followed by closing speakers (Delpy Neirotti vs. Pasquinelli). Team members were chosen a few weeks beforehand by the Chair of the debate (Swanson). Membership of the team supporting or opposing the motion had nothing to do with team members' views; indeed, this was purely an intellectual exercise. At the end of the debate, the Chair took a vote on the winning team from the small audience. An open discussion then took place on what the debate had taught us. Below, key aspects of arguments put forward in support of the motion are presented in brief, followed by those opposing it. This report concludes by reflecting on what was learnt from this special session, primarily in terms of place branding theory and practice, but also in relation to this competitive debating format as a means for exploring academic ideas and concepts in our field.

Supporting the motion: "Yes, we are wasting our time"

Support for the motion kicked off with the suggestion that applying classic marketing concepts to a place context is fraught with difficulty (see for example, Ashworth, 1993; Kavaratzis, 2007), and this is especially true where branding is concerned. Nevertheless, it was suggested that place marketing practitioners often appear to believe that they can treat a place like a conventional product and a place name (a toponym) like a brand name and then, even worse, attach a series of supposed brand values to that toponym (often with minimal consultation with place stakeholders – especially residents of the place in question). It was suggested that this toponymic commodification can result in some superficial and potentially patronising place sloganising, often at odds with external and, especially, internal perceptions of the place in question; and in many cases beyond any excuse of supposed comic irony. Examples were provided which acknowledged the US conference venue, and included: 'Kansas – As big as you think' (does it matter if you don't think); 'Delaware – It's good being first' (well that depends what for - there are some things where you might want to be last). And perhaps best of all, or maybe worst of all, (and also found on the state license plates): 'Idaho – Famous potatoes'.

Another identified problem with treating place names as brands is the belief that the toponym can be simply switched or changed to meet place marketing goals, such as improving place image or increasing inward investment and tourism spend. An example given of such toponymic rebranding

was the new name of 'Noho' for the London district of Fitzrovia north of Soho. This attempt to rename and rebrand the place has been promoted by property developers within the area, who argue it's reflective of new urban regeneration (Davis, 2008). The team supporting the motion suggested that a fundamental problem with commodifying places in this manner, and seeing them as a 'thing' that can be branded, is that it denies the very agency that has made such places what they are. Echoing this line of argument, the views of a local councilor for Fitzrovia, Rebecca Hossack, were quoted. She has said that Noho means nowhere to her, suggesting it is a word, name and brand "*which has nothing to do with community... [and is] like putting a big white paint brush over something that's incredibly delicate and has been... woven together over hundreds of years.*" (Davis, 2008).

In this sense, it was suggested that the biggest problem with place branding and associated practices, such as toponymic commodification and place-related sloganising, is that they automatically constrain the possible perceptive versions of a place by starting to delimit parameters around what it should look and 'feel' like via powerful and influential brand positioning tools such as brand values and brand personality. Thus, as Medway and Warnaby (2014: 164) have suggested: "*place branding campaigns, in an effort to project one universal reality (or hyperreality) of the place product to relevant audiences, often end up suppressing (albeit unintentionally) a place's eclecticism and natural distinctiveness. In truth, places typically remain much more disordered in the way they serve the needs of their consumers, in essence performing the oft-cited 'place marketing' role of being multisold at one and the same time to multiple audiences.*" It is problematic, therefore, if place branding activity reaches only some of those audiences.

The team supporting the motion summed up their argument by suggesting that place branding is not something any individual or agency needs to do, because it happens anyway; and in this sense to do it is 'wasting our time'. In addition, where place branding activity does not connect with many of its target audiences (see above), it is arguably a waste of public money too - money which some have argued might be better spent on the place and its people directly (Elliott and Delpy Neirotti, 2008). Thus, the supporting team presented the notion of place branding purely as an organic concept born out of the widest possible participation – residents, tourists, communities, etc. - or put another way, people. This is a 'bottom-up' as opposed to 'top-down' perspective, in which if place brands emerge at all it is merely as a consequence or by-product of naturally occurring, co-created processes involving a full range of stakeholders, rather than deliberate branding effort by 'so-called' place marketing professionals. Such a view draws explicitly on social constructionist and phenomenological perspectives on place (Cresswell, 2004).

Opposing the motion: “No, we are not wasting our time”

The team opposing the motion started with a reminder of the size of the challenge that place branding faces, both as a concept and a practice. *“There are more than 300 cities in the world with over a million inhabitants, and all those cities want to be the most attractive. In Europe there are more than 500 regions and 100,000 different kinds of communities competing individually for the same jobs, investments and talented experts.”* (Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009: 3). Given such observations, the opposing team argued that it should come as no surprise that competition amongst places for tourists, investors, companies, new citizens, and most of all qualified workforce, has risen strongly in the past decades (Zenker *et al.*, 2013). The fact that place marketers increasingly try to establish places as brands, and employ brand positioning practices to help promote their place to its different target groups, was proposed as a logical outcome of this competitive place environment. Furthermore, whilst there is an argument that place branding activity can waste public money (see above), the opposing team argued that the image of a place is often built through stereotypes and commonsense narratives, and that investment in place branding was the most effective way of altering these if they are perceived negatively by potential or existing place users.

Although there was clear agreement by the opposing team that place marketing practice needs (and perhaps even wants) place branding, there was also an echo of the supporting team’s argument in the suggestion that place marketers may erroneously believe that the place brand is controllable and fully manageable, thus disregarding the inherent complexity that characterises place products with their multitude of stakeholder interests. For instance, attention to counter-branding (Jensen, 2007; Greenberg, 2008) as an intrinsic part of place brand building witnesses a commitment to an understanding of place branding as going well beyond the ideas of coordination, alignment and strategic consistency. Indeed, it was suggested that theoretical and conceptual advances in our exploration and understanding of those complexities surrounding place branding may provide an important lesson, which can be fed back into the branding of more conventional products. Specifically, the increasing engagement of debates in place branding with a plurality of disciplines across the social sciences is an important reminder of the inherent political, social and geographical nature of all forms of product consumption, beyond places. In addition, the fact that a place brand can rarely stand alone, in the sense that it is always connected to other places through flows of resources and capital as well as to other brands such as product brands, person brands and corporate brands, points towards a notion of brand ecosystems where place is concerned. This may hold resonance for scholars and practitioners wishing to make sense of increasingly complex brand architectures in the worlds of consumer goods and services, often brought about by successive waves of merger and acquisition activity.

Reflection

In the audience vote at the end of the debate the team opposing the motion won. That said, there was an acknowledgement that the team supporting the idea that place branding is 'wasting our time' would always be 'swimming against the tide' when presenting at a major academic conference devoted to the subject of marketing. Nevertheless, the members of both teams were agreed that the process of the debate itself had been a constructive academic exercise. Specifically, through the presentation of two opposing arguments an area of 'common ground' was revealed in critiquing the nature of current place branding practice. Both teams arrived from a point of recognition that place branding, at present, is often inadequate; typically revealing itself as something that place branding practitioners 'do to a place', rather than something that 'emerges' from it in an organic manner via stakeholder groups such as residents, tourists, etc. (Braun *et al.*, 2013). From this latter perspective, places might be viewed as socially constructed and co-created products, endlessly re-developed and re-defined via the competing, ongoing and often simultaneous narratives of place consumers. This is a view in harmony with academic viewpoints in the critical place marketing field (e.g. Warnaby and Medway, 2013). Indeed, there has been considerable debate regarding the limits of place branding (Pasquinelli, 2010; Pasquinelli and Teräs, 2013) and whether a place can, in fact, be branded at all (Amujo & Otubanjo, 2012; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Such writers, by taking the stance identified by the opposing team and combining perspectives from across the social sciences (in particular those of geography and politics), imply that to 'tie' a place to one dominant narrative via centralised and imposed place branding activity (typical of town/ city centre management, local authorities and tourist agencies) suppresses the diversity that makes places different. At a theoretical level such developments have echoes of Ritzer's (2011) McDonaldization thesis. In more practical terms, place consumers who feel and maintain connections with a place outwith its projected brand image are more likely to feel marginalised. In summary, doing place branding badly creates a dominant but arguably 'inauthentic' narrative (Relph, 1976), which overwrites the realities of a given place arising from the potentially alternative discourses of its multifarious consumers.

If the above represented a point of agreement between the debating teams, the key point of difference centered on what should be done about it. In short, whilst both teams set out from the premise that much place branding activity is currently left wanting, the team supporting the motion presented this as evidence that the activity was not worth doing at all, whilst the opposing team argued that it provided an impetus to do things better. One would imagine, and hope, that most readers of this conference report would side with the latter view, or there would be little justification for this journal's existence. In truth, outside the confines of the debate and the desire to win an argument, even if it meant playing devil's advocate, the team supporting the motion was also of this opinion.

To conclude, a key task for place marketing academics should be finding ways to make branding work better for places. If this means allowing place brands to develop as more inclusive and organic entities, then it will require us to provide the evidence to relevant audiences as to why it may be best for place practitioners to avoid creating and imposing a place brand and instead help shape it from the views of stakeholder constituencies. This shifts the notion of place branding from an activity of 'imposition' to one of 'curation'. If a competitive debate is a format for exploring the potential of this shift, then it is one we should encourage and embrace in the future. Furthermore, conducting that debate between disciplines in the social sciences might reveal some interesting contrasts in viewpoint.

References

- Amujo, O. C., & Otubanjo, O. (2012). Leveraging rebranding of 'unattractive' nation brands to stimulate post-disaster tourism. *Tourist Studies*, 12(1), 87-105.
- Ashworth, G. (1993) 'Marketing of places: What are we doing?', in *Urban Marketing in Europe*, Eds. G. Ave, F. Corsico. Torino Incontra: Turin. pp. 643-649.
- Braun, E., Kavaratzis, M., & Zenker, S. (2013): My city – my brand: the different roles of residents in place branding. *Journal of Place Management and Development*, 6(1): 18-28.
- Cresswell, T. (2004) *Place: A Short Introduction*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Davis, A. (2008) 'Noho? No way, this is Fitzrovia.' *London Evening Standard*, 6 March, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/noho-no-way-this-is-fitzrovia-6651554.html>
- Elliott, S. M., & Delpy Neirotti, L. (2008). Challenges of tourism in a dynamic island destination: The case of Cuba. *Tourism Geographies: An International Journal of Tourism Space, Place and Environment*, 10(3), 375-402.
- Greenberg, M. (2008) *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World*. Routledge: New York.
- Jensen, O.B. (2007) 'Brand Resistance and Counter Branding', in *Fun City*, Eds. M. Gitte, M. Zerlang. Arkitektens Forlag: Copenhagen. pp. 99-120.
- Kavaratzis, M. (2007) 'City marketing: The past, the present and some unresolved issues.' *Geography Compass*. 1(3): 695-712.
- Kavaratzis, M. and Ashworth, G. J. (2005) 'City branding: An effective assertion of identity or a transitory marketing trick?' *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 96(5): 506-514.
- Medway, D. and Warnaby, G. (2014) 'What's in a name? Place branding and toponymic commodification.' *Environment & Planning A*, 46(1): 153-167.
- Moilanen, T. and Rainisto, S. (2009) *How to Brand Nations, Cities and Destinations: A Planning Book for Place Branding*. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK.

- Pasquinelli, C. (2010) 'The limits of place branding for local development: The case of Tuscany and the Arnovalley brand.' *Local Economy*, 25(7): 558-572.
- Pasquinelli, C. and Teräs, J. (2013) 'Branding Knowledge-intensive Regions: A Comparative Study of Pisa and Oulu High-Tech Brands.' *European Planning Studies*, 21(10): 1611-1629.
- Relph, E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. Pion: London.
- Ritzer, G. (2011) *The McDonaldization of Society*, 6th Edition. Pine Forge Press: Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Warnaby, G. and Medway, D. (2013) 'What about the 'place' in place marketing?' *Marketing Theory*, 13(3): 345-363.
- Zenker, S., Eggers, F., & Farsky, M. (2013) Putting a price tag on cities: insights into the competitive environment of places. *Cities*, 30(February): 133-139.

Pre-proof version