

Chapter 5

Using Social Media for Participatory City Branding: The Case of @cityofizmir, an Instagram Project

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid explosion of Internet, social media has emerged as a new communication venue for city branding initiative. The aim of this chapter is to provide a deeper understanding of today's communication environment, and in particular, to focus the greater interactivity, engagement and responsiveness of resources in relation to city branding. Thus, this chapter firstly outlines the participatory city branding, which can be considered as an appropriate approach for involving wide range of stakeholders in promoting cities as brands. Secondly, the role of social media and its influential users are scrutinized to better present their importance for city branding. Following this, the examined Instagram campaign to promote the city of Izmir intends to allow greater insight into how to utilize online platforms in order to communicate a city both to its citizens and to global arena. And finally, the chapter leads to practical implications regarding how to benefit from social media for effective participatory city branding.

INTRODUCTION

The whole point of taking pictures is so that you don't have to explain things with words. (Elliott Erwitt¹)

The transformation of the communication environment occasioned by the advance of technology has affected brands and the branding processes. In the traditional sense, a brand is defined as “a shared desirable and exclusive idea embodied in products, services, places and/or experiences” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 13). In order to survive in today's highly competitive market environment, branding is considered to be one of the most essential strategies of any organization. Therefore, branding should be seen as a strategic management process that needs to be well-thought, well-designed and maintained to ensure

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the sustainability of the brand. The main aim of this managerial process, and also the indicator of its success, is to enhancement of 'brand equity' that is "the extra benefit enjoyed by the consumer above the bare utility value of the product" (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005, p. 509). Keller (1993, p. 1) conceptualizes the concept from the perspective of consumers saying that "brand equity occurs when the consumer is familiar with the brand and holds some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory". In a sense, brand equity enables brand managers to comprehend consumers' assessment of a brand (Ford, 2005).

Branding is no longer a simple logo or a tagline that refers to a meaning in the mind of target groups; rather it is a mindset that includes the development of a brand identity, a brand differentiation, and a brand personality (Aaker, 1996). Furthermore, it incorporates overall efforts aiming to create strong bonds and to develop relationship between the brand and its target audiences, stemming from mutual interaction. As indicated by Merz, He and Vargo (2009, p. 338), brand value is "co-created through network relationships and social interactions among the ecosystem of all stakeholders".

Recent developments in the Internet, and particularly its emerging phenomenon, social media, can be considered an effective approach to meeting the need for this interaction. Larson identifies social media as "the newest and most actively engaging forum for customer and company interaction" (2009, p. 4). These communication platforms provide individuals with the means to generate content, interact with others, and exchange information in different forms, such as picture, words, video, and audio (Safko & Brake, 2009; Mulhern, 2009).

There has been a noticeable increase in the global competition between cities to appeal to local and global tourist, to encourage new investment and to attract talented individuals. Thus, as Dinnie (2011, p. 3) pointed out, "the concepts of brand strategy are increasingly adopted from the commercial world and applied in pursuit of urban development, regeneration and quality of life". Like the marketers of many other products and services, city authorities have recognized the importance of social media in enabling the engagement of stakeholders. One of the main responsibilities of these authorities is to develop a destination which satisfies its members and stakeholders, and encourage their engagement. As social media provide a platform for interaction with consumers (Mulhern, 2009), it "can be considered a valuable tool for engaging with consumers, who are now demanding a much greater degree of interaction with businesses" (Uzunoğlu & Öksüz, 2012, p. 271).

When used strategically and creatively, social media platforms, such as Instagram, can provide both inhabitants and other stakeholders with a novel experience of the city from a digital perspective. Acknowledging that people increasingly "... tend to rely on messages and recommendations from other individuals, rather than depending upon information from organizations" (Misci Kip & Uzunoğlu, 2015, p. 175), it will be appropriate for city branding managers to utilize Instagram in order to engage with stakeholders, construct their brand and simultaneously convey relevant messages in a participatory manner.

Participatory City Branding through Social Media

In a world in which brand domination permeates in every aspect of our lives, cities are also inevitably subject to branding activities. City branding is characterized as "the use of various marketing practices to promote a place's attractiveness for business, tourists, residents and students" (Andersson & Ekman, 2009, p. 41).

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