


Chapter 2

Cluster Branding: The Art of Communicating Innovation

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ABSTRACT

Innovation economies are a departure from traditional modes of development. Where the latter privileges activities like resource extraction and infrastructure construction, the former emphasizes less material approaches such as knowledge-building and talent creation. In its drive to become a knowledge-based economy, Dubai may face challenges of perceptual legitimacy in its newly formed innovation clusters. At the same time, however, a strength of image bulwarks its established clusters like finance and logistics. This chapter summarizes best practices and existing theory on cluster branding, briefly examines several innovation clusters in Europe and the United States, and finally ruminates on the opportunities and challenges faced by Dubai in creating strong brands that communicate innovation.

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INTRODUCTION

Michael Porter (1990) defined the early contours of what would become known as “innovation clusters” — networks of geographically co-positioned and thematically related companies and institutions that, through collaboration and competition, could produce greater results as a group than they could individually. The drivers for cluster development have been well-documented. Autio, Chaminade, et al. (2016) include among them “skills, accommodating policy framework, infrastructure, low cost structures (in early stages), a good lifestyle offering and serendipity.” To that hexad of innovation drivers, however, perhaps we can add a seventh —effective branding.

A brand represents a “shared reality” (Ballantyne and Aitken 2007, 365), or how we collectively perceive a product, person, or place. It is a method of distilling a complex set of ideas into a simple and easily understood image. Cluster branding, therefore, is about the creation of a recognizable and enduring image for an innovation cluster.

Dubai, the subject of this volume, is not a single, self-contained cluster. Rather, it is a panoply of clusters. It does not project one image of itself. Rather, it is a city of images. Each of its clusters magnifies a different and unique brand to its residents, customers, and investors, all of which ultimately feed into the larger place brand of Dubai.

In this chapter, we examine the function and theory of cluster branding and its importance to both the individual companies and institutions that form the cluster brand, as well as the place brand in which the cluster sits. We then briefly explore Dubai’s innovation clusters, juxtapose them against clusters in other regions, and finally ruminate on how or if the brands projected by Dubai’s clusters contribute towards innovation and entrepreneurship in this “city of images.”

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