

Chapter 5.5

City Brands and their Communication through Web Sites: Identification of Problems and Proposals for Improvement

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ABSTRACT

City marketing tries to position cities in the mind of the public, although the process of creating and communicating city brands is still at an early stage of its development. One of the main tools for the communication of these brands is now the World Wide Web. This chapter describes the results of two combined studies (qualitative and quantitative) that analyzes a sample of official city Web sites. The results show that official Web sites of cities give much attention to ease of navigation, but interactivity is much less implemented, especially between users. Furthermore, some lack of attention to the communication aspects of city brands can also be found. Finally, the chapter submits a number of improvement proposals.

INTRODUCTION

In the current world of cities, competition has increased and the centre of interest has moved to include much broader spheres. Already, cities do not try only to be just significant tourist nuclei, but they also compete in aspects such as quality of life, economic development and sustainability. Aside from tourist interest, cities try to position themselves as comfortable areas to live and important centers of economic development that attract all types of investment.

To achieve this, it is necessary to know the opinions and evaluations of the publics (Prebensen, 2007)¹, to find out what image they have of the city and determine the positioning that it would be desirable to achieve. Therefore, a vision of the city must be formulated and, consequently, a program of identity must be created that is transmitted through a brand and a visual logo and, later, an adequate and effective communication program must be

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run. With this objective, citymarketing tries to position cities in the minds of the public. In spite of this, the process of creating and disseminating city brands is still in a very early stage of its development.

This chapter tries to show, on one hand, that the concept and application of city brands are still very incipient and, on the other hand, that the official websites, in part due to city brands being underdeveloped, do not pay enough attention to the dissemination of the graphic, functional, and emotional aspects of the brand. With this, there is still a long way to go in the dissemination of cities through their brands on the Internet.

THE CONCEPT OF CITY BRAND

The concept of brand applied to destinations, places or cities is relatively new. It started to spread with the Travel and Tourism Research Association's Annual Conference in 1998 (Blain, Levy & Brent Ritchie, 2005). From that moment, the concept has been developed widely and has been studied from diverse perspectives, especially from the point of view of tourism. All in all, studies on city brands and destinations are still under developed and knowledge on the subject is limited. Some authors consider that it's not correct to talk about branding or place branding in relation to territories, cities or countries. They believe that it is incorrect to associate communicational and marketing terms to realities with their own identity like cities. Nevertheless, the majority of authors appreciate that the territories and the cities do not have the same characteristics as commercial products, but agree that they can apply the same marketing strategies to the territories (Olins, 2002).

The first difficulty we come up against in the study of city brands is the confusion of concepts. Therefore, it is fundamental to distinguish between city brand and brand image (Cai, 2002). Many studies confuse the analysis of the brand image

with the brand itself and the branding done by the destination.

The city brand is a new concept and is not very well defined. It is currently very much in fashion, and many people have theories, but few have dared to define it. It is a construct composed of a name, a logo, some symbols and some values that we try to associate with a city, representing its identity, with the objective of creating a position and a vision of the city in the minds of the public. Each city must have its own brand, and each city brand must be the result of a citymarketing plan and a competitive city strategy.

A very complete definition of destination brand, fully applicable to the city brand, which is based on the previous definitions of Aaker (1991) and Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) is that of Blain, Levy and Brent Ritchie (2005), which implies:

The creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identify and differentiate a destination; that convey the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; and that serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; that reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk; all with the intent purpose of creating a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice. (p. 337)

However, the brand image is the result of the branding process, which is the perception created in the minds of individuals. It is “*networks of knowledge elements stored in long-term memory, and the core of such a network is the brand name which is linked to a number of other knowledge elements and/or associations*” (Riezebos, 2003).

As confirmed by Bill Baker:² “*A destination without a clear and attractive brand image is like a person without a personality. They blend into the crowd, are seen as uninteresting, and don't get the attention they deserve*”.

As consequence of this dichotomy between

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