Branding Communities Calls for a Different Approach

by Bill Baker, President, Total Destination Management

At times the branding of destinations requires a somewhat different approach than that generally used for the branding of corporate products and services. One of the reasons for this is the composite nature of communities, i.e. they are usually a compilation of many independent and competing businesses, products, and experiences owned and managed by many different organizations with no single owner or brand custodian. For most cities this involves projecting and delivering a unified brand experience through the commitment of many competing brands, such as attractions, hotels, and restaurants.

Branding cities frequently requires an approach that must be more accommodating and conciliatory to that found in the branding of consumer products. Being too specific with the positioning of a city may unintentionally alienate some stakeholder groups. The objective should be to create an "umbrella brand" that will positively resonate with key stakeholder groups and encourage their adoption and use of the strategy.

However, in doing this, care must be taken not to dilute the positioning to the point where the city loses its competitive edge, and ends up with a meaningless point of difference. The best outcome is where there is a clear essence from which all organizations marketing the city (chamber of commerce, city council, convention & visitors bureau, economic development agency) can all draw on this common DNA to project clear and compelling messages and images that are relevant to their individual markets.

Alhambra. CA

Unlike consumer products, cities are not discrete products like soft drinks or hamburgers. A city cannot be reformulated or terminated if it is not popular or is under-performing.

Cities generally have extremely limited budgets in comparison to the marketing resources at the disposal of many consumer

and service brands. Exacerbating the situation is the pressure from city stakeholders and the challenge of developing a simple positioning message from the diverse and complex matrix of city attributes and markets to be served.

Steamboat, CO

Crafting the positioning, brand platform, and Destination Promise™ that will be widely adopted and supported by stakeholders does not happen by accident. To achieve this, you may have to enhance their knowledge of branding, and carefully consider their opinions, ideas, and insights in order to weave the path to a meaningful brand.

A city brand must be able to stand the test of time, public debate, political scrutiny, media questions, and the analysis of marketing partners, as well as do the job that it was originally designed to perform. The best course is to generate key stakeholder buy-in and involvement from the start. Community-based brands can live or die on these vital early steps.

A constant challenge for city marketers is to balance the influence of particular individuals, organizations, and interest groups. Those who control the city's key experiences, products, and services must be closely consulted because they will ultimately be responsible for delivery of the brand experience. However, the strength of their appeal and finances should be balanced with the brand positioning and messages that may need to be in the greater community good.

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