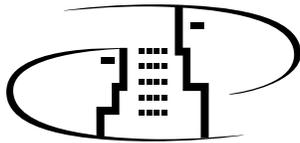


# Place Branding in Practice

Current issues for  
economic development professionals

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## Every place has a story. What's yours?

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Paris. Detroit. Beijing. What comes to mind when you think of these cities? If you are like most people, each place conjures up ideas about its culture, economic conditions and quality of life. For better or worse, there is no escaping the fact that your city or region is already making an impression on the market. The real question is how you, as an economic developer, can utilize place branding principles to shape and influence the way your city is perceived.

This white paper will explore the issue of place branding and its role in furthering your economic development priorities. We will discuss how branding a place differs from branding a product, outline the rationale for a branding initiative, and introduce five key factors of successful place branding in your city or region.

## Branding doesn't have to be a dirty word

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There is no shortage of horror stories about economic development branding initiatives that went awry or failed to gain momentum and support from key decision makers. We will explore the reasons for failed branding efforts in depth in a future white paper in this series, but for now it will suffice to say that we must not throw the brand baby out with the bathwater.

The truth is, a strong brand is absolutely critical to successful economic development. Whether you engage in it or not, your city has a brand, and smart economic

developers recognize the opportunity to actively define what that brand looks like. Later in this paper, we will offer practical advice for getting branding right in your community, but let's start by defining what branding is and what it is not.

## Branding defined

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A brand is not a logo. At best, a logo is a visual representation of a brand, but a brand is much, much more. In fact, many of the horror stories we alluded to in the last paragraph are the result of a failure to recognize the full scope of branding. The launch of a flashy logo and clever tagline is not a branding initiative. Rather, true branding must be derived from your core strategy for economic development. Your brand reflects your DNA – it is expressed in every interaction you have with your stakeholders, both formal and informal.

*"A place brand strategy requires a realistic, competitive and very compelling strategic vision for a city, region, or country, and needs to ensure that it is supported, reinforced and enriched by every act of communication between that place and the rest of the world. Every government and municipal department or local agency, local people and local companies must consistently communicate and demonstrate the same carefully developed brand."*<sup>1</sup>

For a brand to succeed it must be rooted in what is great and unique about a city. For example, if you want to brand yourself as the technology capital of Canada, then you must have the infrastructure, investment and skilled workforce to back that up. Otherwise your brand is little more than a tagline, and the experience of your city will not live up to the promise of the brand. In short, your brand must fall out of your economic

development strategy, which in turn must be built on your city's strengths and ambitions. Real branding is not an afterthought. It is a reflection of what your city is and why the market should take notice.

## What is unique about branding places?

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Although place branding uses many of the same techniques as more traditional product branding, there are some differences that are worth noting:

First, the requirements of the brand are more demanding. Unlike a brand for a product or a company, place brands must serve many different stakeholders and audiences. A strong brand must be flexible and versatile enough to apply to tourism, business development and to target specific sectors. It must accommodate the needs of multiple groups and communicate a number of ideas. It must do this without suffering the watering down that often results from trying to be all things to all people. This is a delicate balance to strike and one that is unique to the business of branding places.

Second, the development and management of the brand is decentralized and informal in place branding. There is no corporate marketing department that is bestowed with the power to define and control all aspects of the brand. Rather, place branding requires a high degree of coordination and cooperation. According to the Medinge Group:

*"Place brand partnerships are not like central government departments, or local government or private companies or voluntary, community and charitable*

*organizations. They are a hybrid form of organization. Their characteristics are determined by those who set them up, the purpose for which they were created and by those who form the team that leads the work of the partnership, the key stakeholders of the place. The form of partnership organization and operation is rarely a given. It has to be negotiated and agreed by those who are going to be involved. Brand partnership has to be worked at."*<sup>2</sup>

In our experience, failure to recognize the unique challenges of place branding can doom a city branding initiative. On the other hand, acknowledging and leveraging these factors increases the likelihood of a sustainable brand that enjoys community-wide support.

## Five ways to succeed with place branding

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The added complexities of place branding can be mitigated by employing the five best practices outlined below:

### 1. Be different from your competitors

Many economic development organizations fail to think about the competition when thinking about branding their communities. This is a tenet of traditional product branding that place marketers would be wise to observe. You must recognize that site selectors, businesses and workers are not looking at your city in isolation. It is one choice in a sea of options, and the only way to stand out is to think not just about what your city has to offer, but to think about what your city offers that is *different*.

As the International Economic Development Council (IEDC) points out:

*“Technically, your community may have the same strengths and assets as a number of others. The key is finding a differentiator in the mind of the client, and understanding site selection criteria so you can turn features such as transportation or education into distinct advantages.”*<sup>3</sup>

Don't be afraid to take a stand and commit to what makes you different. Many people shy away from this approach for fear of losing some of their potential audience, but the result of trying to be all things to all people is usually a “bland brand” that resonates with no one. Build your brand message around your competitive advantage.

## 2. Tell the truth

A British consultancy recently released a study that compared the brand strength of European cities.<sup>4</sup> The study looked at both the assets the city had to offer (e.g. culture, amenities etc.) as well as the current image of the city. In many cases, cities had assets that they were not leveraging, resulting in an image that was weaker than what the city had to offer in reality.

But in some cases, the opposite was true. Cities did a great job of selling an image that embellished (or worse) what the city offered in reality. This resulted in a city whose image was stronger than its actual assets. In short, these cities fail to live up to their own hype.

A sustainable economic development communications strategy requires the reality lives up to the perception. Identify your current assets, match them to an audience that values those assets and fill the gaps you need to attract sectors targeted in your economic development strategy. If you build it they will come. If you already have

it, they will come for that too. But if you are dishonest about it, they will come, see for themselves... and then they will promptly leave.

## 3. Get stakeholders excited about what really matters

Too often we see stakeholders being poorly utilized in the branding process. It's not uncommon to find a group of community leaders huddled around a conference table debating the merits of a red versus blue logo, rather than engaging with an overall strategy and vision. Get your stakeholders excited about what is really driving the branding exercise in the first place. This will garner lasting engagement that can be counted on well after the launch of the brand. The Medinge Group, a not-for-profit think tank of communications professionals, says that this type of approach:

*“...helps the key stakeholders of the place to chart a route towards realizing their shared vision for the development of the future offer of the place. It helps define the value that will be created for those stakeholders, for example through increased income generated by sports events or from retail sales, from increased investment in land and buildings, from job creation and from the creation of new services. It provides a decision making tool for shareholders to identify really 'on-brand' investments from among the many possibilities and opportunities on offer to them.”*<sup>5</sup>

When community leaders present a unified message, it is a clear indicator to site selectors and investors that this is a place that has its act together and will be easy to work with. Successful branding initiatives must have the support and buy-in of the city's leadership and spokespeople to succeed in the long term.

#### 4. Appoint ambassadors

A U.S. consultancy, Development Counsellors Inc., released the results of a survey of top executives responsible for site selection.<sup>6</sup> The survey has been conducted five times since 1996, and asks the question: “What sources of information influence your perception of a city’s business climate?” The top response was “Dialogue with industry peers”, with 61% of respondents citing it as a factor.

To take advantage of this channel in a formal way, many communities are creating ambassador programs as a component of their branding initiatives. The idea behind these programs is simple: In a world of too much information, a message has more credibility when it is delivered by a trusted source. Advice and personal experience from an industry peer can strengthen the brand of a community and reach deep into networks that economic development professionals may have a difficult time accessing. Structured ambassador programs ensure that professional networks become a forum to further promote your city’s brand.

#### 5. The launch is a beginning, not an end

It’s baffling to watch a community unveil a new logo and tagline as if it marks the completion of their re-branding initiative. Although the launch is a significant milestone, it is only the beginning of sustainable branding. This is where the hard work starts, where every communication must reinforce the brand, where every stakeholder must adopt and nurture it.

*“In traditional approaches to local and regional economic development, developing a brand for a place is still seen*

*too often in graphic design and slogan-led marketing terms, involving the design of an attractive logo and the coining of a catchy phrase. Rarely has the brand of a place been recognized as the summation of the way it operates, how it behaves and what it aspires to be and do. Even more rarely has branding a place been recognized as a key component of its overall economic development strategy to maintain its competitiveness and as a tool to help develop its people, companies and institutions.”<sup>7</sup>*

Communities that are successful have a strategy in place for sustaining momentum after the launch. They recognize that the true power of their brand lies in how they live it day to day.

## In Closing

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Place branding is quickly gaining recognition with economic development professionals. It is a platform to communicate and reinforce your city’s economic development strategy, and as such it must be defined by your priorities for development and by what differentiates your community. Whether you pay attention to branding or not, your audience still has a perception about your city. Smart economic developers are taking steps to influence these perceptions and use them to strengthen their overall strategy.

#### **About the Author**

*On Three Communication Design Inc. is a creative agency specializing in promoting places not products. For more information and insight, visit them at [www.onthree.ca](http://www.onthree.ca) or read the blog at <http://blog.onthree.ca>.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Agenda for Local Economic Development, February 2004. "Find a vision and dump the spinning". [http://www.placebrands.net/\\_files/placebrands\\_Agenda\\_Feb2004\\_FindaVision.pdf](http://www.placebrands.net/_files/placebrands_Agenda_Feb2004_FindaVision.pdf), accessed September 2008.
- 2 The Medinge Group, "The Journal of the Medinge Group". August 14, 2007. <http://medinge.org/journal/20070814/place-branding/>, accessed September 2008.
- 3 The International Economic Development Council. "What's in a Brand? Some Insights from the Experts". [http://www.iedconline.org/EDNow/031907/Branding.html\\_](http://www.iedconline.org/EDNow/031907/Branding.html_), accessed September 2008.
- 4 The Saffron Group. "The Saffron European Cities Barometer Report". August 2008.
- 5 The Medinge Group, "The Journal of the Medinge Group". August 14, 2007. <http://medinge.org/journal/20070814/place-branding/>, accessed September 2008.
- 6 Development Counsellors Inc. "A View from Corporate America: Winning Strategies in Economic Development Marketing". <http://www.aboutdci.com/WinningStrategies.aspx>, accessed September 2008.
- 7 Agenda for Local Economic Development, February 2004. "Find a vision and dump the spinning". [http://www.placebrands.net/\\_files/placebrands\\_Agenda\\_Feb2004\\_FindaVision.pdf](http://www.placebrands.net/_files/placebrands_Agenda_Feb2004_FindaVision.pdf), accessed

## About this White Paper Series

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