Guest Editorial

Special issue on places for people in a turbulent world

Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (2010) 6, 76–78. doi:10.1057/pb.2010.17

In a world where the values and stability of our financial and work environments are threatened daily, one thing remains relatively stable through the years and even generations: our sense of place. The greater the chaos, the more the people seek security of the places that they know and trust – the place brands. How can places compete against growing competition in times of economic downturn? The key challenge of place marketing and branding is that places are not products or corporations, and there is a widely held view that simply applying commercial marketing techniques to places may be inappropriate, inadequate and arguably ineffectual. This special issue illustrates, applies and comments on place branding and marketing strategies and consumer reactions.

In 2009, Brunel University invited academics, policymakers, town centre managers and other practitioners to submit papers to the 1st International Colloquium on Place Marketing and Branding, which was held on 24 and 25 September 2009 at Brunel Business School, Uxbridge, London, UK. Scholarly, conceptual, empirical, case study and practitioner papers were welcomed, but all papers had to address the practical implications of the findings. The papers in this special issue have been developed from the best papers presented at that colloquium.

The editors appreciate *all* of the submissions made and thank all of the

authors, regardless of whether their papers were accepted. Achieving the greatest impact for the special issue depends on the total quantum of contributions. Unfortunately, a number of quality papers could not be included because reviewers and editors considered that they did not quite match all of the stringent parameters required for *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*.

As Aram Eisenschitz argues in this issue, place marketing is often seen as a pragmatic activity aimed at bringing prosperity to specific places. Given the wider focus of this journal on the economic, social, political and cultural development of cities, regions and countries, it is therefore appropriate that the first three papers challenge the ‘old world’ narrow view. First, an opinion piece by Eisenschitz asserts that place marketing is an essentially political activity that demonstrates different political, or more accurately (in the author’s view), class settlements by its impact on places. Many place marketers (including at least one of the guest editors and reviewers) will not agree with Eisenschitz’s controversial claim that place marketing has been ‘particularly associated with gentrification which ... is a political strategy by which neo-liberalism takes control of the city’. Notwithstanding the specific political stance, the guest editors consider that, in line with Eisenschitz’s conclusion, for place marketing to move

forward from global recession, the political dimensions must take centre stage.

Having opened the papers in this special issue with a controversial interpretation of what constitutes place marketing, the second paper continues that trend but in a very different way. Chris Houliez pushes back the boundaries to encompass virtual places. Houliez explores image coherence of mixed realities environments *via* an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the online virtual world 'Second Life'. The author concludes that, when designing a service space – real, virtual or 'cross-world' – the resulting experienced space, even in the real world, is what will ultimately carry – or not – the branded message associated with a place.

Only one of the accepted papers concerns nation branding. Ying Fan again expands the horizons of the place branding discipline by emphasising the need to shift from 'branding' the nation to *nation image management*.

The remaining six papers concern towns and cities. The first of these, by Jim Northover, is our only accepted practitioner paper. It constitutes a relatively rare practical description and analysis of a branding programme, by a practitioner, responsible for the planning, execution and tracking. The recent branding programme for the city of Belfast provides a timely case study that seeks to demonstrate how even a history of conflict and division can be harnessed to provide a platform for city branding.

Next follows another innovative paper. Stephen Smith and Kate Darlington provide a double commentary, first on place branding and second on social science approaches to understanding feelings about places, in response to Anholt's plea for *substance and attention to policy* when developing local 'brand image' and 'brand equity' (Anholt, 2008). The arguments are supported with reference to striking comparisons between local authorities, which again demonstrate the importance of the political dimension.

Christoph Teller, Jonathan Elms, Jennifer Thomson and Andrew Paddison propose

antecedents of (retail related) place attractiveness. Their empirical study of an Austrian town demonstrates that the retail tenant mix and the atmosphere influence attractiveness most significantly. This paper, in common with each of those following, focuses on place users' perceptions as opposed to the more dominant theme in the discipline of place actors' strategic needs.

Continuing the European theme, Maria Lichrou, Lisa O'Malley and Maurice Patterson use a narrative methodology to examine the views of local stakeholders of the island of Santorini, Greece, in relation to their experience of the rapid transformation into a tourism destination. The paper again draws attention to the political challenges inherent in successful place branding. The findings demonstrate the value of 'progressive nostalgia' through a rediscovery of traditional customs and trades, while developing innovative expertise.

Grazyna Stachow and Cathy Hart investigate the formation of consumers' images of town centres from a place branding perspective. On the basis of qualitative methodology, the paper compares consumer perceptions of the shopping experience in three contrasting town centres in the United Kingdom. The findings indicate that town centre image is a complex construct incorporating four elements (cognitive, affective, social and physical) embodied within a customer experience framework.

The final paper by Charles Dennis, Richard Michon and Andrew Newman again investigates consumers' images of a town, this time utilising a quantitative methodology. The paper evaluates the segmented appeal of a town centre's separately branded environments that have differentiated brand images and appeal to different market segments of shoppers. The paper is novel in demonstrating the segmented appeal of digital signage (video screens) in contributing to the brand image of a town.

Although this special issue leaves much scope to continue research into the 'turbulent world'

theme, the guest editors hope that readers will enjoy and find useful the eclectic range of challenges to conventions of place marketing and branding that have surfaced from the turbulence.

Finally, the editors thank the reviewers and acknowledge their special role. Without them, nothing is possible. The detailed, constructive reviews provided a basis for substantially improving those papers that were finally accepted. The editors extend a big 'thank you' to all of the reviewers.

REFERENCE

- Anholt, S. (2008) Place branding: Is it marketing, or isn't it?
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Charles Dennis
Reader, Brunel University

T.C. Melewar
Professor of Marketing and Strategy,
Zurich University of Applied Sciences,
Switzerland