

Place branding: representing sense of place

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Abstract

Branding theory and techniques have been applied to places in order to promote economic development and to enhance the cultural differentiation of places. This research aims to identify attributes for developing a co-created place brand model. The attributes that people attach to place create the sense of place and the interactions between them are fundamental to developing a sustainable brand, enhancing authenticity and embracing place identity. Very little research has been done in terms of understanding the constructs that determine the sense of place in the marketing domain. This paper presents the constructs that determine the sense of place on the Chatham Islands, New Zealand.

Keywords: place branding, sense of place, place brand co-creation.

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Introduction

The concept of branding has been applied to places for a variety of purposes, for example to increase exports, attract new investments (Kotler and Gertner, 2002, Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002, Anholt, 2005), and develop tourism destinations (Gnoth, 2002, Hall, 1999, Morgan *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, place branding is also recognized as a tool to enhance the cultural differentiation of places (Gnoth, 2007, Freire, 2005), and is understood as a complex process involving people and communities (Gilmore, 2002, Hall, 2002, Blichfeldt, 2005). Brands are mediators of consumers' experience connecting symbols, images and perceptions that exist inside the realm of ideas and emotions to represent people's identity and self-expression (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Place branding is about the representation of identity and expression of a place perceived through the sense of place. The interactions between landscape and people are interweaved in a sense of place, creating a unique identity for each place (Sack, 1988). Similar to corporate brands, place brands are also largely intangible (Levy, 1999) and exist as a collage of collective perceptions.

A review of contemporary practices and extant literature shows that place branding strategies usually adopt a top-down approach (De Chernatony, 2008, Dooley and Bowie, 2005, Anholt, 2005, Kotler and Gertner, 2002) under the leadership of governments through their agencies for economic and/or tourism development. Frequently, residents and the local community are left out of the branding process, and this leads to tenuous connections to, and understanding of, the sense of place. As a result, this lower level of identification with the brand does not promote recognition, acceptance and commitment by the local community, threatening the long term sustainability of the place brand (Gilmore, 2002).

This paper aims to identify attributes that people attach to a place which can be the basis for developing a place brand model. Place brands function to portray the culture of a place (Gnoth 2007) and to represent people's lifestyle and their sense of place. Therefore it makes sense to include them in the process of branding. According to the perspective adopted for this research, place brands play a role beyond generating awareness about places by reinforcing identity and culture. This belief is based on the assumption that a place brand enhances the culture and the identity of the place, and the voice of the people represented in the brand should be listened to in order to create brand sustainability and to enhance authenticity.

Literature Review

The relevant literature in this paper embraces bodies of knowledge out of the realm of marketing to accept a large contribution provided from literature in sociology, anthropology and geography. The decision to visit these literatures is based on the necessity of understand place and therefore engage in a discussion of branding places. The theoretical framework reviews theories of place, landscape, habitus, and sense of place addressing the branding perspective.

Place and Landscape

The concept of place embraces the idea of location plus movement (Relph, 1976, 2004), open process (Massey, 2006, Sack, 1988) and continuous interactions (Bender, 2001, 2002) that produce meanings by the humans interference (Cresswell, 2004). Places provide a stage for multifaceted experiences with location, landscape, personal involvement and social relations (Relph, 1976, 2004). Moreover, places are seen as “an arena of action” for “physical and historical, social and cultural” experiences (Casey, 2001). As place, the concept of landscape is also related to the idea of movement, changeability and time. Landscape provides a face for a place, creating a shared visual reference always related to the visible features of place and how a place is seen (Relph, 2004). The image of the landscape is the first element to form a memory of a place inside people’s mind (Tilley, 2006). Only places have landscape, although a landscape can be composed by a set of places, but also landscapes shape the way places look like (Casey 2001). It is through the landscape people can share experiences of place. Landscapes provide a ground for an on going process of interactions (Bender, 2006) between people and place.

Interactions and Habitus

Human engagement with the landscape is central to linking materiality (physical aspects) to meanings (Harvey, 1990). This engagement is peculiar and unique to each place as "different people, differently placed, engage with the world in different ways"(Bender, 2002), creating an opened unfinished process constantly being performed (Sack, 1988). The perspective of dynamic relationships connecting people (groups and individuals) to physical space make places more relational and contextual (Appadurai, 1996). Adopting the concept of habitus developed by Bourdieu (1977), Casey (2001) explains that ties of these interactions serve as a “middle term” or “a figure of between” creating dynamic links “between nature and culture, between place self, between lived place and geographical self” (p.686) . Habitus is an open system of exchanges and actions representing a particular way of doing things in particular place. It is established beyond repetition and routines, but meaningful practices (Bourdieu, 1979).

Sense of Place

The uniqueness of a place is the *modus vivendi* of a group of people of a certain land, constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social experiences and understandings, embedded with a subjective and emotional attachment (Massey, 2006, Cresswell, 2004). The concepts of sense of place are related to affective bonds between people and place (Agnew, 1993, Sack, 1988, Tuan, 2001), because they are part of the symbolic and physical dimension of people's identities (Carter *et al.*, 2007). Peoples’ life experiences include a sense of emplacement (Feld and Basso, 1996) in a geographic space, and the presence of the human body in a place creates meaningful exchanges (Casey, 2001). The significance of interrelated meanings produced by interactions with place is revealed by the sense of place, which is entirely unique for each place.

Research Problem and Methodology

The development of a people-centred place branding model requires an understanding of the attributes that people attach to their place. This attachment is perceived and expressed through

the sense of place. The research problem is to identify *the attributes that determine the sense of place* to the community.

The site selected to conduct this research is the Chatham Islands, an archipelago with ten islands and an area of 966 km², and a population of 609 inhabitants (NZ Census 2006), located 800 km east of New Zealand. The small isolated community with a diverse and rich culture faces the dilemma of how to market and position itself to generate economic development, but at the same time, preserve their cultural identity and lifestyle.

The research involved multiple methods of data collection in three field trips including participant observation with tourists and with residents during the first one week field trip (Nov 2007), thirty seven in-depth interviews and five group interviews (3 to 6 participants) with resident, and participant observation and informal (not recorder) interviews with tourists during the second three weeks trip (Jan 2008). The data was registered through field notes, researcher's diary and recorded interviews. Validity was addressed through within-method triangulation (Denzin, 1970). To aid data analysis the Nvivo data management program was used. The third trip was in February 2009 for a period of two weeks when researchers presented the interviewees with the findings from the previous stages of the research and validated the attributes presented in this article.

Findings

The findings reveal the existence of a number of core constructs which play a central role in people's lives and which were revealed as a main influence on their behaviour and their sense of identity. The attributes that emerged from the research are:

1 Time (and weather): Closely related to the weather, which is, in fact, the determinant for time frames, the concept of time on the Islands drives the rhythm of life and impacts the behaviour and expectations of people:

"It's a lifestyle that doesn't depend on the clock. It depends on the weather, generally".

"It is time travelling. I just think the essence of the place is in the fact that nature dictates life in many ways because of the ship, because of the plane. [...] Weather dictates life, unless you are an office worker but that's not the essence of the island".

This peculiar concept of time impacts habitus and people's characteristics regarding their attitude creating two types of behaviour: a) 'do it now' attitude, and b) tolerance and flexibility to wait until the next opportunity to get something done.

"It doesn't matter what time it is or what day it is, you have just got to go with the flow."

2 Ancestry: Genealogy is an essential element for the Islanders and creates a powerful connection with history, land and family rights and ownership. Their heritage includes Moriori, Maori, British, German, Portuguese, and Irish. The place is described as:

"It is home, it is ancestral, whakapapa, a spiritual connection, huge family, and sense of home."

3 Community: They describe themselves as friendly, loyal, honest, tolerant, self-sufficient, protective, and supportive of each other, with a strong sense of pride and belonging. The feelings of pride and belonging extend to genealogy and to landscape. These two aspects are not independent one of another, but integrated as one unique system. The connection with the ancestors is experienced via a particular attachment to the land, creating an identity largely influenced by genealogy and ownership of the surrounding landscape.

“Proud people. Very proud and protective. I think they’re protective of the Island and the attitude that people have of the Island. And they’re protective of their friends and their families.”

The sense of belonging to the place is the background for their individualities and identities, positioning the sense of place as the primordial ‘scape’ for the construction of personal identities. Obviously, the same idea applies to all other places, because the place of birth will be attached forever to one’s personality. However, what makes this feeling strong on Chatham Islands is the important status it has in everyone’s life and how it is nurtured from one generation to another.

4 Landscape: The relationship between people and landscape is crucial for the construction of people and place identity. In indigenous cultures, nature is not seen as an entity apart, but an extension of the self. This bond becomes stronger in extreme places where people need to rely more on natural resources, and in places where the power of nature dictates the rhythm of life. On the Chatham Islands some elements enhance that bond: the roughness and uncertainty of climatic conditions, the abundance of resources, and the cultural importance of the land.

“The people become one with the environment. [...]As a human being you become more in touch with your senses and your capabilities.”

“Everyday you are part of nature’s environment. So the fact that you are living in it makes you more aware of it and makes you more conscious of it”.

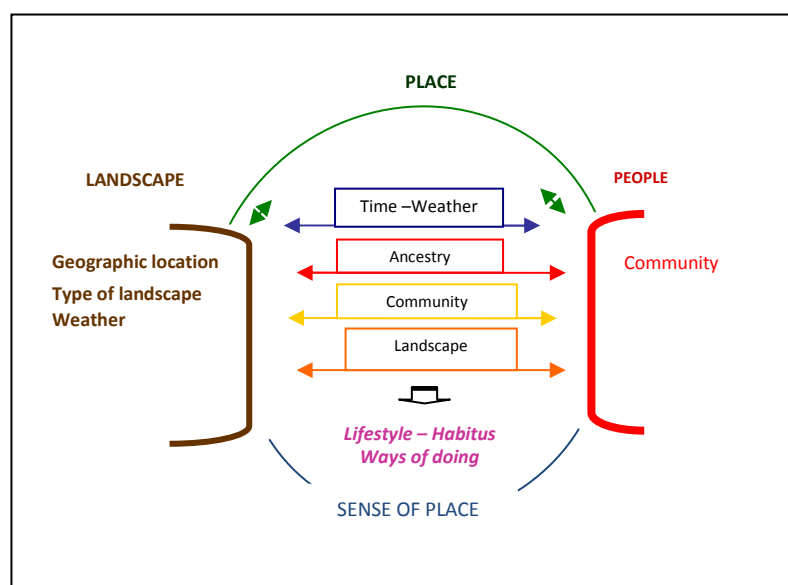


Figure 1: Sense of place model

The attributes identified on the Chatham Islands impact people's attitudes and their habitus. They influence and are influenced by interactions shaping culture and its manifestations, systems of beliefs and practices, community organisation, and utilization of resources. The attributes stand for a set of communal meanings because they are imbued with a particular 'way of doing things' determined by historical, physical and natural factors (for example weather). The meanings that support the attributes transform them into constructs. A construct represents a thought or a statement which hold a variety of meanings (Zaltman, 2003). Considering the attributes identified represent a peculiar 'way of doing things' determined by 'the meanings of doing things in this way', they become constructs. Therefore, we will refer to constructs and no longer to attributes for the remainder of this paper.

The constructs are all interacting with each other directly or indirectly conveying more meanings. The meanings reside in the way interactions are practiced, reinforced and recreated in everyday life. The interactions of all constructs create the sense of place representing 'how we feel about how we live' and 'what it means to us to live like this'. A sense of place therefore is the result of a constant interaction and a dynamic negotiation between people and their landscape.

Discussion and Conclusion

Operating in a contrast to corporate strategies, where brands help to define values and identity; for places, the identity of people and community and their shared values must drive the brand. A comprehensive place branding model that adopts a bottom-up strategy requires identifying the constructs that determine the unique sense of place. The four constructs identified on this paper were revealed through the voice of the community who recognised these elements as major influences in their lifestyle, personal and communal identity. Therefore, the recognition and representation of these constructs in the brand imagery and brand communication seem to be vitally important to not only achieve authenticity but also to ensure sustainability. Listening to the voice of the community and positioning the people at the centre of the brand strategy is a more inclusive, collaborative, and sustainable process that encourages the co-creation of key brand constructs. The paradigm of co-creation (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) by nature, integrates a variety of voices and the adoption of this paradigm in place branding is conducive to a bottom-up approach. The sustainability of a place brand does not reside only in the big operators of the place's industries, but it resides inside the communities in their 'way of doing things'. Ultimately, the community owns the brand, it co-creates and defines the brand values by the day-to-day practices and habitus.

The contribution of this research was to identify the constructs that determine the sense of place in the marketing domain. However, a comprehensive place branding model requires the understanding of *what* constructs represent the place's identity and *how* it should be represented. Complementary research is in progress aiming to understand and discuss the patterns of the visual representation of the constructs presented in this paper.

The limitations of this research are related to the fact that the model and the criteria were developed from one particular community. While the constructs identified in this research may well have more general applicability, they need to be confirmed in another community.

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