

## **The Four R's of Place Branding**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is part of a research agenda that adopts the paradigm of co-creation to analyse the process and practice of place branding with the intention of recommending a set of principles for place branding. This particular research investigates the interactions and relationships between people and their place to identify the constructs that are interwoven into those interactions and which influence the nature of the brand. We present a model that identifies four constructs that encapsulate the co-created experience of the place: Rights, Roles, Relationships and Responsibilities. The bottom-up approach should be taken to developing a place brand and that brand ownership is determined by the extent to which the representation of the place reflects the experience of the community.

Key words: Place branding; Brand ownership; Brand communities; Co-creation.

## The Four R's of Place Branding

### Introduction

The application of brand theory to the marketing of places has been discussed by academics and practitioners (Hall, 1999; Gnoth, 2002; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Anholt, 2005). The use of branding principles and key elements such as, authenticity, essence, equity, ownership and communication assume particular importance for towns, cities, regions and countries. Brands play an integrative role when related to places because at the core of the brand is culture and the people who create it. Beyond promoting destinations, experiences and products, place brands enhance identity and culture (Gnoth, 2007). The influence of local culture and the enhancement of community identity, therefore, are of fundamental importance when attempting to define the managerial aspects of a place brand. This research, then, aims to understand how interactions and relationships between people and their place influence the branding process, and to identify the constructs that are interwoven into those interactions that will determine the nature of the brand as related to ownership and governance. Initially, however, the paper reviews concepts of brand, brand community and ownership and co-creation to provide a theoretical framework to contextualise the development of a place brand.

### Literature Review

Brands are commonly defined in relation to ideas of differentiation and identification (Aaker, 1991; Wilson, Gilligan and Pearson, 1995; Kotler, 2002; Aaker, 2004). As an identifier, the brand is linked to issues of ownership, and as a differentiator, the brand becomes a signifier of perceptions, meanings and values that separate it from competitors (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007). Acting as a differentiator and an identifier, and through an aggregation of meanings and symbols, a brand becomes a powerful influence on consumer behaviour and thinking (Heilbrunn, 2006), and impacts culture by infusing or reinforcing meanings into people's lives (Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006). Working as a semiotic engine (Heilbrunn, 2006), brands comprise meanings, symbols and values (Berthon *et al.*, 2007) that reveal and influence the construction of identities both collectively and individually (Askegaard, 2006). The interaction between brands and consumers goes beyond conventional relationships where companies 'talk' to consumers through their brands. Even more than such two-way dialogue, brands and consumers are influenced by the environment (Bergvall, 2006) and the culture (Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006). This interaction brings multiple perspectives and participants to the process of creating, replicating and re-creating meanings and has significant managerial implications. Interacting with the culture and the environment, a brand engages in an expanded 'multilogue' (Berthon *et al.*, 2007) with a variety of stakeholders. These interactions affect the construction of identities for consumers (Bergvall, 2006) and influence the production of brand meanings that are often constrained by cultural codes (Schroeder and Salzer-Morling, 2006). They also impact the dissemination of values in society. Brand meanings, therefore, can be seen as the prerogative of the consumer who adds to it or not, reinforces or changes the brand message through their use and experience of the brand.

## Co-creation and Brands

According to Prahalad (2004) the paradigm of co-creation developed by the Service-Dominant Logic of marketing (SDL) repositions consumer experience in terms of brand experience (Prahalad, 2004; Vargo and Lusch, 2004; Payne *et al.*, 2009). Ballantyne and Aitken (2007) highlighted how SDL breaks out of the specific roles of marketing exchanges to explore the untapped potential for co-creating brand meaning and brand value due the fluidity of brand connections in developing communicative interactions. Moreover, their assertion that “*branding is essentially a form of communicative interaction*” (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007, p. 366) works in terms of integrating and getting people together around a shared identity and image.

Brands as artefacts of communicative interactions are influenced by culture including historical perspectives and local contexts that together make up cultural codes (Schroeder, 2009). These inform not only the process of how meanings are ascribed but which meanings are ascribed. The fluidity of these interactions would aggregate a sense of collective co-creation of meanings and collective brand experience. Understanding that brand meanings are socially constructed, culturally dependant and communally ‘owned’ promotes a radical shift in understanding brands and brand ownership (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007).

The understanding of brand, essentially, as a social construction contests the conventional definition of a brand as “*the sum of individual perceptions*” (Fournier, 1998 p. 344) and suggests, instead, that brands are “*a shared reality, dynamically constructed through social interaction*” (Ballantyne and Aitken, 2007, p. 365).

The co-creation of brand meanings by consumers shifts brand ownership from the managerial and legalist sphere of intellectual property rights and trademarks (Schultz and Schultz, 2004) to consumers and brand users. This idea widens the scope of brand image and the meanings that create and nurture the brand image, to consider not only the number of stakeholders that would influence the brand with different perspectives, but also how the interaction of multiple perspectives would generate new meanings. As a consequence, the nature of brand image is a continual process of iteration as is the brand itself. The acceptance that brand meanings are created by shared beliefs and realities as a result of the interactions between suppliers, stakeholders and consumers (in a firm-based context) is central to the paradigm of co-creation (Grönroos, 2000). Thus ownership becomes stronger with the emergence of brand communities via “*continued creative and interpretive actions*” (p. 31). Brand meanings are constantly co-created and re-presented by the community, reflecting, as they do, the everyday experience of their constituents. The resulting brand essence is dynamic, authentic and, most importantly, collective.

## Brand community, Ownership and Place Branding

Brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) are consumer collectives formed around brands through social relationships based on identity and affinity. They are characterized by consciousness of kind, evidence of rituals and traditions, and a sense of obligation (O’Guinn and Muniz, 2005). This idea of community transcends traditional geographic boundaries and assumes a post-modernist affiliation of identity (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). Opposed to

modernist managerial and social institutions, these post-modern communities are reinforced by sharing brand values, meanings and symbols, and by a free association of ideas and identification. What creates a sense of community around a brand is the sense of sharing meanings and belonging (associated identities). Sharing and belonging creates a sense of purpose for people. Indeed, communities are organised around a variety of themes and issues, but because brands in our post-modern society stand for the construction of the self, the aggregation of people around a brand appeals to the construction of the self, individually and collectively. The post-modernist self requires recognition by others which enhances identity, and creates bonds and relationships.

The importance of brand communities to the discussion of place brands centres on the idea of collective ownership. This collective ownership is based on the constructs of a brand community as outlined earlier, that is: consciousness of a kind, the rituals and traditions that surround the brand, and a sense of obligation to the community and its members (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001). These constructs create a context for a common ownership or a "social universe rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy" (Cova and Pace, 2006 p.1089). In fact, place branding is tied to its ecosystem (Bergvall, 2006) and is dependent on the relationships with community, people, landscape, companies, consumers and stakeholders. These relationships create and reveal idiosyncrasies and cultural underpinnings (Bergvall, 2006) that would determine the nature of ownership. A place brand by nature belongs to the place and its people. This genuine and foundational relationship, even before conscious claims by the community, influences all aspects of the brand, since the creation of meanings and values constitutes the basis of ownership.

### **Methodology**

The aims of this research were to identify constructs to develop a place brand based on perceptions of the community about their place, and to understand the interactions and implications of branding that could influence brand essence and brand ownership. Therefore, this study adopted an interpretivist – constructivist approach as researchers' intentions were to understand the meanings constructed by human beings through their interactions with others and the surrounding world. These interactions take into account the social and historical attributes which contribute to the construction of place and to a sense of identity (Crotty, 1998). Using a case study method to analyse the Chatham Islands, data was collected via multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995; Denzin, 1997; Ekstrom, 2006) using participant observation recorded via field notes and researchers' diaries during a two week field trip in February 2009. The data was then categorised using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and validity was addressed through within-method triangulation with existing data collected on two previous field trips in November 2007 and January 2008.

### **Findings and Discussion**

A fundamental understanding about the relationships between people and place is necessary to underpin the development of a place brand. Beginning from individual perceptions, the identity of a place takes shape when similar perceptions are shared across a community. These shared perceptions influence attitudes, define values, create meanings and decide the

degree of their importance in the community's life. On the Chatham Islands great importance is given to the maintenance of family ties not only those in the present, but especially those with the past. People are proudly aware of their ancestors and the stories that link them together. Indeed, the importance of carrying family names from generation to generation plays a significant part in the culture and the continuation of the bonds with the past. This is further reinforced by the importance given to the ownership of land and natural resources that link identity through ancestors to the place and the sense of place. This reinforcement of culture not only creates new perspectives for the future, but confirms and reaffirms the history, the ways of life, and the family duties that anchor them to their past and secure them to their place. Self identity is thus based on two strong pillars: family names and attachment to the land. Both of which are essential to the construct of ownership. The perpetuation and celebration of family names carries and creates the history of the place and inextricably links the past to the present. Most importantly, it emphasises the Rights that are attached to each family and which, while emanating from ownership of the land, extend to influence in the community. These Rights also determine the Roles that individuals and particular families play both within the context of their own social nuclei and within the community. Certain families and particular individuals have established Roles to play in their communities which range from guardians of ancestral relics to gatekeepers of contemporary agenda. Inseparable from Roles is the sense of Responsibility. Those members of the community whose Rights and Roles are conferred by ancestry and ownership are expected to not only behave responsibly in the discharge of their particular duties but also in their general contribution to the Island's affairs. This sense of Responsibility is both individual and collective, and is explicit and visible in a number of ceremonial and bureaucratic duties. As such it is an important part of the sense of ownership and cohesion within the community. These underpinning constructs are represented in the following model:

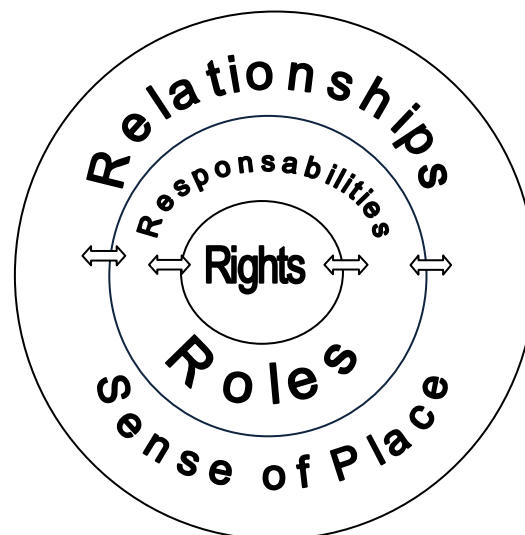


Figure 1: 4Rs of Place Branding

Such Roles and Responsibilities ensure that Relationships within the community are transparent, mutually respectful and valued. Relationships are the strands that bind the community together, give it a sense of ownership and ensure that it stays strong and flexible. This is particularly true where individuals exercise their rights in a range of different contexts but which are underpinned by the same expectations. It is also at the level of relationships where communal bonds are reinforced and social and individual identities are reaffirmed. Relationships are, thus, both representative and integrative, and, as such, play a crucial part in

how people see themselves and their connection to their place. The ways in which these rights, roles, responsibilities and relationships are represented is the challenge for branding the community's sense of place.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This paper makes a contribution to our understanding of place branding, indeed, branding in general, by its emphasis on the role of the co-creation of meaning and the collective experience of communities in the development of a brand identity. Brand meanings are constantly co-created and re-presented by the community, reflecting, as they do, the everyday experience of its constituents. The resulting brand essence is dynamic, authentic and, most importantly, collective. The adoption of the paradigm of co-creation not only helps to reveal the ethos of the place in terms of symbols, meanings and attributes that shape place identity, but also reveals the place's ethos in terms of practices, ways of doing things and social order. Both aspects are likely to influence brand sustainability and authenticity. Therefore, the development of a brand strategy based on a co-created experience empowers the community with decisions around brand positioning, representation and brand ownership. For place brand managers this requires a more inclusive, integrative and comprehensive approach to identifying the meaning-making processes that constitute a brand. These meanings are embedded in and constantly re-produced by the culture, the interactions and the relationships that define the experience of place. This paper presents a conceptual model that identifies and structures the foundational features of the communal ownership of a place brand. The four fundamental elements that encapsulate the experience of the place: Rights, Roles, Relationships, Responsibilities, and the interactions between them are of fundamental importance to understanding a sense of place, the structure of the community and the role of ownership. How these constructs can best be represented in terms of brand imagery, is the focus of the next stage of our research.

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