European Travel Commission (ETC) and World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)

Handbook on Tourism Destination Branding

Executive summary

Brand definition

- The term ‘brand’ is often misunderstood. The term ‘destination brand’ is used throughout this Handbook to refer to a destination’s competitive identity. It is what makes a destination distinctive and memorable. It differentiates the destination from all others. It is the foundation of the destination’s international competitiveness.

- A destination brand represents the core essence and enduring characteristics of a destination. A destination can change its moods and the way in which it presents itself to different market segments. But its core brand characteristics, like someone’s personality, are essentially always the same.

- A destination brand is the DNA that defines the destination. It should run through every act of marketing communication and behaviour by the NTO and the destination’s stakeholders.

- A destination brand represents a dynamic interaction between the destination’s core assets and the way in which potential visitors perceive them. It really only exists in the eyes of others. It is the sum of their perceptions, feelings and attitudes towards the destination, based on the way in which they have experienced the destination or on how it has presented itself to them.
• A destination brand generally cannot be manufactured like a consumer product brand. It inheres its core assets: its landscape, people, culture and history. It exists in the way in which these assets are perceived by potential visitors and the emotional value they attach to experiencing them.

**Brand development process**

• **Branding is for everyone.** It is not the preserve of high-spending destinations. All destinations can, and should, develop a brand, regardless of the size of their marketing budgets. Destination brand values should run through all marketing communications, whether simple website pages, public relations messages or expensive TV advertising.

• A destination should focus on its core market segments when developing a brand. Their perceptions will define the brand’s core characteristics. It is therefore essential to understand how they perceive the destination through targeted consumer research.

• **Qualitative research** is the most effective way to identify consumer perceptions of the destination. People’s psychological needs and travel motivation must be explored in sufficient depth to reveal their true motivation for travel, identify the experiences they are seeking, and to understand what kind of destination would satisfy them. This requires much deeper psychological investigation than merely establishing visitors’ ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’.

• **Stakeholders** (e.g. political, commercial, travel businesses and residents) should be involved from the outset in developing the brand. This is the best way to obtain their buy-in to the concept, as well as secure their active participation as advocates of the brand in how they talk about the destination and how they behave towards visitors. This can also reinforce national/civic pride amongst residents.

• A **fine balance** is required to enable the creative flexibility necessary to appeal to different market segments while still maintaining a coherent destination brand that is universally recognisable.

• Destination brands can be **geographically-based, thematic or a mixture of both.**
• Attempting to build supra-national and pan-regional brands generally does not work very well. They tend to lack cohesiveness, involve too many stories and too many stakeholders. This generally doesn’t add up to a sufficiently clear competitive identity or to a strong impact on potential visitors. Nevertheless, pan-regional marketing cooperation can achieve economies of scale for destinations that are targeting the same markets.

• National and sub-national brands should share a brand architecture: sub-national brands should reflect at least some of the national ‘umbrella’ brand values while still differentiating themselves from each other.

• Nevertheless, flexibility is required to enable sub-national destinations to develop and promote their own brand identities in competition with each other where appropriate, rather than forcing them to become a pale imitation of the national brand.

• The best opportunity for sub-national brands often lies within national brand marketing materials (e.g. websites, brochures, consumer shows, and trade fairs). Sub-national brands can take advantage of the market penetration and distribution achieved by the national brand to present their own subnational brand messages at the point at which the consumer (or trade customer) is most likely to be receptive to these messages. The national brand creates an opportunity for the sub-national brand to reach markets it could not otherwise afford to reach; and the sub-national brand adds value to the national brand by providing more texture on the national destination that adds to its appeal.

• A destination brand usually comprises several different and complementary values that define its personality. These do not all always need to be used in every marketing communication in equal measure. They can be applied selectively and their prominence ‘dialled up or down’ like the volume, bass and treble of a music system, according to their appeal to different market segments. The important thing is that the resultant marketing communication still feels as if it comes from the same place by reflecting some of the destination’s brand values.

• Destinations tend to refresh their brands, more often than radically re-brand, because they are mostly unable to alter their basic product, which is inherited (e.g. people, culture, history, landscape).
• It is time to consider refreshing a destination brand when it becomes comfortably familiar. This usually presages its likely decline from being familiar to becoming fatigued and losing impact amongst potential visitors.

• There are a number of models available for teasing out the ‘truth’ of a brand. The roles of all brand building models are similar in that they aim to establish the brand’s core essence, however this is described. It is therefore a matter of personal choice as to which one to use.

• Building a destination brand requires answers to the following questions on behalf of potential visitors:
  - What are the main things I like about the destination?
  - What sort of place is it?
  - How does it make me feel?
  - How would I describe it in one sentence?
  - What makes it different from all other destinations?

• Specialist branding and research agencies can help destinations develop their brand by providing independent, experienced analysis, which is essential to underpin a sustainable destination brand.

Brand implementation, management and monitoring

• Once the destination’s brand essence and values have been established, they should then be run through all marketing activities by the NTO and, ideally, by stakeholders in their own marketing communications. This means reflecting the brand essence, through the projection of appropriate brand values, in every single marketing communication, no matter how small.

• Projecting a destination’s true essence with real impact in marketing communications relies on clever, creative execution.
• A high level **steering group** is valuable for developing the brand and monitoring its progress. This sends signals that the brand is considered important by senior people. This can make it easier to obtain buy-in from important stakeholders and opinion-formers within the destination.

• A **brand guardian/brand manager** should be appointed who has a direct link to the NTO chief executive.

• A modest number of high profile **brand champions** should be appointed to espouse and promote the brand amongst stakeholder groups in different economic, political and community sectors. These should be people who are leaders in their field and are able to command respect across a wide range of sectors.

• **Brand advocates** should be recruited throughout as many stakeholder organizations as possible. They are generally people who hold positions of influence in relevant organizations, who can therefore ensure that the brand is adopted within their own organizations.

• Brand champions and brand advocates need to be well-informed about the brand and well-equipped to champion it. This usually involves **training** them in the principles and application of the brand. They need to be provided with key facts and information about the brand, so that they can promote it knowledgeably and convincingly.

• An **internal marketing programme** should be developed for NTO staff and key stakeholders. This should explain what the brand is, why it is important, and how to implement it. They must also be kept up to date with any feedback on, and changes to, the brand.

• The **NTO needs to live the brand** within its own internal culture.

• A **brand toolkit** should be produced for NTO staff and stakeholders. This should explain: the role of a brand; the destination’s brand essence and values; and how to apply them in marketing communications. It should also contain technical guidelines on using any brand logo or brand identity. This should be available in electronic format, ideally via the NTO website.
Residents need to be brought on board too. They should be informed about the nature, value and purpose of the brand, which is in effect representing them both nationally and internationally. This can be done through presentations, discussion groups, and media communications.

The brand’s impact should be regularly monitored and, if necessary, refined. This is best done through brand-tracking surveys, on-line panel surveys, ‘Omnibus’-style surveys, consumer research, visitor satisfaction surveys and benchmarking surveys.

The brand manager needs to be alert for sign that the brand might be getting tired and in need of refreshment. Brand-tracking surveys and media monitoring will usually provide the first early warning signs of a brand’s decline.

Critical success factors

Critical success factors in developing a successful brand are:

• A good understanding of the destination’s core market segments.

• Qualitative consumer research to understand people’s deep motivation for travel and their feelings and attitudes towards the destination, not just their likes and dislikes.

• A clear understanding of the destination’s competitive position, its relative strengths and weaknesses.

• Leadership and support for the brand from the very top [e.g. NTO CEO and ideally from government as well – tourism minister, prime minister or president], that is both enthusiastic and highly visible.

• A robust brand management system that includes an energetic brand manager/guardian, influential brand champions and committed brand advocates.

• An internal brand communications programme that inspires commitment to the brand amongst NTO staff.

• Destination stakeholders’ buy-in to the brand through their involvement in developing the brand from the outset.
• Ongoing communication with stakeholders as involved participants, not as external observers.

• Adoption of the brand by commercial and other destination stakeholders in their own marketing communications – thereby stretching the brand’s impact.

• Constant monitoring of the brand’s impact and relevance amongst key target segments.

• An understanding throughout the NTO that everyone is responsible for applying the brand in marketing communications and behaviour, not just the brand manager.

• Long-term commitment to enable sufficient brand equity to be built up for the brand to gain traction in the marketplace.

• A mindset within the NTO that positions the brand at the centre of all marketing communications.

• Living the brand: A brand is not just about marketing communications; behaviour is critical – by the NTO and its staff, by stakeholders, and by residents (i.e. everyone with whom the visitor comes into contact, whether face-to-face or as a recipient of information, service or products provided by anyone in the destination). Behaviour – as in the way that visitors experience a destination through the people they encounter – has always been the most important element of a destination brand. In the Web 2.0 environment, where people can ‘Twitter’ and exchange immediate views on both good and bad destination experiences, brand-compliant behaviour, or at least behavior that reinforces rather than contradicts the core brand essence, will become even more critical to a destination’s image.

The future

• Destinations around the world will increasingly recognise the importance of their brand as the source of their international competitiveness. Those that do not clearly understand, articulate and apply their brand essence and values in marketing communications and behaviour will fall behind their competitors.

• Place branding will become increasingly important, and valuable. Destinations will have to develop partnerships with other sectors to project an overall, holistic place brand, as part
of an overall national, regional or city effort to project it as somewhere attractive to live, work, study, invest, visit and do business. But they will still need to apply their own distinctive destination brand when talking directly to potential visitors.

- NTOs need to find ways of remaining relevant and useful to potential visitors in the digital era. The Web 2.0 environment requires a change of mindset in the ways NTOs approach their marketing communications. But the role of the brand – as a consistent representation of the destination’s brand essence – remains the same. It is, if anything more important, amongst the welter of ungraded information available on-line from limitless sources.