

# Place branding practice in the UK and Ireland



Ivo de Noronha | J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak | Alastair M. Morrison  
Strategic Solutions (Int) Limited | University of Greenwich | International Journal of Tourism Cities



How important is strategic place branding for the success of town centres and visitor destinations?

What can and cannot be achieved by place branding?

Should places be branded at all?

This report presents key findings from a research study published recently in the journal *Cities* and conducted with business improvement district (BID) and town centre management (TCM) professionals in the UK exploring their perceptions of place branding.

This report is based on the following peer-reviewed journal article:  
de Noronha, I., Coca-Stefaniak, J.A. and Morrison, A.M. (2017), "Confused branding? An exploratory study of place branding practices among place management professionals", *Cities*, 66, pp.91-98. (Online) Available at:  
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<sup>1</sup>For full article, visit <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264275116305522>

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed account of this study, please refer to the following source: de Noronha, I., Coca-Stefaniak, J. A. and Morrison A. M.

# Introduction

**B**randing is a concept that has been increasingly transferred from products and services in the corporate world and applied to retail districts, shopping centres, business improvement districts, town centres, regions and nations. Towns, cities and tourism destinations devote substantial resources annually to branding and marketing activities, with budgets that range from £130,000 to €10 million<sup>1</sup>.

The branding of places has evolved considerably over the last two decades, particularly with regards to

the way it communicates messages to different audiences and from a rather simplistic promotion-based approach to places, to a more strategic and holistic view such as the participatory design and co-creation of authentic experiences jointly with of key local stakeholders. This is a trend that is beginning to manifest itself at many levels, including the development of a new generation of smart cities<sup>2</sup> and smart tourism destinations.

Although there are parallels between the more strategic elements of place branding and place management<sup>3</sup>, many challenges remain ahead for place branding at a number of levels. Among these is the

legitimacy of some re-branding initiatives that have not always been anchored in the DNA of places, the role of social media and the shared economy in the marketing and management of tourism destinations<sup>4</sup>, the diminishing effectiveness of mega-events in the re-branding of places<sup>5</sup>, and, ultimately, whether places should be branded at all. This report builds on an exploration of views on place branding and its use among professionals in town centre management (TCM) and business improvement districts (BIDs) in the UK to suggest areas for improvement and development in the place management profession.

# 2 Why is place branding used?

**B**rands that have a unique and compelling proposition help underpin places as desirable tourist destinations, attractive business locations or places local residents are proud of, while others aspire to live in them. It is therefore critical, that any place-focused branding strategy leverages the features and benefits of that place that provide a compelling and unique promise that is delivered upon on the ground. In essence, the main reasons behind the use of strategic place branding can be summarised as follows:

<b>1 Future vision of the place</b>	<b>2 Economic growth of the place</b>	<b>3 Shifting negative perception of the place</b>	<b>4 Re/positioning the place</b>	<b>5 Maintaining consistency in image of the place</b>
Crafting a clear vision of the place by identifying the core promises and involving all the key stakeholders is key to successful place branding.	A clear place branding strategy can be vital in shaping places, stimulate economic growth and enhance the vitality and viability of Town Centres and BIDs.	An unequivocal place branding strategy can help shift negative perceptions of a place and shed unfavourable stereotypes associated with a place.	Place branding can help places define and re/position themselves in the eyes of their local, national and international audiences.	A robust place branding policy can help places maintain a consistent and effective positive image of the place.

*“The challenge for cities and countries is to find keys to the representation of their identity and to project their image that, from the achievements of a cultural inspiration in the past, will create fresh, modern points of attraction for younger audiences”.*<sup>6</sup>

*(Lucarelli and Berg, 2011)*

Nevertheless, as life expectancy continues to rise across much of the world's leading economies, one of the growing challenges for place branding strategies will become to assist in the *curating* of places so that older generations do not become

disenfranchised by the pace of change in technology, the scale of development or the lack of opportunities for face-to-face interaction, to mention but a few.

# 3 Place Management

The key to enhancing the vitality and viability of town centres

**T**he need to integrate place branding techniques in the formulation of policies related to places and their management has therefore been proposed and it is pointed out that, city marketing professionals in Germany place a higher emphasis on place branding strategies than their British counterparts<sup>7</sup>, who have often had a tendency to focus instead on aspects of the retail competitiveness of town centres.

In the same tone, it is contended that 'cities, regions and nations are developing full scale branding programmes, partly to encourage self-confidence and self-esteem and their own sense of place and partly to attract inward investment and tourism<sup>8</sup>, even if there appear to be divergent views with regards to the impact that place branding and management practitioners can exert on policy making in this arena. Indeed, it has been argued that the governance of a city brand strategy is a team effort for all stakeholders, rather than something that local authorities should implement on their own.<sup>9</sup>

However, building resilient place brands is a long term commitment, which needs to retain the flexibility required by the evolution of places as living entities and leverage the tangible and intangible traits of place.

*“Most important community attributes influencing residents' city brand attitudes are social bonding, a strong brand personality and business creativity”.*<sup>10</sup>

*(Braun et al, 2013)*

Arguably, these are also some of the key success factors of resilient high streets<sup>11</sup>, including effective town centre management schemes and Business Improvement Districts in their role as facilitators in the delivery of successful place brands. In spite of this, there continues to exist a considerable lack of understanding with regards to the use and interpretation of place branding

concepts by professionals responsible for the management of town centres and Business Improvement Districts in the UK. This report outlines some of the key findings of recent research on this topic with place management professionals in the United Kingdom (except Scotland) and the Republic of Ireland.

# 4 Research Results

**T**his research study had three key research objectives, namely:

a) To identify the role of place branding in the management of TCM schemes and BIDs.

b) To examine the mechanisms used by place management professionals to implement place branding on the ground, including working with local stakeholders.

c) To evaluate potential avenues for the future of place branding in TCM and BIDs.

Interviews were carried out with fifteen place management professionals (incl. BIDs) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The geographical coverage of this research deliberately left out Scotland on the basis of differences related to the legislation pertaining to BIDs in that part of the UK. The focus of this study on professionals involved with BIDs and town centre partnerships renders it a first of its kind in place branding.<sup>2</sup>

## 4.1 Perceptions of place branding related to the management of urban places

Place branding was linked by place management professionals to concepts such as “attractiveness”, “identity”, “competitiveness” and even “culture and heritage” (see Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed account of this study, please refer to the following source: de Noronha, I., Coca-Stefaniak, J.A. and Morrison, A.M. (2017), “Confused branding? An exploratory study of place branding practices among place management professionals”, *Cities*, 66, pp.91-98, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0264275116305522> .



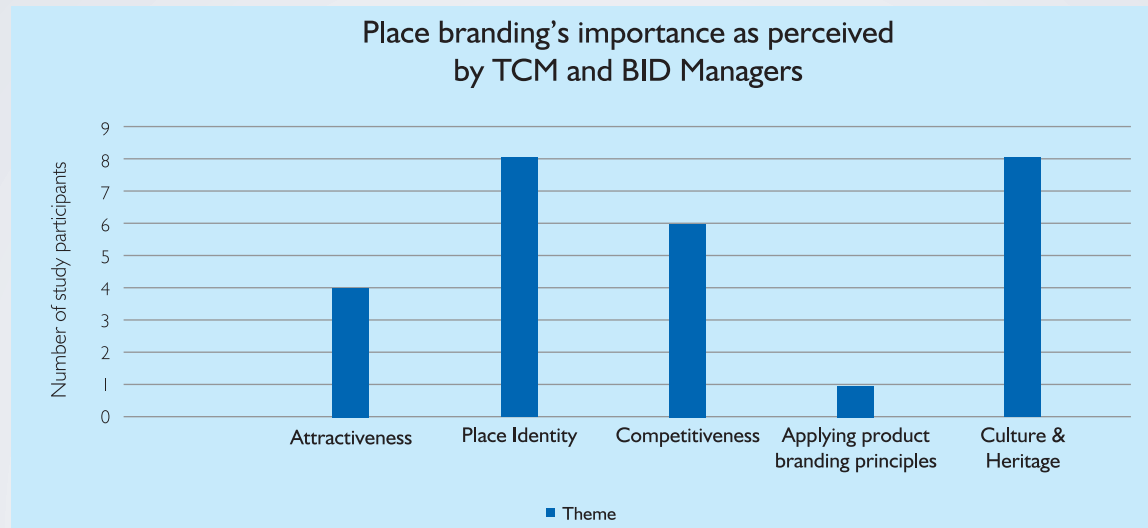


Figure 1. Conceptual links of place branding made by participants in this study.

Some of the study participants argued that product branding principles could be applied to places in the same manner as "places have images just as products and corporations have images, and that places depend to a similar extent on the power and appeal of those images for their progress and prosperity", an issue which has been

raised before by leading thinkers in place branding.<sup>12</sup> The need for a strong link between effective place branding and place identity was also raised by the majority of participants. Yet, even if it a well established fact that place branding plans need to fulfil the aspirations of its multiple stakeholders<sup>13</sup>, our field research showed that place management

professionals often tend to focus instead on place competitiveness aspects (e.g. attracting visitors and investors) based more on a benchmarking approach against competitors elsewhere, including neighbouring towns, than on the pursuit of initiatives anchored in the DNA of the town or city they manage.

*'The whole place branding scene (...) is understood in the USA, it is understood in Australia, it is understood in Germany and most of mainland Europe (but) England or the UK is one of the few places that still struggle with it'. (11)*

On a parallel front, some participants raised concerns linked to practitioners' understanding of the concept stating that it is “often mistaken for (...) a nice logo and a slogan for the area”. This would appear to echo concerns also raised recently by leading thinkers in place branding in that policymakers and practitioners tend to ascribe place logos and slogans “powers that they

do not possess, diverting focus, resources and effort from what actually is important in place branding”<sup>14</sup>. Similar concerns were raised by participants in this study with regards to practitioners in the UK who often lag behind colleagues in other countries as regards the depth and sophistication of their interpretation of place branding as an agent for change.

## 4.2 Strategic place branding

The place management practitioners interviewed as part of this study agreed unanimously that TCM and BID practitioners should be more strategic in their outlook. However, concerns were raised by some interviewees with regards to growing pressures for BIDs to operate at operational and janitorial levels (e.g. street cleanliness, public safety) as a

result of the challenging fiscal regime affecting local authorities in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which could potentially result in a widening of the gap between some of the very successful (and strategic) London-based BIDs and their counterparts elsewhere. This appears to be exacerbated by the fact that in some instances local authorities appear to have retained the arguably more

strategic remit of promoting places as destinations to visitors, while many BIDs have had to adopt a promotion-based approach more focused on local businesses and residents.

# 5 Impact of Place Branding

## on TCMs and BID's

**P**lace management professionals interviewed in this study highlighted a number of ways in which place branding has an impact on town centre management schemes and business improvement districts. These included:

- Having a positive influence on local economies
- Galvanising local business support and providing a voice for local businesses
- Helping to keep pace with the digital economy

An actively managed evening economy was also seen as key to the branding of town and city centres.

This may be a manifestation of a growing realisation that places are 24-hr entities that cannot rely solely on being managed and supported on a daytime basis. This is particularly applicable to tourism destinations and key regional town/city centres that attract visitors from nearby locations, often to engage with evening-focused leisure activities. A well managed evening and night-time economy will ensure that the overall place brand is not undermined by negative reports of antisocial behaviour. However, this is unlikely to be achieved adopting a unilateral management approach. Instead, some a more multilateral approach may be required with different stakeholders adopting actively

different roles in the management of the brand. These may from a geographical division of stakeholders to a functional one, for instance, by types of target audience.

The importance of the digital economy in this process is a noteworthy issue as this realisation by place management practitioners is likely to result over time in increasingly sophisticated approaches to the management of challenges to place branding brought about by social media (e.g. TripAdvisor) and the shared economy (e.g. Airbnb), among other channels.

# 6 Conclusion and Discussion

**Place branding is misunderstood by many town and city management practitioners in England, Wales and Ireland. This is a situation that needs to be remedied.**

Given that the process of branding places involves a constant dialogue with stakeholders who collectively define and deliver the brand, it is imperative for the message to reach people through this stakeholder prism in a way that the focus remains on the 'DNA of the place' and the location's uniqueness. This DNA should be interpreted as the 'destination's non-imitable assets' (Morrison, 2013)<sup>15</sup>, i.e. its

differentiating uniqueness, which makes its proposition hard for competitors to replicate, rather than a mere slogan or a logo (Lucarelli, 2017)<sup>16</sup>.

As place branding grows in sophistication - though not necessarily in complexity -, place management practitioners need to re-evaluate their *modus operandi*. In some cases, this may involve re-assessment of strategic priorities to emphasise local or regional 'co-opetition' rather than direct competition. In other cases, the change will have to be more related to how places are viewed as 'assets' by re-focussing on their unique characteristics, which often stem

from history. This may even result altogether in a *rediscovery* of places in a fashion not unlike that of one of the BBC's most loved programmes – Time Team. Place managers have a key role in this process. They also have difficult decisions to make as to what should remain part of a place's competitive advantage and what should be ditched altogether as superfluous and lack essence. Place Managers need to identify key actors who can become ambassadors of a vision supported by the grass roots, while keeping the place proposition fresh, open and inclusive by avoiding stagnation or negative traits such as parochialism.

Similarly, in today's age of social media, smart cities and tourism destinations, it is imperative that the presence and character of a (physical) place is reflected accurately and fairly in the digital domain. Just as corporate brands have realised the importance of investing in their relationship with customers via social media by co-creating, co-developing and ultimately learning and gathering intelligence proactively from their *followers*, place managers will have to become increasingly not only curators of the places they manage but also perception and relationship managers (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2010<sup>17</sup>; Marzano and Ochoa, 2016<sup>18</sup>) in the digital domain beyond simplistic *likes*-driven approaches. This relationship, like any long-term relationship, will have to be based on

honesty, thus avoiding the temptation of marketing places via social media in a way that fails to portray the (physical) reality of those places. As the evening and night time economies continue to grow, it is essential that a potential schizophrenic view of town centres does not develop whereby they have one personality during the day and a completely different one in the evening. Again, it will be increasingly the responsibility of 24-hour place management teams to ensure that places do not become merely functional arenas for activities, exchange or even excesses that diminish their depth and idiosyncrasy to a purely utilitarian sphere devoid of any values, whether anchored in the local community or other key stakeholders.

Place branding faces these and other challenges at many different levels, which range from community development to the growth of the visitor economy, from tackling gangs and crime to ensuring that overcrowding by tourists does not affect the quality of the service that a place can offer to both visitors and its local community. In essence, perhaps

the branding of places has entered a new phase – one more focused on debate and dialogue beyond the top-down approach that has often prevailed among place strategists in the past. As new generations (e.g. millennials) seek increasingly memorable experiences from places based on meaningful relationships with the people who live and work

in those places<sup>19</sup>, the challenge for the branding of places is to throw out the old textbook and re-think completely how we portray our places (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013)<sup>20</sup> and, just as importantly, our personal relationship with them.

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**Ivo de Noronha** is Director at Strategic Solutions (Int) Limited - a London-based networked Branding & Marketing Consultancy. He is also the Managing Director and Editor-in-Chief of TechSource – a technology focussed international digital publication. Ivo is also an Advisor to two SMEs and sits on the Board of a media company. Previously, Ivo worked on behalf of global FMCG companies and Marketing consultancies.



**J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak** is Senior Lecturer at the University of Greenwich (UK) and co-Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Tourism Cities. He has secured over £2 million of EU project funding over the last 14 years and has published internationally in town centre management, retail, place branding/marketing and event management. Andres was also formerly Programme Manager for Research, International Partnerships and Thought Leadership at the Association of Town and City Management.



**Alastair M. Morrison, Ph.D.** is President of Belle Tourism International (Shanghai, China) and a Visiting Professor at the University of Greenwich, UK. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in Hospitality and Tourism Management at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA. Alastair is the author of five leading books in tourism and hospitality management and Co-Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Tourism Cities.

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