

# Municipal Tourism Promotion: Mid-Size Cities in the United States

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## Abstract

The competitive environment in the tourism industry requires municipalities interested in attracting tourists' dollars to strategically manage city resources. Often public and private sector bodies cooperate and combine their efforts and resources to promote visitation to a city emphasizing the desire to maximize the limited resources of each available for tourism promotion. To succeed cities are challenged with finding an identity, or 'personality' that has a unique combination of functional and symbolic attributes to differentiate themselves from countless other destination options (Hankinson 2001). A city's distinctiveness can be built on many different characteristics, such as cultural events and institutions, sporting events, urban parks and noteworthy architecture (Kazancoglu and Dirrsehan 2014).

Unfortunately, although the interest in city branding has increased internationally (Lucarelli and Berg 2011) little research has been conducted on marketing a U.S. city. The majority of research on city tourism and branding has been conducted in areas outside the United States (i.e. Kazancoglu and Dirsehan 2014; Loda 2011; Martins 2014). Considering the desire of cities in the United States to effectively promote themselves as tourism destinations this preliminary project begins by investigating and analyzing 11 similar size U.S. cities as tourist or visitor destinations.

What does it take to offer a unique experience proposition to a potential visitor? What can a city promise to deliver that no other destination can? According to research conducted in Istanbul and Izmir, a city experience consists of five dimensions: social activities and leisure time experiences, affective experiences, taste experiences, nature-related experiences and disturbing sensory experiences (i.e. crime, traffic, climate) (Kazancoglu and Dirsehan 2014). Each of which can contribute, positively or negatively, to a visitation experience.

Other research has focused on other city characteristics. Some early work by Limburg (1998) emphasized events, history and shops and pubs. Heritage tourism, culinary tourism and sport tourism have been the focus of many city promotional campaigns. In general, the consensus seems to be that tourists are looking for 'authentic local culture'.

The task of defining ‘authentic local culture’ belongs to the city tourism promoters. Recently, the concept of brand personality has been applied to place marketing (Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri and Kurtulus 2008). To compete for tourism dollars a city must develop a ‘personality’ all of its own to contrast with the ‘personality’ of other destination options. City tourism promoters must realistically work within the resource restrictions each city provides. These resources include financial resources as well as the existing unique features or characteristics a city offers to provide an experience for the visitor.

Place management calls for communicating the identity of that place (Walker 2012). Having functional and symbolic/emotional needs tourist will develop a perception of a particular place based on both tangible and intangible elements (Parkerson and Saunders 2004). The goal for each city is to use available resources to define and communicate a unique proposition for the traveler.

In order to investigate the ability to differentiate a city this study focuses on cities with a 2014 U. S. Census estimated population of between 600,000 and 700,000. In a relative sense, this sample contained cities which were 18-30th in the listing of most populous cities in the United States. The selected demographic group included 13 cities. Las Vegas and Washington, DC were eliminated from this study due to extraneous promotional activities and extraordinary historical and social attributes. The 11 cities remaining in the defined population size included cities from across the U.S. and included a variety of climates and history. The cities analyzed in this study were:

|                   |         |
|-------------------|---------|
| Detroit, MI       | 680,250 |
| El Paso, TX       | 679,036 |
| Seattle, WA       | 668,342 |
| Denver, CO        | 663,862 |
| Memphis, TN       | 659,861 |
| Boston, MA        | 655,861 |
| Nashville, TN     | 644,014 |
| Baltimore, MR     | 622,793 |
| Oklahoma City, OK | 620,602 |
| Portland, OR      | 619,360 |
| Louisville, KY    | 612,780 |

The definition of a ‘personality’ for each of these cities can be assessed. Based on this analysis, conclusions about the efficiency and effectiveness of the promotional activities for these U.S. cities can be ascertained and studied for future place marketing strategies.

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**Keywords:** *city marketing, municipal tourism promotion, brand experiences*

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:** This research explores relevant strategies to optimize tourism promotion for U.S. cities.

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