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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

**OF THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE OF
THE INTERNATIONAL PLACE BRANDING ASSOCIATION**

MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY, LONDON - DECEMBER 7-9, 2016

IPBA



**Middlesex
University
London**



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The Burroughs,
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International Place Branding Association
(IPBA)

Middlesex University Publication

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Printed and bound by CDS, The Burroughs,
London NW4 4BT

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First published December 2016.

ISBN 978-1-911371-61-8

Branding a functional region: Lessons from the Southern Randstad

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In general, it is hard to brand functional regions, i.e. regions that are defined according to common functional characteristics, like a shared economic structure or an intensive commuting pattern. In contrast to historic or natural regions, functional regions are rather artificial. In Europe, however, more and more of these functional regions want to build up a profile. What works and what does not? What are the available options and how does this selection process take place? In the paper at hand this question is explored both from a theoretical and an empirical perspective. We start with a review of relevant insights from place branding theory, political science and human geography. This framework is used to analyse and discuss a case study of regional branding in practice: the Southern Randstad. Besides desk research we base our findings on 40 interviews with stakeholders in the region.

The Southern Randstad indicates the southern part of Holland. It is a functional region that consists of a diverse set of cities and towns. All the municipalities involved agree that a regional approach makes more sense than local branding actions to attract foreign direct investment and boost the regional economy. Due to the large amount of city, town and regional authorities and the diverse economy choosing a common profile is easier said than done. However, we suggest that two region-wide ‘ports’ and two ‘deltas’ could play a role here: the ‘Mainport’ (a large logistics and maritime industry cluster), the ‘Greenport’ (a large agro and food industry cluster), the ‘Medical Delta’ (an emerging health and life sciences cluster) and the ‘Security Delta’ (an emerging security and legal services cluster). As a matter of fact, every involved municipality in the region can relate to one or more of these two ports and two deltas. When it comes to the choice for a common brand name for the Southern Randstad we suggest that a term in which two of the largest cities (Rotterdam and The Hague) are expressed makes sense. For an international audience of investors and expats, the names of both well-known cities offer more distinction, recognition and associative impact than a new imaginary name – referring to for example one of the region’s ports or deltas – would do.

Our case study on the Southern Randstad provides clear lessons for other functional regions that want to brand themselves. These regions should take two notions into account. First, a common brand story for a large variety of municipalities and economic activities can be promising only if it *enhances* rather than *replaces* the existing local branding strategies. Second, branding functional regions always will be a ‘multilevel game’: depending on the relevant geographical scale level (local, regional, national, global), municipalities have to adapt their brand name and associated brand story to what is telling for the respective target audience. Such a chameleon like-branding approach asks for empathy, flexibility and coordination skills from the authorities involved.

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