

Perspectives in Asian Leisure and Tourism

Research articles, essays, practical applications in hospitality, leisure and tourism - with an emphasis on Southeast Asia

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 5

2008

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Alex JS Tan

SHATEC INSTITUTES, alextan@shatec.sg

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Recommended Citation

Tan, Alex JS (2008) "Destination Branding: Creating a Destination of Choice," *Perspectives in Asian Leisure and Tourism*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/palat/vol1/iss1/5>

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Destination Branding: Creating a Destination of Choice

By Alex Tan

“Consumers often don’t buy products, they buy the images associated with products. ...
The power of the brand and its ultimate value to the firm resides with the customers”
(Keller, 2008).

By branding a destination successfully, one can witness the evolution of a destination into a recognizable brand in the eyes and minds of the world. “It’s all in the mind” (The Power of Brands, Apr. 2008). “Powerful brands provide security of demand and competitive differentiation” (Branding in Asia, Apr. 2008). “Destination Branding is a combination of a philosophy and its implementation. It’s about giving careful thought to precisely what the destination should evoke in people’s minds, selecting the appropriate features to put forward and using the appropriate communication techniques to make sure you get the right people as efficiently and persuasively as possible” (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). Careful thought must be given to “... providing precise information of the destination and the perceived image it hopes to evoke in people’s minds” (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). This process involves the fronting of appropriate features of the destinations. This activity will create a destination brand personality that would be used to differentiate tourist destinations. As others have written, the additional ingredient that makes a successful brand is personality; leading brands are personalities themselves (The Power of Brands, Apr. 2008). This brand identity or personality must encompass every component of the society of that

destination. All claims made by the destination must be truthful because the truth has a way of finding it's way to the surface soon enough (Whisper, Destination Branding, Feb. 2008). Destination branding should be approached from the perspectives of what customers needs.

As such, it is essential that brands are constantly reviewed and updated to ensure the brands remain relevant. We need to reinforce our presence as well as ensure that our customer's perception of our products and services are deepened. A superficial, mental association customers make with our brand will no longer suffice in the 21st century (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). Attention could be paid to how needs and wants have changed across the world. If any destination intends to remain relevant and become the destination of choice, it would need to ensure that its offerings address these changing needs and wants on an ongoing basis. "Dialing into the emotions of nations and cultures you wish to reach is critical to branding success" (Whisper, Destination Branding, Feb. 2008). "Consider the confused consumer, buffeted by the mixed brand signals he frequently gets from the industry" (Brand Marketing in the hospitality Industry Apr. 2008). A psychological basis that looks at the functions of the mind, including thinking, sensation, feeling, and intuition can help to learn how messages can be structured in order to ensure this confusion does not occur and consistent messages are presented.

Destinations and branding implications

"Destinations can be a country, a region, a city, a hotel, an event or an attraction. The branding of a country has implications that go way beyond tourism and the revenues

that the tourism industry brings in” (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). There is a need to encompass beliefs that can be both rational and emotional. Many factors will go into the creation of these beliefs. It affects political attitudes, commerce, as well as financial investments. “A tourist’s perception of any country will be colored by his own personal experience if he has been there before, by what other people say and what the media have to say about that destination. It is also affected by how the country chooses to present itself, the only thing that the country has total control” (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). As a result, branding a country can be complex and multi-layered. More and more countries are marketing themselves aggressively in the global tourism market, posing a greater threat to countries that do not update their outdated and tired image, or counter any negative perceptions that are usually based on ignorance.

City as a destination

The city as a destination and “The City Breaks” that are associated with it is a major driving force in the tourism industry. Many cities continue to be exciting, enchanting, and seductive. Given enough reasons (things to do, memories to create, etc.), it is easy for anyone to fall in love with a city. “The market for short city breaks continues to grow and grow. But so does the competition” (Destination Branding: The Branding of Nations, Feb. 2008). Destination marketers need to go outside to seduce and earn their share of tourist, especially if theirs is not a capital city. When they are overshadowed by another better-known city, or if they are a new city, the novelty of them being new will wane and when the “been there, done that” syndrome kicks in, the excitement may be renewed by the creation of a relevant image that will get the city

noticed again. It has to be something that gives the city a renewed personality that is both unique and relevant. One that is memorable. One that makes the city stand out from the other cities.

Event as a destination

An event as a destination is known to have great powers to draw people to that destination. Popular events are also those who command a stronger brand appeal and enjoy greater pulling power and thus greater impact on tourist perception of the city or country where it is held. “But in essence, we are talking of major ‘festivals’ that are of sufficient quality to draw the crowds through to minor quirky, unusual festivals with appeal to appropriate niche markets” (Destination Branding: Event, Feb. 2008). Although events are dynamic, they are also time sensitive. It is essential that event planning takes place way in advance to ensure that tourists are given sufficient time to plan their visits.

Attraction as a destination

“If you’re marketing an attraction, the chances are it already possesses a unique and distinctive image. In other words, it’s already a brand in its own right, with its own brand personality” (Destination Branding: Branding your attraction, Feb. 2008). The question one then should ask would be is it getting its fair share of the market. Would it be able to improve the numbers visiting the attraction? Can it increase the amount each visitor spends? Can it reach a broader target audience? Further, it would need to implement cost effective communication and promotion budgets, thus ensuring the best return on marketing investment. Another useful tactic is to generate creative ideas for

joint promotions with partners, encouraging repeat visits and using word of mouth to spread the word.

Hotel as a destination

A hotel or a chain of hotels, large or small, that is geared to hosting conventions, seminars, and banquets or highly focused on leisure, can become a destination in and of itself. The hotel needs to have plenty of activities to keep the guest interested in staying within the property. This is not inexpensive, yet if successful, the guest's tourism dollars can be channeled into the hotel, helping to recoup the internal investment. Hotels as a destination have serious competition. A cruise ship, a holiday village, and a campsite are all categorized as establishments or organizations that are involved in the marketing of destinations. Each also has lodging as a perishable, and has the harsh reality that it cannot recover a lost bed night or an unsold seat. Creating a lodging organization as a destination helps to ensure the usage of this perishable product.

Changes to be addressed

“We need to address the changes that have to take place in order for any destination if they want to be considered the destination of choice. We need to address the changing life-scripts that have changed the way we live and exercise our individual liberties” (The Power of Brands, How to enhance..., Mar. 2008). There are new expectations to fulfill. There is a need for destinations to embark on capturing the traveler's attention and to captivate them by meeting their ever-growing sophistication of taste.

“There is also growing implications for ensuring environmental sustainability and associated strategies for long-term viability of travel businesses to offer needed products” (Destination Branding, Branding, Feb. 2008). It is essential to offer good products because we cannot make good products out of bad ones. We need to consider if these products meet high revenues potential needs.

Destinations need to select brand platforms that travelers can relate with and to ensure the selected platforms that address the needs of their customers The benefits they can derive from traveling to that destination need to be clear and concisely communicated. The full brand benefit statement must ride on this platform. Finally, the benefits customers can derive from the product must be real, for it customers do not perceive value in them, the benefits do not exist.

The Destination of choice must enjoy a strong brand image. It must have brand equity. The Destination should possess brand attributes with distinct competitive advantage over competitors. The Destination should ensure brand consistency. Finally, there must be a brand communication plan and strategy with promotion and advertising brand activities to follow.

There must be an understanding established on the travelers’ needs and their reactions to competitive and proposed plans. There is a need to be able to identify hidden motives. It is all in the mind. Destinations of choice need to evaluate the thinking, the sensations, the feelings, and the intuition of travelers.

Destination branding differs from consumer branding. Destination branding will not have the luxury of reviewing the effectiveness of their brand every few years and then re-launching it or replacing it with a new one. “As in product life cycles, outdated brands

are allowed to die slowly. The Internet has changed things. In world tourism, the introduction of new media, cheaper forms of transportation, increased choices, increased prosperity, evolving expectations, interest and concerns add up to a revolution. As a result, attitudes to countries and tourist expectations of destinations change on a continuous basis now” (WOW, Branding, Feb. 2008). Such perceptions change virtually every day. “Nations reputation in the world that are subjected to popular and media opinions is increasingly volatile and quickly influenced. Public views and perceptions justified or ignorant are disseminated with equal speed by blog, SMS or email” (Whisper, Destination Branding, Feb. 2008). However, the speed of changes need not be a threat to destinations. It will allow you to discover new opportunities every day, acquiring new means to exploit them.

Destinations, be it a country, a city, a hotel, an event, or an attraction may not actually be unique. What can be said about a respective destination may not be unique. Many countries utilize a “shopping list” check-off approach to branding. A mere listing of attractions, for instance, has no soul and does not answer the question of “Why do we matter?” It is critical for the *soul* of the destination to be intertwined with the brand. “The soul is the emotional truth a place may uniquely define and own. Destinations can make use of good old fashion tools laden with meaning like unique stories, history, cultural poetry and shared knowledge that is distinct to that destination” (Whisper, Destination Branding, Feb. 2008). Branding cannot satisfy everyone. If it attempts to do so, it usually ends up standing for nothing. It is important to understand the feelings of customers that branding seeks to influence and to attract. We need to develop a unique and authentic answer to the question of “Why do we matter?”

Festivals can be used to help create understanding of what works and what does not. These are one-time events (possibly repeating on some cycle) where new ideas can be trialed. In the process, creating opportunities for successful festivals to be featured regularly will ensure we continue to engage our customers and to remain unforgettable. Customers often value the experiments of the ‘new’ idea, and certainly are not shy in letting us know their opinions of it. Successful branding exercises like these have frequently resulted in increased sales, more tourists, more hotel bookings, more conventions, and greater spending. By exhibiting a willingness to learn, we also gain information about what not to do, too. When a Brand offers superior perceived value followed by good and consistent performance, the perception of consistency is delivered, reinforcing a highly important feature of brand behavior.

Another critical consideration is to match and market the right features of a destination marketed to the right audience. Telling seniors about beach volleyball may not be an effective method of attracting them to the destination. Instead, telling seniors about the soft, warm breeze, the gentle waves, and the colorful sun at sunset are probably better features to market to this group.

The use of traditional methods like surveys and questionnaires may not be effective to learn this information. Unless people are given a compelling reason to shuffle the brand deck, there will be a tendency for them to stick to what they know rather than accept new data. In that shuffling of the brand deck, customers must be given sufficient data and be convinced that data is relevant; they have to be encouraged to look at it again. ”In traditional settings, or controlled environments, like focus groups, on-line surveys and telephone interviews, the drawback is, people tend to say certain things and then do

another in real life” (Whisper, Destination branding, Feb. 2008). They do not effectively address contradictions in peoples’ responses. Individuals often have one foot in the world of conscious rational thought that is influenced by what we are expected to do while the other foot is planted in the subconscious, the emotional part that knows what the person really wants to do. Gather responses of the experiences of life of what customers actually do-not just want they say they will do-is the information we need to better provide the desired features and benefits. This information is collected by directly monitoring customer behavior instead of more simply asking them in advance.

Conclusion

Given the growth of independent travel, the surge in taking short breaks, the proliferation of new destinations, low cost airlines, and above all the Internet, every destination will depend on developing and sustaining a distinctive brand personality. This personality must remain relevant and motivating to each one of their target audiences. It must be capable of evolving to meet the changing attitudes and behaviors of the tourist today and in the future. It must also be capable of encouraging repeat visits, and capable of advancing the interests of related economic activities and employment.

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