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taking the politics out of place marketing

Gert-Jan Hospers argues that place marketing works only if cities focus on the perspective of the 'target' group – and that, as this is something that local politicians find hard to do, they should leave place marketing to marketing experts



Left

The National Glass Museum at Leerdam – the town claims to be the centre of Dutch glass-making and artistry

'Stockholm: The Capital of Scandinavia', 'Glasgow: Scotland with Style', 'Osnabrück: City of Peace' – today, place marketing is used by every European city that wants to attract businesses, visitors and new residents. City officials hope to put their city on the map by using flashy websites, campaigns, events and tourist packages, but many local politicians think that place marketing involves nothing more than the promotion of a cute slogan – which is unfortunate, as this is not the point at all.

As in regular marketing, place marketing revolves around target groups – be they considered as customers, consumers or clients. In the words of Philip Kotler, the father of marketing: 'Marketing is not the art of finding clever ways to dispose of what you make. It is the art of creating genuine customer value.' How would this philosophy be best applied to cities seeking to be favoured by residents, businesses and visitors?

Places affect us

Place marketing is a bit more complex than regular marketing. A place – whether a city, a town, a region or a village – is not the same as a product. First of all, places are difficult to define. Where, for example, does Copenhagen begin or end? Where is the border between the North and the South of England? In addition, a place is multi-functional: you can do more with it – or in it – than with a product such as a pair of shoes or a bottle of orange juice. You wear shoes and drink juice, but in a place you can live, work, study, relax and enjoy recreation. Moreover, the same place can mean something very different to residents than it does to outsiders: someone who has lived in Liverpool all his life does not look at the city in the same way as a couple of Danish youngsters flying there to celebrate a bachelor party. Furthermore, any place is what it has *become*: a conventional 'relaunch' of a city is impossible. Finally,

there is usually limited control over the 'place product' itself. For example, the weather is a major determinant of people's perception of a city – but this is not something that city officials can influence.

However, that is not all. Geographers suggest that people often have a special relationship with the place in which they live or were born. A 'sense of place', together with practical factors such as the proximity of family, friends and work, brings about an attachment for many, as borne out by migration statistics throughout much of Europe. In the Netherlands, for example, only 7% of people relocating move from one region to another. Companies too tend to become attached to a location once they have settled: no more than 6% of companies relocating in the Netherlands move beyond regional borders.

Consequently, rankings such as 'Best Places to Live' and 'Best Cities for Business' should not be taken too seriously: cities at the bottom of such lists have their loyal supporters too. Even a place that apparently has nothing special to offer from an objective point of view can be very special for people who have a relationship with it.

It is therefore unsurprising that attempts to attract newcomers to peripheral regions usually fail. For example, in 2004 plans for a new development in the north of the Netherlands, the Blue City (Blauwestad), were drawn up to attract people from the crowded Randstad; but up to now, only around 200 of the 1,500 available lots have been sold, and half of those buyers were already resident in the area. Marketing aimed at residents and businesses from outside an area is difficult – attempts to attract newcomers are usually better focused on former inhabitants. This certainly applies to regions with strong identities, such as Tuscany, Bavaria and Scotland – you can get a Scotsman out of Scotland, but you cannot get Scotland out of the Scotsman. And jobs are critical for return migration – some regions have established 'career centres' that help return migrants and their partners to find suitable employment.

The art of choosing

Place marketing is most likely to succeed at attracting visitors, such as tourists and day-trippers. Unlike residents and businesses, visitors are mobile by definition: they are looking for experiences that they cannot find at home, and culture, history, nature, shops and restaurants work as landmark attractions for visitors. Research carried out some years ago showed that the majority of English cities mention historical heritage in their promotional material, while nearly half of the municipalities in the Netherlands promote themselves as offering peace, space and recreation. In a world that is becoming more uniform, unique cultural heritage and beautiful scenery can make a difference. Place marketing needs to be

clear about what makes a place different from all the other cities that are also trying to attract visitors.

It is important for a city to make clear choices about what it has to offer, and whom it is seeking to attract. After all, places are too complex to bring all aspects of their identity to the attention of prospective visitors. Only in a distilled form will the attractions of a place stick in their minds. This requires clearly focused positioning, not only in terms of a relevant brand identity (what?), but also when it comes to a relevant core target group (who?).

In the end, marketing is the art of choosing. This may not seem remarkable to marketers, but try to convince a municipality official of this. Public authorities aim to please all parties, which often results in political positioning so general and unfocused that it is unlikely to provoke strong opinions against it – or strong support in favour. Too many cities still position themselves as an all-rounder or everyone's friend, from 'Leeds: Live it, Love it' to 'Only Lyon'.

The sharper the positioning, the more that position stands out among the crowd. For example, the municipality in the town of Kemi in Finnish Lapland builds a 'Snow Castle', including a restaurant, a hotel and a chapel, every winter. This 'Snow Castle' project has put Kemi on the world map as a wedding location: many Japanese couples have said 'I do' in the freezing chapel. In the Netherlands, Leerdam also clearly positions itself. As the 'Glass City on the Linge', Leerdam claims to be the centre of Dutch glass-making and glassblowing, and not without success: the National Glass Museum, the Glass Factory, the International Glass Art Exhibition, and the town's Glass Days attract lots of visitors every year. The marketing focus of Leerdam is on art-loving and wealthy 'WHOPers' (wealthy, healthy older people). In Leerdam glass is even evident in the street, in the form of glass art and ornaments on façades. This is positioning *par excellence*.

The visitor journey

City tourist brochures are remarkably often written from the perspective of the resident, with large amounts of text, pictures that could have been taken anywhere, and a lack of practical information for visitors. It is not always clear why this would help to attract potential visitors. Why would it be interesting for an outsider drawing up holiday plans to read a resident's story of the city in which he or she was born? If a city wants to attract visitors, it should be willing to get into their minds – and the concept of the *visitor journey* (the experience of the visitor before, during and after the visit) provides clues for how to do this. The visitor journey involves some key 'moments of truth':

- *Decide and plan:* You want to go away for a weekend to a specific destination. The choice of a particular city may be the result of information



Above

Groningen offers a good practice example in the field of place marketing

picked up in the media or a brochure, a special offer, a visit to a website, a tip from family or friends, or previous experience.

- *Search and book:* This is a crucial moment. The ease with which you can arrange the visit is of great importance. Can you easily find all the information you are looking for? Are there cheap packages? What are the opinions of previous visitors?
- *Travel and arrive:* The visit starts. The journey affects the mood in which you arrive at your destination. What is your first impression of the city? How is the signage? Can you park easily? Is there wireless internet?
- *The stay:* This is the most important phase in the overall visitor experience. You get impressions of the city and form an opinion about the people, the atmosphere, the attractions, the infrastructure and the service in bars, restaurants and hotels.
- *Remember and tell:* This point is often overlooked. What souvenirs do you take with you for those at home? What do you tell them about the city, and what kind of proof can you show them? Do you hear back from the hotel where you stayed?

During all these moments of truth, a destination can leave a good impression with the visitor. The

ease of booking, the quality of a station area, or the quality of treatment by the hospitality industry can greatly affect an overall opinion of a city. If something is disappointing, the place must put in extra effort to counter that disappointment. If we are satisfied, we might come back and provide free advertising through our network of contacts.

More and more cities are realising that this is how place marketing works. For example, some European cities have designed customer-friendliness courses for taxi drivers, while others place tourist information at bus and tram stops. Other cities invest in smart signage and temporary parking places on wasteland. The measures may seem trivial, but in the visitor journey they are essential. Place marketing asks for hospitality: it demands that visitors are made to feel that they are welcome.

The example of Groningen

The Dutch city of Groningen provides an example of good practice in the field of place marketing. The campaign 'Nothing Tops Groningen' is implemented by Marketing Groningen, an organisation operating at arm's length from the municipality of Groningen. Marketing Groningen is responsible for the

marketing of the city and province of Groningen and aims to attract more visitors and increase visit duration and spending. Supported by a consultancy firm, Marketing Groningen in 2004 managed to convince local and regional officials of the importance of focus. The choice fell on the specific culture and nature of Groningen.

While the chosen focus is far from uncommon, implementation has been particularly smart. Just as every visitor to an African game park aims to see the 'big five' wildlife species, Marketing Groningen promotes the 'G7' – the seven reasons to visit Groningen: the city itself as a cultural centre, the natural and historical characteristics of the villages of Pieterburen and Bourtange, the Lauwersmeer National Park, and the area's historic churches, estate houses and castles, and artificial hills (*wierden*). 'Interested Netherlands' was chosen as a core target group: educated people with a broad, intrinsic interest in culture, history and nature. Broadly speaking, these tend to be dual-earners without children and empty-nesters – altogether, about 1.7 million people in the Netherlands.

'City officials who want to put their city on the map may participate in discussions on place marketing, but they should not operate the buttons'

Marketing Groningen understands that visitors cannot be expected to know about Groningen in advance. Its marketing includes folders inserted into national quality newspapers – the newspapers of 'Interested Netherlands' – containing turnkey promotional packages and a map of Groningen. Commercials that ran on television between 2005 and 2007 and between 2009 and 2012 always prominently showed the website address (toerisme.groningen.nl), and in the latter campaign 'fans' of Groningen introduced the viewer to 'their' Groningen, giving visitors a chance to have their experience of Groningen broadcast on television.

An evaluation of the first advertising campaign (running from 2005 to 2007) estimated that the 1.5 million euros spent on television commercials and other advertising resulted in an additional 83 million euros of tourist spending in Groningen (city and province). During the campaign, tourism (day and short stay) grew much faster than in the rest of the Netherlands, and Groningen won a prestigious Dutch marketing award in 2008 as a result.

Place marketing and politics

Generally, place marketing and politics do not go well together. As the guardian of the public interest, government is interested in maximising benefit for the greatest number. However, marketing asks us to choose: the more specific the target group, the better chance of success. One might argue that marketing is perhaps the one activity that *requires* discrimination.

Place marketing carried out by local government is often ineffective, especially if local politicians dare not make choices in approach that may exclude other groups from taking an interest in the city. For example, the Dutch city of Nijmegen initially positioned itself as the 'oldest city in the country'. The strategy was successful because it was genuinely distinctive. However, by the end of 2011, the local authority had decided that this focus was too limited. Nijmegen now also promotes itself as a dynamic city of knowledge and culture and as a green, walking city – but this shows a lack of understanding of how place marketing works, which is regrettable as a lot of money is at stake.

Municipalities may initiate place marketing, but they need to let go of its implementation. In several cities this approach has delivered beneficial results. In Haarlem, near Amsterdam, City Marketing Haarlem is an independent organisation that has a performance contract with the Municipality of Haarlem for its marketing role. Each year, it receives a subsidy from the municipality, while also acquiring its own revenue. City Marketing Haarlem also runs the Tourist Office, Haarlem Festivals and Haarlem Partners (an umbrella organisation for co-operation with local partners).

In contrast to the Haarlem approach, local politicians often consider place marketing to be 'their baby', but if place marketing is to be successful, it must run separate from the political process. City officials who want to put their city on the map may participate in discussions on place marketing, but they should not operate the buttons. Perhaps this is the most important advice for cities that want to market themselves: leave the implementation of marketing to marketers.

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