

Braun, Erik; Kavaratzis, Mihalis; Zenker, Sebastian

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## My City - My Brand: The Role of Residents in Place Branding

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## **My City – My Brand: The Role of Residents in Place Branding**

**Erik Braun**, PhD, senior researcher

Erasmus School of Economics, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Room H12-33, P.O.Box 1738, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Email: braun@ese.eur.nl

Tel.: +31 10 4082740

Fax: +31 10 4089153

**Mihalis Kavaratzis**, PhD, senior researcher

International Business School - Budapest

Tarogato 2-4, 1021, Budapest, Hungary

Email: mihalis.kavaratzis@gmail.com

Tel.: +36 20 24 97 432

**Sebastian Zenker**, PhD, post-doctoral researcher

Institute of Marketing and Media, University of Hamburg

Welckerstrasse 8, D-20354 Hamburg, Germany

Email: zenker@placebrand.eu

Tel.: +49 40 428 38-74 99

Fax: +49 40 428 38-87 15

**Abstract:**

The theoretical development of place branding is in its early stages. The most important contributions so far have come from publications ‘translating’ insights, methods and tools from corporate branding theory to places and cities in particular. Obviously, an academic field in its early stages has many critical issues to be developed. One major issue is the role of residents in the formation and communications of place brands and their involvement in the place branding process.

This paper attempts to fill in this gap by exploring in detail the role that residents are called to play in current place branding practice. The paper argues that there is an urgent need for resident involvement and participation in place branding because residents simultaneously fulfil different roles in the place marketing process. Firstly, they are target groups of place marketing itself and therefore the main audience of several marketing actions. Secondly, residents are an integrated part of a place brand. Their characteristics, behaviour and reputation could make a city more attractive to visitors, new residents, investors, and companies. Thirdly, residents could function as ambassadors for their place brand. They are in the position to give credibility to any message communicated by city authorities, “making or breaking” the image and brand of their city. Fourthly, they are also citizens and are vital for the political legitimisation of the whole marketing endeavour.

The paper reviews this fourfold role of the residents and explores the implications for place brand management. Drawing on examples from place marketing practice it demonstrates how residents exert their influence on city brands either through intentional involvement or unintentional negligence. The paper concludes that only through meaningful participation and consultation a more effective and sustainable place branding is possible.

**Keywords:**

Place branding, place marketing, urban planning, cities, residents, citizens, local communities

**Theme:**

Planning and place marketing – theoretical implications (special session)

## 1. Introduction

In the past decade a growing interest has emerged in the strategic role that citizen participation may play to enhance the quality and the effectiveness of urban policies (URBACT, 2007). Place marketing is not an exception; in fact it might be a field where the participation of citizens can enrich the activities of local authorities. Whilst since the late 1980s citizens have been perceived as customers rather than as passive beneficiaries, their role has recently shifted towards that of an active partner and co-producer of public goods and services (URBACT, 2007). In this sense, it is essential to understand the current and potential role that residents can (or should) play in place marketing.

Residents are commonly treated in the relevant literature as a target market of place marketing and place branding efforts. As identified in the earliest literature on place marketing (e.g. Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Kotler *et al.*, 1993) the three main target groups of place marketing are: *residents*, *companies*, and *visitors*, an assertion stemming from the three obvious functions of a place: live, work and visit. As reasonable as this assertion is, we want to challenge the most common element of this treatment of residents as target markets, which seems to limit the role of place branding in attracting new residents, whether it is the talented-creative class that Richard Florida has introduced and popularised (Florida, 2004; 2008), or students (Braun, 2008), or wealthy families. In most places around the world, attracting new residents will inevitably be only a fraction of the place marketing strategy whereas existing residents have a more active role to play.

The current academic discussion shows considerable shortcomings in this respect (Zenker *et al.*, 2010) – since it mainly focuses on the explorative description of a certain city brand without considering the important role of the residents in this process (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2009). Hence, the aim of this paper is to describe the fourfold role of the residents theoretically and to explore the implications for place brand management illustrated by different cases from place brand practice.

## 2. Place Marketing and Branding: a Short Overview

Although there are examples for promoting cities dating back to 1850 (Ward, 1998), place marketing is a relatively new field of academic research (Kotler *et al.*, 1993; O'Leary and Iredale, 1976). O'Leary and Iredal (1976) were the first to identify place marketing as a challenging field for the future, describing place marketing as activities “designed to create favourable dispositions and behaviour toward geographic locations” (p. 156). In the following years, the first publications really dedicated to place marketing came from regional

economists, geographers, and other social scientists (see for an overview: Braun, 2008), but still mostly concentrating on promotional aspects of places. In the early 1990s, the scope of the contributions widened, trying to develop a strategic planning framework for place marketing (e.g. Ashworth and Voogd, 1990) and discussing place marketing in the wider context of structural changes in cities and regions (Van den Berg and Braun, 1999).

*Place marketing* in general could be defined as “the coordinated use of marketing tools supported by a shared customer-oriented philosophy, for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging urban offerings that have value for the city’s customers and the city’s community at large” (Braun, 2008, p. 43). Its *aim* is “to maximize the efficient social and economic functioning of the area concerned, in accordance with whatever wider goals have been established” (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990, p. 41).

As a current development in place marketing, the branding of places (and cities in particular) has gained popularity among city officials and urban researchers in recent years. This is illustrated by the development of city brand rankings such as the *Anholt-GMI City Brands Index* (Anholt, 2006) or the *Saffron European City Brand Barometer* (Hildreth, n.d.) and a rising numbers of publications about the branding of places (e.g. De Carlo *et al.*, 2009; Kavaratzis, 2008; 2009; Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Since a *Place Brand* could be defined as “a network of associations in the consumers’ mind based on the visual, verbal, and behavioural expression of a place, which is embodied through the aims, communication, values, and the general culture of the place’s stakeholders and the overall place design (Braun and Zenker, 2010, p. 5), places eager to gain positive associations in the (mainly external) place consumers’ mind with the help of place branding.

But most importantly, all these definitions highlight one central point: place marketing and branding are customer orientated approaches and have to integrate all different customers of a city. The current focus of mainly external target groups in place branding disregards that it is crucial to integrate the current residents into the process, since they are “making or breaking” the whole marketing process due to their four different roles in the place marketing and place branding.

### **3. The Four Roles of Residents in Place Marketing and Place Branding**

In their insightful account of urban governance structures, Swyngedouw and Baeten (2001), have detailed the re-scaling of systems of governance attributing it to the ‘glocalisation’ processes in place. They argue that “the ‘glocalisation’ of governance is often paralleled by a loss of democratic control, reduced citizenship rights, social disempowerment for some and a

growing influence and power for (inter)national or regional economic elites in the new re-scaled systems of governance” (p. 832). This is a rightful criticism against the organisational structures that are commonly established to pursue city marketing goals, as noted repeatedly in the literature (e.g. Bellini *et al*, 2010; Kavaratzis 2007). As Swyngedouw and Baeten (2001) go on, “the often non-democratic and opaque organisation and decision-making procedures at these scales of governance, turn them into implicit or explicit elite playing-fields that permit shaping territorial trajectories in the image of dominant and hegemonic elite coalitions” (p. 835). Not surprisingly, scholars such as Healey (1997; 2003) makes a plea for collaborative planning putting much more emphasis on the inclusion of all stakeholders, the collaborative process and a common vision, rather than the outcomes per se. The issue of (genuine) stakeholder involvement is also critical for place branding. Therefore we explore the role of residents in place branding identifying the fourfold role that they play in the development of a place brand.

### ***3.1 Residents as a Target Group***

Before we have a closer look at the first role of residents as a target group it is good to ask who are considered to be the place target markets? The easiest answer to that question is ‘all the people and organisations that are important for the functioning of the place’, but this does not help us much further. The most common answer is – like pointed out before – that the city’s customers are its residents, companies and visitors (e.g. Van den Berg *et al.*, 1990; Ashworth and Voogd 1990). Van den Berg and Braun (1999) and Braun *et al* (2003) added investors as a fourth category. The common ground in these broad classifications is that both residents already living in a particular place, as well as potentially new residents, are considered as target groups for place marketing.

It is important to note that there are different views on place’s target markets. Kotler *et al.* (1993, 1999) have introduced a very strong economic and external focus for the target markets of places: visitors, business and industry, export markets and residents and employees. The ‘marriage’ of residents and employees in Kotler’s approach is awkward in three ways. First, it reduces residents to productive workers and ignores the role of residents as place consumers and voters. Second, it understates the important of residents as *the* target group and third it is confusing as some residents are employees of companies in the city, some are employees elsewhere and some are not employed at all. Rainisto (2003) uses another externally oriented classification of Kotler (2002) in which residents are now limited to ‘new residents’ apparently ignoring the most important target group: the current residents.

What is it that residents are looking for in a place? The straightforward answer is a 'place to live' in the broadest sense of the word. It is a place where the home is, where their job is or from where they commute to their workplace, a place to raise children, to shop, to exercise a sport, to study, to be with friends or family, to go to the theatre or a sporting event etc. For a large group of residents it is also place where they feel they 'belong'. The 'place to live' is not one building (the home) or one location, but it is a network of various locations. Van den Berg (1987) has called this the relevant environment. Residents desire an attractive living environment that fits well to the needs and wants of its members in the household: it concerns the home and its direct environment but also the (access to) jobs, family and friends, educational institutions, shops, cultural facilities, sports (active and passive), green areas, nightlife (Braun, 2008). Place marketers can deploy marketing and branding to influence the decision-making process of residents regarding their 'place to live'. It does not just concern 'new residents' but also keeping the ones that are already there satisfied. It all comes down to the question: *Should I Stay or Should I go now?* Those residents who answer with 'Go!' are new residents and targets for place marketers. The residents that answer 'Stay!' are also target groups of place marketers as they can 'help' those residents to make the decision to stay. Hence, current residents and new residents are target audiences of place marketing and place branding.

### ***3.2 Residents as Integrated Part of a Place Brand***

The second role of residents is that by definition they are an integrated part of the place brand. This could be the result of a deliberate brand strategy but it is also a natural process as residents are the 'bread and butter of places'. Freire (2008) has discussed the role of local people in place branding showing that they are indeed a critical dimension for the formation of place brands and, therefore, essential to be considered in place branding. His research on British 'users' of the Algarve and Costa del Sol place brands, has demonstrated that local people are 'used' for a multitude of purposes in the formation of place brands. More particularly, he has found that local people are used as cues for the evaluation of place brands, as a factor to justify place brand consumption and as a differentiating factor between place brands. Obviously the perceived degree of friendliness in local peoples' attitude has been revealed as the crucial element, something that fits in total accordance with the 4As framework for tourism management, which emphasises Attitude as one of the most important factors that 'make or break' a destination. Furthermore, Freire (2008) contends that many of the perceived characteristics that make local people friendly and, therefore, a positive and

reinforcing factor of a successful place brand, are not necessarily culturally embedded. They are taught as parts of an effective tourism service delivery process, which leads Freire (2008) to the conclusion that local people can be considered a manageable asset within place branding.

### ***3.3 Residents as Ambassadors for Their Place Brand***

The third role of residents is their role as ambassadors of the place brand. In the city brand communication model by Kavaratzis (2004) perceptions of cities are formed by three types of communication: (a) the primary communication, which could be described as the city's actions itself, even though communication is not the main goal of these actions. It includes the architecture and real place offerings as well as the city's behaviour; (b) the secondary communication is the formal communication, like all forms of advertising or public relations; (c) the tertiary communication finally refers to the word of mouth done by the residents of a city. Since word-of-mouth is usually perceived as very authentic and trustworthy, this highlights again the important role of residents in the place brand communication process. A strongly involved citizen, in contrast to a mere resident, will show positive behaviour that goes beyond their 'normal' duties of a citizen defined by law and social norms (Katz, 1964; Zenker and Petersen, 2010). Increasingly, policymakers have discovered this role of residents as brand ambassadors (Braun, 2008).

### ***3.4 Residents as Citizens***

The most neglected role of residents in place branding is that of citizens. Braun (2009) argues that the implementation of place branding requires striking a balance between a distinctive focus for the city brand and wider support in the place's communities. Keller (2003) claims that one of the main objectives of branding is to differentiate a company's offering from the offerings of competitors. However, it is inevitable that as argued before place branding involves a great deal of stakeholders. Riezebos (2007), admitting some level of exaggeration, asserts that applying branding and democracy are incompatible. This is a matter that has to do with the difficulties inherent in the attempt to impose a brand policy from the top rather than letting it grow from the bottom. In fact, this is a growing concern of several commentators regarding the same top-down approach commonly demonstrated in the corporate world (e.g. Hatch and Shoults, 2006). In the case of corporations, however, the normal organizing practices ensure that there is an 'authority' with the responsibility to develop and manage the corporate or product brand, with the right to allocate necessary resources as requested and



with the power to impose the brand on employees (as part of the organizational culture in the best case) who can then choose whether they can live with it and continue working for the company's values and brand promises. This is a reality with very little resemblance to the reality of place branding where political and democratic legitimization of brand values, brand policies and the necessary investment to develop and pursue those is vital. First (like in all other policy measures), because local authorities have to explain, justify and defend their place branding related actions against several types of political control imposed by democratic systems in the Western world. Secondly (and perhaps uniquely in the case of place branding), because the place brand, its values, its propositions and all measures that communicate the brand must have the agreement, support and assistance of local people in order to be effectively developed.

Another aspect that we would like to touch upon here is the so-called 'non-official' or 'counter branding' campaigns. These are grass-roots movements of citizens who in one way or other get together to raise their voice against official place branding campaigns or policies altogether. In some cases these movements are limited to a series of discussions, in others they go further to suggest to local authorities alternative policies and in some cases there have been counter branding campaigns. For instance, when the organisation responsible to market the city of Amsterdam introduced their 'I Amsterdam' brand, a group of residents responded with an 'I Amsterdamned' counter suggestion. Perhaps the most well known example is the 'Birmingham: It's not shit!' website and blog ([www.birminghamitsnotshit.co.uk](http://www.birminghamitsnotshit.co.uk)), which opposes to a great extent the official 'Be Birmingham' brand developed by the city and suggests alternative policies in several fields. In Budapest, the residents' association 'I love Budapest' has actually played a catalytic role in the official marketing strategy of the city. The association started as a group of residents who indeed loved Budapest and felt that they should react to several policies implemented by the local authorities (as much as to the lack of certain other policies). Interestingly, the main initiator of this movement is now heading the newly set up city branding office in the Budapest City Hall.

According to Nuits (2009) who examined the cases of Birmingham and Randers, there are several explanatory factors for non-official branding. These are (a) image gaps (the gap between the perceptions of the residents of their own city and the character of the city suggested by official promotion), (b) the visual appearance of the official brand/logo, (c) citizens' involvement and ownership of the brand (or rather the lack of it) and (d) the existence and characteristics of an official branding effort. All are indicative of what happens

when the residents or specific groups of residents are left out of the decision making and brand development process.

Place marketing practice also shows that a place branding process failing to include the residents in the development and just focusing on an external target audience could lead to massive resistance from the residents. The marketing effort of the city of Hamburg, for example, mainly concentrates on communicating stereotype images of Hamburg as 'city on the waterfront', with 'rich' and 'creative' residents, offering a various range of cultural programs like 'musicals' to its visitors (Hamburg Marketing GmbH, 2009). This image strongly fits the perception about Hamburg for its external target audience, but it neglects the image for most of its current residents (Zenker *et al.*, 2010). This finally results in low identification with the Hamburg brand and even public protest about place marketing activities in a 'Not in our Name'-campaign from Hamburg residents (Gaier, 2009; Oehmke, 2010). Hundreds of citizens protested against the gentrification caused by the government attracting tourists and the so-called creative class (Florida, 2004). They do not want to be branded as a creative city and could not identify with the goals of the official place marketing. Due to the limited concentration on attracting wealthy new residents and tourists, a big mistrust occurred between the city marketing and large parts of the population.

All examples mentioned above (which obviously need further research in order to extract precise lessons from them) are indicative of where things go wrong in much of the current implementation of place branding, which tends to ignore the multifaceted role of the residents in place branding that we have examined in this paper.

#### **4. Discussion and Implication for Place Brand Management**

As discussed in detail in URBACT (2007), there are many different and sometimes contradictory motivations to involve citizens in public management:

- to improve the quality and effectiveness of policies through citizen participation and the activation of their knowledge and resources;
- to reduce the communication gap between public institutions and citizens and to gain back legitimacy for state action;
- to strengthen the sense of citizenship, belonging and care of local environments;
- to deepen democracy and to increase the negotiating capacity of excluded groups.

They are the same for the involvement of residents in the place marketing activities of cities. But even though participation is absolutely necessary for a successful place marketing

strategy, it is a very challenging task. Places in general – and cities in particular – a very complex constructs and the residents of it are even more complex structured. Offering participation for all those diverse groups of residents will be less efficient than a top-down approach, but if a main part of residents is engaged with the place marketing activities the positive outcome will be worth the effort (Zenker and Petersen, 2010).

For place brand management this shows the urgent need to strengthen the communication between residents and the city's officials and to give more control to the people. In every stage of the place marketing strategy a possibility for resident participation should be planned. This process is most important for the stage of defining aims and building a strong shared vision. As we pointed out with the fourth role of the residents, the legitimatisation of those aims is the first crucial step for a successful strategy and a shared vision is the basis for further integration of residents in the process. To find a shared vision, different approaches from the political and economic science were already introduced – for example the *Delphi* method discussed by Virgo and de Chernatony (2006) – but unfortunately not yet wide used in practice. By highlighting the different roles of residents, and their importance for the place marketing and branding process, we are confident, that more positive examples of participative approaches will follow soon.

## 5. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that places nowadays compete for visitors, companies, investments, and talents. As Magosse (2005) points out, “this has resulted in a re-conceptualisation of the urban identities by means of city imaging. This practice is not only used to sell the city and/or specific urban projects to the outside world, it also serves to provide the city with new sets of narratives in order to overcome conflicts in and outside [the place]. Question is then whose narratives will become dominant or hegemonic and whose narratives will be marginalised or wiped out?” (p. 4). Magosse (2005) calls for a bottom up approach for city imaging. Such an approach “should allow the so-called ‘hidden voices’ to bring in their narratives and should allow increasing the ‘inclusiveness’ of the relevant projects” (p. 10). This has obvious resonance with the plea of Kalandides (2006) who calls for a new form of ‘intelligent city marketing’, which can only be achieved “if decision making is widespread – much against the common view of needing to concentrate everything in one hand. It may be less efficient, since it would obviously transport a blurred – or if you wish fragmented – picture, but it would get much closer to the reality of the city” (p. 9).

It is the contention of this paper that such a form of place branding is impossible without the participation of the residents in all its stages. The exploration and clarification of the role of the residents that has been undertaken here might hopefully develop the discussion and contribute to such an approach.

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