A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH TO BRANDING SLOVENIA

Maja Konecnik Ruzzier
Assistant professor of Marketing
Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana
Kardeljeva ploscad 17
1000 Ljubljana
maja.konecnik@ef.uni-lj.si

Leslie de Chernatony
Professor of Brand Marketing
Universita della Svizzera italiana and Aston Business School
dechernatony@btinternet.com
Abstract

Slovenia declared independence in 1991 and sought to position itself. Previously uncoordinated tactical brand building had been undertaken without a brand plan. This paper discusses the most recent attempt in 2007 to develop the country brand of Slovenia. This is the first systematic branding process adopted. The brand was initially developed from an identity perspective and the outcome was the Slovenia brand identity I feel Slovenia. A three-step holistic approach was employed involving all key enactment stakeholders. All relevant stakeholder groups were involved, which is particularly important, but infrequently undertaken when dealing with the complexity of country branding. Defining brand identity represents the first step in a systematic process to grow the Slovenia country brand.

Key words: brand, country, identity, stakeholder groups, I feel Slovenia, Slovenia
1. Introduction

Cities, regions and countries as brands are facing the impacts of economic changes and cultural globalisation as they compete (Dinnie, 2008). Fierce competition to attract funds, foreign investments, business relocations, tourists and even residents is evident. As people, capital and knowledge are becoming less location-specific, places are turning to brands to help promote an environment capable of attracting new activities and key groups (Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Anholt, 2002 and 2003). While place branding follows many of the principles of brand management, one of the key differences is the diverse interests of multiple stakeholders.

Satisfying the interests of numerous stakeholder groups has recently attracted scholars interest (Buhalis, 2000; Curtis, 2001; Ryan, 2002; Morgan and Pritchard, 2002; Pike, 2005; Konecnik and Go, 2008). Successful countries have developed efficient and systematic methods for country management and their long-term success depends on the aligned participation of its key stakeholder groups (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002; Ryan, 2002).

Place branding is an important topic that has attracted increased interest (Morgan and Pritchard, 1999 and 2002; Morgan, Pritchard and Pride, 2002; Anholt, 2002; Kotler and Gertner, 2002; Cai, 2002; Anholt, 2004; Konecnik, 2004; Pike, 2005 and 2009; Szondi, 2007; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2009). Place marketing strategies previously centred primarily on functional attractiveness from the natural environment and advanced infrastructure. However the focus of marketing has shifted to promoting emotional and experiential attractions (de Chernatony, 2006; Gilmore and Pine, 2007).

The perceived value of a place brand is affected by a country's characteristics such as commerce, politics, culture, sport, science and tourism. Generally place branding goes beyond tourism destination branding (Pike, 2009). To convey clear and consistent signals to the diverse target groups, a place brand must have brand identity characteristics that differentiate it from other destinations. An effective way to present identity characteristics is through a story (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002; Pride, 2002), which can be easily communicated.

Slovenia declared independence in 1991 and sought to position itself. Historically marketing stressed Slovenia’s functional rather than emotional attributes. Furthermore most marketing targeted tourism. All the Slovenia campaigns had a common characteristic, i.e. they presented the country focusing on visual elements (slogan and logo). Furthermore there was no strategic plan for long-term brand marketing. Excessive and frequent slogan changes were met with opposition as Slovenian residents felt that future attempts at brand development would fail.
In 2007 a holistic, planned approach to developing the Slovenia brand was instigated. The core idea was based on formulating the identity of Slovenia. For the first time, participation and opinion sharing with key stakeholders was undertaken. Born at the end of 2007, the brand identity I feel Slovenia, was designed for all key stakeholders. The project identified features of Slovenia common to all geographic zones which constitute a typical Slovenian experience. The Slovenian experience is intended to form the basis of Slovenia's emotional attractiveness, direct further development of Slovenia's functional attributes and provide a basis for positioning Slovenia. This paper overviews the systematic approach followed.

2. Literature review

In 1998 researchers (Dosen, Vranesevic and Prebezac, 1998; Pritchard and Morgan, 1998), started to treat places as brands and since then, interest in place branding has grown (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Aholt, 2004; Pike, 2009). Despite growing interest, there has been no agreement about defining a place brand (Tasci and Kozak, 2006). This field of research is in its infancy.

Several areas of research have grown. Place image studies (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1998) are abundant and can be tracked back to the early 1970s when Hunt (1975) examined image as a development factor (Cai, 2002). Place image studies remain prevalent and Pike (2002) found 142 image papers over the last three decades that have directly or indirectly investigated place image topics. Authors such as Dinnie (2004) argue, that place branding studies should adopt a broader remit, investigating place brands from a commercial, public policy, cultural and, historical perspective. Place branding needs to go beyond tourism (Hanna and Rowley, 2008).

Place branding has its theoretical roots in the branding principles initially developed for product brands (Yoo, Donthu and Lee, 2000; Faircloth, Capella and Alford, 2001). The prevalent view is that the concept of a brand is sector invariant and applies in the fields of services (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999), organisations (Ind, 1997; Dowling, 2002) and destinations (Cai, 2002; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007).

Although the literature argues for transferring product brand learning to other sectors, care is required (de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley, 1999; Balmer, 2001). Place brands are built and managed differently from product or service brands (Hankinson, 2005 and 2007; Pike, 2005; Konecnik and Go, 2008; Balakrishnan, 2009). The management of place brands has more in common with managing corporate brands due to their complex and multifaceted nature (Trueman, Klemmm and Giroud, 2004; Hankinson, 2007). Regardless of these similarities the big challenge with place brands is the large number of influential stakeholders (Buhalis, 2000; Ryan, 2002; Konecnik and Go, 2008).

It is now recognised that brands cannot be managed by focusing solely on one stakeholder, i.e. consumers (de Chernatony and McDonald, 2004; Konecnik and Gartner, 2007). Brands
thrive when internal and external stakeholders are addressed (de Chernatony, 2006; Konecnik and Go, 2008).

Internal considerations about brands can be best understood from brand identity models (e.g. Balmer and Stotvig, 1997; Ind, 1997; Kapferer, 1998; Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2006; Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2001). While these models are well documented and used in numerous studies, our literature review showed that there was no one widely accepted brand identity model used in place branding. Cai (2002) proposed a conceptual model of place branding that centres on building a place identity through spreading activation. The latter results from the dynamic linkages between the brand resources, image-building, brand associations and marketing activities. However this model does not provide details about how to build and develop a brand identity for a specific location. Konecnik and Go (2008) developed a framework for place identity, however this is only suitable for tourism. More recently Balakrishnan (2009) proposed that the place branding process revolves around five components: vision and stakeholder management, target customer and product portfolio matching, positioning and differentiation strategies, communication strategies and feedback and response management strategies.

Given the lack of a widely accepted model de Chernatony's (2006) model was best suited as it is easy to communicate, can be quickly understood by diverse stakeholders and captures the core elements of brand identity. We did however expanded and revise this drawing on other place branding researchers (i.e. Buhalis, 2000; Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2003; Pike, 2005; Hankinson, 2005 and 2007; Konecnik and Go, 2008). We argue that place identity components include the following brand elements: vision, mission, values, personality, benefits and distinguishing preferences. This is captured in the model in figure 1. These elements constantly interact to fulfil brand promises at the functional, emotional and experiential level (Park, Jaworski and MacInnis, 1986; Keller, 1993).

A place’s identity, in its narrow sense, is instigated by brand managers who promote it in cooperation with external stakeholders such as business managers and residents. It is essential to invite a wide circle of place stakeholders to participate in the process of building a place’s identity, since their identification with the brand is a prerequisite for long-term brand success (Ryan, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2003).

3. Methodology used in developing the brand identity I feel Slovenia

The process of developing the brand identity for Slovenia followed the phases:

- Phase 1: review of secondary data.
- Phase 2: collection of primary data following a three-step approach to identity building.
Phase 3: development of brand identity based on results collected during second phase as well as relevant secondary data.

3.1. Review of relevant secondary data
We started by reviewing previous efforts to build Slovenia as a brand. These first surfaced an internal perspective. We collected relevant information about the external perspective of brand Slovenia, specifically Slovenia’s brand equity in the eyes of foreigners (e.g. Brezovec, Brezovec and Jancic, 2004; Konecnik, 2004 and 2006). Finally, past and present strategic documents were considered. Those provided a helpful guide for future strategic development of Slovenia.

A review was undertaken of selected foreign country brands, which provided insight into good and bad practices. The most relevant case from the point of Slovenia was New Zealand (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002 and 2003). In addition, we also reviewed: Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Ireland.

3.2. Collecting primary data – a three-step approach
Our first task was to identify which stakeholder groups should be involved. As we were adopting a holistic approach we needed to have representatives covering commerce, tourism, culture, science, sports, state and civic matters. Key experts and opinion leaders from these areas as well as residents participated. Not only do these groups have an influence on the brand, but they are also key to delivering the brand.

Primary data was collected through a three-step approach as shown in figure 2. This involved 3 different groups of respondents:

- Step 1: a Delphi method - a qualitative study with opinion leaders from key areas;
- Step 2: a quantitative study with representatives from selected areas;
- Step 3: questions on a web site - quantitative study amongst the general public.

Figure 2 here

Brand identity elements for Slovenia were surfaced using a Delphi method. Due to its iterative process (Dalkey in Helmer, 1963; Dalkey, 1969), it encourages consensus about the main characteristics of Slovenia's brand identity. We approached the most relevant opinion leaders and 30 agreed to participate. The study was undertaken in two iterations; for each iteration a questionnaire with open questions was emailed to respondents. The first questionnaire included questions which covered the spectrum of brand elements, proposed in the model adopted from de Chernatony (2006). After the results of the first round of the Delphi study were reviewed, the same participants received a new questionnaire. This showed the average views on each topic and respondents were invited to consider whether they agreed or disagreed with these and to justify their replies.
The second target group were representatives from key stakeholder groups. We prepared a questionnaire which included closed questions for the brand identity elements in figure 1 as well as sociodemographic questions about respondents. The invitation to participate in the survey was administered via e-mail, while the questionnaire was available on the brand website. The approach is akin to a convenience sampling approach. Altogether 707 questionnaires were received.

While the questionnaires were directed at representatives from key groups, two questions on the website were directed at the public. The objective was to obtain the public’s perspectives, views and suggestions. Public opinion was also monitored by analysing what the media were saying about the Slovenia brand, reviewing blogs and ad hoc responses received via e-mail. Such an approach provided additional insight into how the public perceived the branding process.

3.3. Development of brand identity
The first draft of the brand identity was based on all the data obtained. This was sent to stakeholders from all key areas, who gave their feedback. Revisions were incorporated and these were sent back to the key stakeholders. There remained some outstanding requests for change and at the second iteration these were agreed.

4. Brand identity, I feel Slovenia
The identity elements of the Slovenia brand were developed from all the data collected during these different stages. The elements served as a starting point for developing the story of the Slovenia brand and are presented in Figure 3.

It is this continuous contact with nature that forms the cornerstone of Slovenia's mission, inherent in the phrase “forward with nature”. Slovenia’s mission is to move forward with nature and transfer this mission to other countries and regions. Slovenia's vision builds on preserving nature through a niche-oriented economy and technological advancement.

Values are based around family and health, attachment to local environment and responsibility for the environment and fellow human beings. With regard to personality, Slovenians have a desire for recognition and are tenacious, active and hardworking individuals who like to receive praise for their work. Distinguishing preferences that differentiate Slovenia from other countries, include unspoilt nature, a crossroads of various natural and cultural impacts in an exceptionally small space, safety, and, internally speaking, the importance and diversity of the Slovene language. These distinctive features provide a foundation for the benefits that Slovenia offers to residents and visitors. It is accessible and characterised by a quality of life that is perhaps more easily attainable than elsewhere. A typical Slovenian lifestyle promotes activity and the wish to contribute and make a difference.
The benefits of Slovenia also include being in touch with nature and the consequential awareness of responsibility towards the environment.

The story created from these individual elements bears more significance than the elements themselves. Whilst some elements of the Slovenia brand may be similar to those of other countries, it is the combination of these elements and their role in the story that makes Slovenia special. The story of Slovenia serves as a basis of the Slovenian experience and should dictate the development of the country so as to provide a consistent, different and recognisable Slovenian experience.

The Slovenia brand identity therefore consists of existing characteristics of Slovenia and new features that are still developing to ensure the Slovenian experience corresponds to the core of the country brand. For Slovenia to truly reflect its identity of feeling connected with the natural environment, pleasantly enthusiastic about life itself and continuously in touch with nature, it is essential that all stakeholders are reminded of the brand identity and encouraged to deliver the desired Slovenian experience.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In the initial post-independence period, Slovenia often failed to be recognised abroad and had an image which did not reflect its virtues. Given this situation there was a lot of interest in building Slovenia’s brand identity.

More recently there has been a comprehensive approach to marketing Slovenia as a brand. In 2007, a large-scale project for building Slovenia’s brand identity was implemented. The brand identity concept emerged as a result of systematically applying several methodologies. The Slovenia brand identity model was founded on a comprehensive approach, involving the key stakeholders that affect and deliver the Slovenia brand identity. The Slovenia brand identity was built by surfacing consensus. As such, any communication and delivery should more likely conform to the desired identity.

All the identity elements point to the necessity of including nature and natural concepts in the Slovenia brand. The term “green” best summarises the core of the Slovenia brand identity. The concept of green refers to Slovenia's natural features, Slovenian attitude towards nature and life, and the balanced development Slovenia wishes to pursue in the future. The Slovenian experience could be called “elemental”. Similarly, a return to the elemental can be observed in the surfaced values. The Slovenian green thus connects the elemental presentations of Slovenia.

The story of the brand is visualised by the slogan I feel Slovenia and a logo designed to support this. The visualisation of the I feel Slovenia logo draws from the brand's identity characteristics, as shown in Figure 4. The logo's green colour evokes the typical experience of the Slovenia brand, and its inclined sides represent the opposites that stir up pleasant
excitement and drive Slovenian’s “forward with nature”. The slogan itself reflects the main functional promise, i.e. elemental. Slovenians consensually “feel” the foundations of Slovenian identity and its fundamental symbols. At the same time, the slogan conveys an internal message by promoting what Slovenia may lack – patriotism and the feeling of connection with one's country. For foreign stakeholders, the slogan communicates the core of the Slovenia brand, that is, the pleasant excitement of people who are involved in what they enjoy and in what they perceive as a part of themselves.

Figure 4 here

Opinions of different stakeholders provided the brand developers with a clear starting point for building the Slovenia brand. The systematic process helped define the identity characteristics of Slovenia, ensuring the key idea to be communicated at home and abroad would be clear and simple. The intent was also to have a brand marketing strategy considerably different from those of other countries. In relation to this, the following features of the I feel Slovenia brand should be noted. Firstly, the principal identity meaning of the brand is generated through the experiential promise of the Slovenian green. In this context, the shade of green is not associated solely with the colour, but also with the entire experience enjoyed in Slovenia. Secondly, the identity story is narrated through its two visual elements (slogan and logo). Designed in accordance with the suggested colour, the logo enhances the slogan, while the brand carries the same name.

The story of the brand provides grounds for its further development. However, to ensure appropriate communication and long-term coordination of the story, the brand needs a manager. They should undertake effective brand management to reduce the gap between the Slovenia brand identity and the perceived image of Slovenia. The manager’s remit should include developing and enacting strategies to achieve the brand’s goals, in particular improving Slovenia’s brand equity. To meet the objectives, the Slovenia brand needs to be managed in an organised and controlled manner. These issues have been recognised by the Slovenian authorities. This role has been entrusted to the Government Communication Office (GCO) and the Slovenian Tourist Board (STB). STB have been active in promoting Slovenia in the past and they continue to play an important role sustaining the Slovenia brand.

In addition to ensuring coherent delivery amongst key stakeholders, the Slovenia brand needs to be lived by residents. A country brand is strong only when residents believe in it and consistently live the promise. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that residents are familiar with the Slovenia brand.

The establishment of brand identity does not signify the end of work, but rather its beginning. The brand’s success does not depend solely on Slovenian residents and key stakeholders living the brand, but on the brand development work being undertaken by the teams responsible for planning and co-ordinating brand activity (eg GCO and STB).
6. References


Figure 1: Country brand identity elements

Source: adapted from de Chernatony (2006)
Figure 2: Methodology – a three-step approach

Delphi method
Two iterations

Questionnaire

Questions on the web site

30 opinion leaders from key areas

Representatives from key areas (707 respondents)

Public

Brand identity
Figure 3: Brand identity I feel Slovenia

Source: The brand of Slovenia, 2007
Figure 4: Visual identity of brand - logo I feel Slovenia