

Successful City Branding: Don't Hire a Painter if You Need an Architect

By Bill Baker, President Total Destination Management

The recent recession is encouraging businesses to broaden their market focus and to offer new services in order to weather the storm. We understand this approach and endorse it - to a point.

We have recently encountered situations where advertising, web design and communications agencies pitch for the development of tourism and brand strategies for cities and regions. Unfortunately, few of these agencies have any tourism or city brand planning credentials. This can be a very confusing situation for city leaders and marketers or panelists on a selection committee. In some cases, unsuspecting locals have been lured by the glitz of the advertising examples and designs presented by these agencies, causing them to lose sight of their original RFP and the role of advertising and designs in the development of their tourism or branding strategy.

We understand why ambitious cities have great advertising, designs and communications. But those actions come *after* the overall strategic framework is established. Otherwise, it is like engaging a painter to design your home because you like the color he chooses and how he will finish the job. The first step is to establish the right architecture with a specialist architect.

At the outset, successful city branding requires awareness that branding is a strategic management tool and is much more than a logo, tagline or

advertising campaign. A true brand strategy will act as a beacon to guide all aspects of the city's marketing, unify stakeholders to speak with one powerful voice and consistently present superior experiences. Achieving this requires extensive research, stakeholder consultation, a lot of creative thinking and a thorough understanding of the nuances of city marketing and branding.

Destination Marketing Association International (DMAI) highlights this approach to managing your brand planning project in their publication, *Destination BrandScience* by Duane Knapp and Gary Sherwin, which states:

"Qualified, skilled brand expertise in strategic development is not easy to come by and even harder to identify. Typical RFPs use the words 'agencies'. While agencies may provide some of the services required for developing a strategy for destination brands, it may be a conflict of interest for a company doing advertising or promotional campaigns to do the assessment and create the promise.

Many advertising agencies or graphic design firms believe that they are in

the business of brand development, and indeed some are. However, the real question to ask is: What is the vendor selling - advertising, graphic design or strategy? Ask yourself, if you were developing an RFP for a large bridge project, would you solicit construction firms to do the engineering? Of course not. You want the expertise of an independent expert to design the critical elements for success. True brand (and tourism) strategies require the same high level of expertise.”

When you decide that it’s time to develop a brand strategy, remember:

- Clearly identify the scope of the project and set clear objectives
- Gain a thorough understand of the process needed for successful city branding

- Have an overall plan for managing the project which may require several specialized agencies and contractors to move from the strategy planning through the implementation
- Ensure that stakeholders are aware of what will be involved in the project and the benefits when it is finished
- Hire professionals who are objective, strategically-focused and experienced in all aspects of brand planning for cities
- Finalize the brand strategy before selecting advertising, pr agencies and web designers. The strategy guides the agencies, they should not shape the strategy.

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Bill Baker is the founder and President of **Total Destination Management**. TDM is a team of destination branding, tourism planning and city marketing specialists. Bill is recognized internationally as an expert in developing brand strategies for destinations and communities of all sizes. He is a popular speaker and author of *Destination Branding for Small Cities*.

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Destination Branding for Small Cities by Bill Baker is drawing praise from industry leaders, marketers and academics worldwide. It’s a must read primer that demystifies city branding and provides affordable, proven tools, templates and checklists to build a successful community brand.

