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The narrative/storytelling approach in brand development for towns

Ernest M Kadembo

Key Words: Storytelling, town branding, place marketing, marketing, brand development models

Abstract

The narrative or storytelling approach is often associated with folklore and other aspects of socialisation rather than a scientific and systematic approach to conceptualising a phenomenon. However, there is a growing body of literature centred on both the practical applications and relevant theory on the authenticity of applying the storytelling approach in brand development and there is evidence to prove the efficacy of this approach in the process. Denning (2007) demonstrates the application of the narrative in general management and branding. Boje (2006; 2008) highlights the story as a reflection of the respective entity in any given situation, be it the individual, the department or the organisation. In formulating a conceptual frame on the application of storytelling in brand development for towns this paper focuses on four key variables which are a) the history of the town, b) the criteria for effective branding, c) the narrative approach in brand building and d) the town strategy for growth, infrastructure, geography.

Lucado(2005) presents the s.t.o.r.y as representing strengths, topic, optimal conditions, relationship and yes. This logical flow of developments shows that the whole process will consolidate a given phenomenon. Ultimately the narrative-based brand development approach concludes that all phenomenon is centred on the story, and the effectiveness of the brand depends on the management of the story in conjunction with the marketing concept and its related variables.

Introduction

Papadatos (2006, p.382) makes a strong claim about brands and stories in stating that, "... the world's best and most enduring brands are what we like to call 'storytelling' brands." This view complements the assertions by Boje (2008) who argues that every entity, be it an individual or organisation is a story and will be known by that story. Equally, a town is known by its story. These conceptual positions are at odds with conventional approaches to branding and marketing in general where emphasis has been put on scientific and systematic approaches in developing the theoretical frameworks in guiding research and practice in brand development and marketing at large. A quick browse of traditional branding literature or marketing in general does not yield topics on storytelling as part of the body of concepts that underpin both the conceptualisation and practice. Storytelling has been associated with folklore and other socialisation concepts that are an integral part of sociology and history rather than marketing. Recently the subject of storytelling became an aspect of debate as to its authenticity as a tool that can guide the practice and conceptualisation of brand development (Baker and Boyle, 2009).

The aim of this paper is to consider a number of arguments to demonstrate the efficacy of the storytelling approach in guiding the process of developing town brands. In formulating a conceptual frame on the application of storytelling in brand development for towns this paper focuses on four key variables which are a) the history of the town, b) the criteria for effective branding, c) the narrative approach in brand building and d) the town strategy for growth, infrastructure, geography. It is the contention of this paper that that these key dimensions underpin the framework for effective story-based town branding.

Literature on the Narrative or Storytelling approach

There are eight dimensions of storytelling that Denning (2007, p. 43) identifies which include, “sparkling action (springboard stories), communicating who you are, transmitting values, communicating who the firm is – branding, fostering collaboration, taming the grapevine, sharing knowledge and leading people into the future”. The dimensions put forward by Denning (2007) make the story integral to marketing communications, particularly in respect of branding and operationalising the brand through what sounds like a company-wide involvement. Baker and Boyle (2009) state that,

...stories have a unique power to persuade and motivate, because they appeal to our emotions and capacity for empathy. ... A story can shape a company’s strategic position, by defining and aligning its brand, and ensuring that its communications always reinforce that story and build that brand. Baker and Boyle (2009, p. 81)

The line of argument taken by Baker and Boyle (2009) may attract disapproval from scientists as that does not follow conventional wisdom where storytelling or the narrative is not considered to be central to marketing communications or marketing in general. However, there is a growing body of literature advancing the authenticity of storytelling as critical to effective brand development (Boje, 2008; Papadatos, 2006; Fog et al, 2005; Ghodeswar, 2008; Langer and Thorup, 2006). As regards the increasing use of storytelling and other tools in marketing communications Langer and Thorup (2006) state that,

... new concepts have emerged in the literature about corporate, organisational and marketing communications, such as (corporate) branding, integrated communication, storytelling and crisis communication. while storytelling seeks to communicate a uniform impression of a company’s identity in a “super-story” addressed to interested parties both inside and outside the organisation. (Langer and Thorup, 2006, p. 374)

Langer and Thorup (2006) underpin the increasing significance of storytelling and crisis communications and further emphasise the importance of consistency within and outside the organisation. The importance of internal consistency is that it helps in cementing a shared vision in the organisation and this position is then projected outside the organisation in the various interactions of the organisation through storytelling (storyselling).

Literature on Approaches to Branding

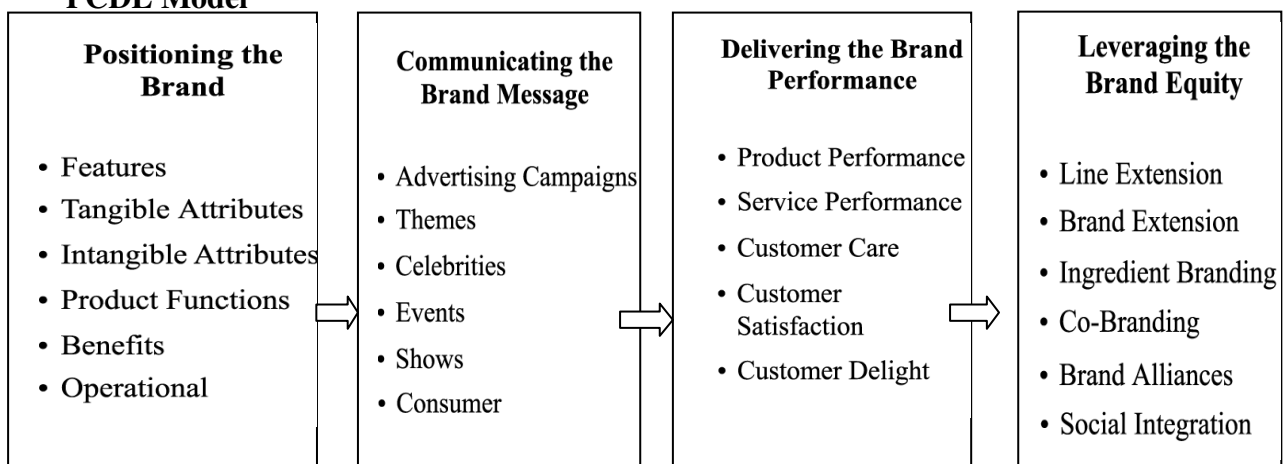
Chernatony and McDonald (2003) highlight the attributes of a successful brand and identify a place as one of the entities that can be classified as a brand. There are many challenges associated with the development of a brand and it is important to plan and strategically position the entity to win against competition and that is the challenge that towns face in developing their brands.

A successful brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition. (Chernatony and McDonald , 2003, p.25)

Simoes and Dibb (2001) argue that there is a general agreement on the wider implications of a brand as a strategic element of marketing; as a name and embraces physical and socio-psychological aspects and beliefs which enable the organisation to handle fluctuating environmental and market variables and further asserts that, “branding is the principal driver of success” (Simoes and Dibb, 2001, p. 219; Caldwell and Freire, 2004, p.51). That success would also apply to towns and cities. It is common knowledge that towns that stand out have a bigger attraction than those that do not stand. In the main it could be argued that towns with stories that are appealing would have a better attraction than those that do not have strong stories. Caldwell and Freire (2004) observed that destination branding is a relatively new concept but all the places can be branded in the same way as consumer goods and services.

Ghodeswar (2008) presents a model for developing a brand which is centered on positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering the brand message and leveraging the brand equity. In considering towns in respect of Ghodeswar’s model it is clear that some towns are positioned as tourist, manufacturing, university towns etc., and that becomes the basis of their positioning which is communicated. While the positioning and the communication efforts help in creating awareness and an identity. It is important that the performance is consistent with the promise and that will earn a share of the mind as its equity and subsequent growth.

PCDL Model



Ghodeswar (2008, p.6)

The PCDL model sounds consistent with the logical development of a phenomenon in that it progressively develops from a focus through implementation and ultimately results more like telling a story.

Towards a story-based branding approach for towns

Hankinson (2005) points out the notion of brand development in respect of cities in stating that,

Cities with larger budgets have however, succeeded in developing positive brand images linked, for example, to attributes such as heritage and history, the character of the local people, associations with famous people, “capital” city status and international city status. Hankinson (2005)

The assertion by Hankinson (2005) ties the storytelling approach and branding in alluding to the use of heritage or history as a basis upon which the development of the story might be based on. Langer and Thorup (2006) argue that storytelling should be polyphonic which involves creating a shared position between management and employees instead of monophonic which is one directional from management only. The polyphonic approach would cement a common ethos across the organisation which is tantamount to being purpose or mission driven on an organisation-wide level and ensures a consistent story for the organisation. Fog et al (2002) argue that the goal is the brand and the means is storytelling and the whole framework is anchored on branding, storytelling and the target group since a strong brand is built on strong values and emotional connections with the consumer. These emotional connections can be brought into the story of the town by capturing features or the history in the story.

Lapp and Carr (2008) take a significantly different perspective on the narrative or storytelling approach to branding by advancing the notion of storyselling which puts the phenomenon into the realm of marketing as a promotional tool as the story is biased towards the storyteller’s perspective of the issue be it the town in question. In that regard it is important to note that, “It is widely accepted that consumers buy brands and not products”(Simoes and Dibb, 2001, p.220). Essentially the story is used as a persuasive tool in building an image or perception of the town in the case of town branding so that the targeted clientele may find it appealing.

... in the UK, cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, Cardiff, Bristol and Bradford, and towns such as Huddersfield, have adopted regeneration strategies that include strategies to promote creative industries. Within these initiatives it is common for city centres to become the symbolic and economic focus of rejuvenating city-regions. In many localities, this also includes the agglomeration of creative and cultural industries and particularly the development of ‘quarters’(Bell and Jayne, 2003 : p 126).

The whole argument by Bell and Jayne (2003) mirror the challenge of restorying as a positional tool in branding and marketing at large. The whole notion of regeneration is a recurring agenda for many cities in their quest to develop an appealing image to the targeted clientele; tourists, residents and investors at large.

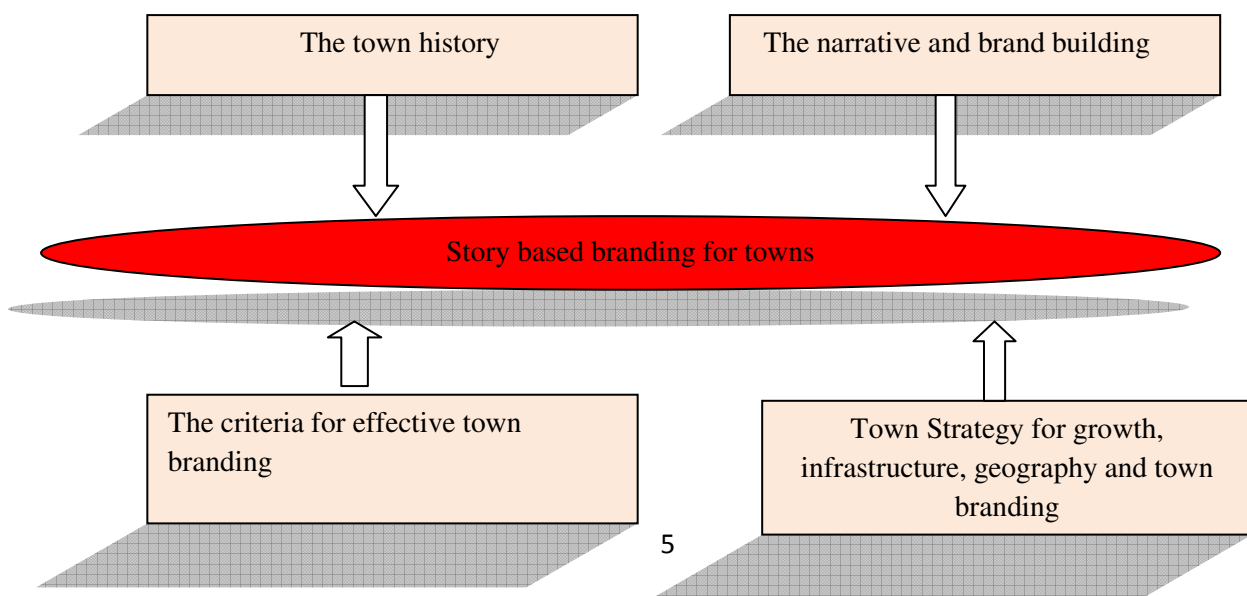
Lucado (2005) presents the story as an acronym for strengths, topic, optimal conditions, relationship and yes. Lucado writes issues relating to common life but all the same this approach fits in with the challenges of branding. Essentially it is important to note that

effective brands are centred on the strengths of the product or the place, they must also have a target/focus, certain conditions should prevail for branding to be effective, certain relationships within and without should be clearly defined and managed as well as that everything is in harmony to receive a nod or an endorsement in the form of by saying yes.

Having considered the diversity of literature relating to storytelling and branding this paper observes that story-based branding is centered on four fundamental elements which are, a) the history of the town, b) the criteria for effective branding, c) the narrative approach in brand building and d) the town strategy for growth, infrastructure, geography. While making this proposal the paper acknowledges the diversity of issues that impact on the branding of a town. The model being proposed seeks to encourage a wider debate on the phenomenon of story-based brand development for towns in a bid to enhance and enrich the conceptualisation of the area. There are multitudes of issues that would require consideration among them the people and their values but the model would point out that a number of specific variables that may not have been mentioned in the discussion could still be embedded in the model proposed.

The history of the town is essential in the development of a brand as it gives character to a town (Denning, 2006, 2007; Langer and Carr, 2008). Towns can attract because of their history and often tourists are informed about the history and that can be an important part of selling the town brand. There are models and tools employed for effective branding (Ghodeswar, 2008; Simoes and Dibb, 2001; Chernatomy and McDonald, 2003). Most of the models employed for purposes of branding seem to consider the value that is provided and the targeted customer. The narrative approach in brand building is an effective tool as alluded to by a number of authors (Denning, 2007; Fog et al, 2002; Langer and Thorup, 2006; Lapp and Carr, 2008). There are increasing proponents of the narrative approach in the debate on effective branding and that line of thought is gaining ground hence this paper is adding to that chorus. The town strategy, infrastructure and geography are important elements in the marketing of a place (Hankinson; 2005; Wanarby, 2008; Simeo and Dibb, 2001).

A proposed Conceptual Frame in story-based town branding



In the development of the brand marketers should be aware of some of the important dynamics as argued by Tsai (2006),

Brand managers are also advised to bear in mind that identity is metaphorically comparable to a life story, which is composed of internalized narrative integration of the past, the present, and the anticipated future. ...so brand strategists should attend closely to the metamorphoses involved. (Tsai, 2006, pp. 657-658)

Tsai's argument acknowledges the essence of a paradigm shift, ie, over time the state of things change and the same would apply to town brands as change is a commonly accepted phenomenon of the environment.

Conclusion

This conceptual discussion has brought together two interesting areas which are not commonly associated but are increasingly becoming a focus for debate and discussion within the academic realm of knowledge. The story-based approach to branding is practical and the literature is showing there is evidence the back up that claim and moreso the confirmation that every phenomenon is a story as argued by Boje (2008) drives home the notion that there is merit in using stories to guide branding. It is hoped that this paper will generate debate and discussion on this phenomenon in a bid to inform both the academic and the practioner's domain.

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