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The branding consultant's recommendation for the re-branding of Oldham town: Weighing in on the conceptual fit

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Key words: Branding, rebranding, place marketing, town branding, positioning.

Abstract

The rebranding of Oldham is a positional shift in the perception and strategic image of the town. The commissioning of a consultant to handle this critical aspect of the renewal of the town was meant to usher in a new era for the town and the borough at large. Oldham's history presents a mixed picture of world dominance, subsequent dilapidation and chaos. The heydays of king cotton vanished over time culminating in economic meltdown and then ultimately 2001 race confrontations. The study reflects on the way the stories relating to the history of Oldham have impacted on the shaping of the brand. Boje (2008) argues that every workplace, school, government office or local religious group if not any organisational setup is a storytelling organisation and that wherever people are involved they are known by their story. The study reviews the approach to branding.

This paper argues that the crisis helped put Oldham back on the national and international map. The consultant employed a simplistic model to capture the ethos of the new Oldham. It is inconclusive if the recommended image really makes a difference in the shaping of the new image of Oldham. The logo represents oneness and seems to answer to political whispers and not well grounded marketing. Ultimately the paper takes a position that the consultant did not comprehensively tackle the key issues that underpin place branding by not addressing some sensitive issues that could help consolidate the development and the image of the town.

Introduction

The dilapidation of the once "king cotton" town of Oldham and the subsequent violence and turmoil in the wake of race confrontations in 2001 created an ugly and extremely repulsive standing for the Oldham town and the borough at large. At that point Oldham could be described as irrelevant and unattractive for a whole range of stakeholders- residents lost pride, the workforce was hopeless, investors saw a void of opportunities, the infrastructure was tattered, higher education found no purpose and above all the place sent out echoes of chaos and mayhem as a result of the scars of the ugly scenes of 2001. The Richie commission was commissioned to investigate Oldham immediately after the chaos and issued what has come to be known as the Richie Report (2001) and some of the highlights of their observations on Oldham were:-

- *Oldham is a town without strategic direction. In our view this results from a major failure of political and corporate governance in the town.*
- *There is no commonly held view of the type of place Oldham wishes to be, its economic, social and environmental priorities over the long term, and the way in which it will achieve good community and race relations.*

- *A particular aspect of citizenship is recognising the challenges which go with being a culturally diverse town. There is no forum where people can openly discuss the really hard issues of race relations, including the stereotypes and myths about other communities, in an unthreatening environment.*
- *Developing the leaders of tomorrow is important in every town and city, and as a process in Oldham may itself help to draw communities together.*
- *The message of this report, in each of the Chapters, are that a transformation in people's attitudes can only come about if accompanied by transformation of the town's physical, social and economic environment. In this Chapter, we look at the extent of deprivation in the town, previous attempts to tackle this and what we consider is now necessary to make a real change. In particular, we focus on the regeneration vehicle which we consider to be necessary.*

From the foregoing it is crystal clear that Oldham was a failed town that had fallen from the apex of its success into the abyss. At the core of the crisis bedevilling Oldham were a number of issues among them; incompatible racial communities; lack of investment; the absence of a strategic vision and direction; lack of aspiration; a general failure to attract investment and traffic that could fuel growth and development in renewing a local economy in free fall.

Oldham had become a Siberia, a place everyone knows where it is but nobody would want to visit. In that regard Kadembo (2009) concluded that:

... a place such as a town or borough like Oldham is both a social hub and an economic hub whose continued prosperity depends on the positioning and sustained renewal in the face of the environmental dynamics. ... the pattern of renewing places is a cornerstone for repositioning and re-branding places that have suffered exclusion and social degradation but that calls for a strategic and sustained effort by the community and other stakeholders. (Kadembo, 2009, p. 57)

Therefore Oldham's positioning or rebranding is effective relative to the paradigm of the time and would need a strategic fit. The days of cotton are forgotten and an Oldham "cotton town" does not hold sway in the modern day. Oldham is a town in the neighbourhood of the expansive city of Manchester in the Northwest of England. While the negative portrayal of gloom meant stagnation, to the contrary; in hindsight that probably was the best thing to happen to the town and its surrounding townships in recent times in the light of its state of stagnation and bitterness. The crisis thrust the town and the borough into the national and international spotlight culminating in the implementation of the regeneration programme to restore the pride and dignity of Oldham.

The infrastructural and social developments since 2001 have not completely wiped out the negative aspects but helped redirect and reinvigorate Oldham towards a new destiny. The Oldham Partnership which is an organ of the town's mechanism for transformation has also taken on board the agenda for re-branding the town. A marketing consultancy firm (Hemisphere) was hired to execute the process of re-branding Oldham culminating in the new image that will now project the values that should carry Oldham into a challenging and hopefully progressive future.

Study Objectives

This study sought to weigh the recommendations made by Hemisphere, the image consultancy which developed the new branding for Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council. The argument is largely centred on a number of key issues that underpin the essence of branding according to the body of literature in respect of the issues relating to the dynamics of Oldham underpinned the following objectives; to evaluate the image of Oldham before the

re-branding process, to outline the conceptual frame relating to the notion of branding, to assess the extent to which the recommendation for the new branding fit in with the conceptual frame, and to make a suggestions or confirm the consultant's recommendations and justification on the best approach to re-branding Oldham in the light of the conceptual frame. Ultimately the study brings to the fore key issues that underpin the branding of a town in the light of the multiple stakeholder position of a town or a place in general.

The Conceptual frame in effective branding

Paddison (1993) observe that,

Rather than advertising per se, place promotion has sought to rebuild and reconstruct the image of the city, allied to which has been a strategy of targeting specific types of activity which both reflect and bolster the image. (Paddison 1993, p. 340)

Warnaby and Medway (2004) argue that places cannot be marketed like goods, ie commodification of places is not automatic but there has to be some adaptation of the marketing tools. In the same vein the branding of goods and services cannot be straight-jacketed onto towns. Therefore the thought process and conceptualisation needs to consider other facets which do not come into contention in respect of the conventional marketing of goods and services.

Cardwell and Freire (2004) observed that there is a general consensus amongst practitioners and academics that places can be branded like goods and services and this underpins the hearts and minds of stakeholders. There are many definitions that have been put forward about branding and here are a few:-

...in simple terms, a brand is an entity that offers customers (and other relevant parties) added value based on factors over and above its functional performance. These added values, or brand values, differentiate the offer and provide the basis for customer preference and loyalty. Knox (2004, p. 106)

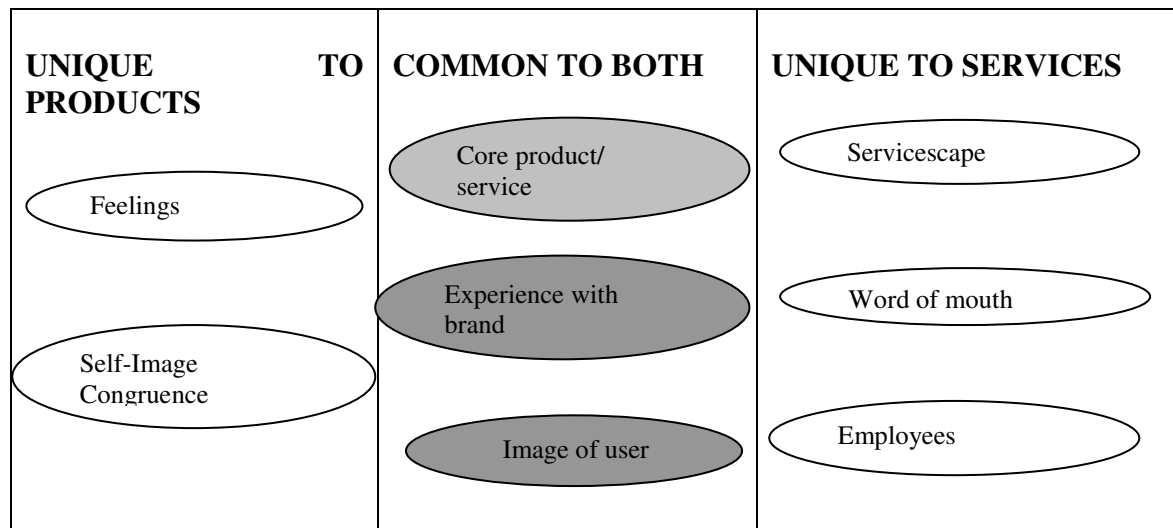
A brand is a cluster of functional and emotional values which promise a particular experience. de Chernatony et al(2003, p. 1100).

Essentially these views suggest that a brand gives a service or a product a personality that makes the product stand out against competing products (Cardwell and Freire, 2004). Knox and Bickerton (2003) point out that the establishment of a corporate brand is underpinned by the marketing mix variables and the development of a brand management system and that ties in with the general ethos of the broad literature on the area. Hankinson(2005) referred to eight clusters of brand image attributes: physical environment, economic activity, business tourism facilities, accessibility, social facilities, strength of reputation, people characteristics and destination size as influencing the branding of a city or a destination. In the same vein Hankinson (2005) puts forward three key points on the unique characteristics of place marketing that mirror the challenges that the re-branding of Oldham needed to consider as follows:-

- First, places exist both as holistic entities or nuclear products and as collections of contributory elements or individual services and facilities.
- Second, the place product can be assembled uniquely by each visitor from their experiences of a chosen set of individual contributory elements.
- Third, places are multi-functional. ... offer historical buildings, shopping facilities, sports facilities and entertainment venues. (Hankinson 2005, p. 25)

In the case of a city the physical structures the behaviour of people, the symbols that identify the city and what people say tend to shape the brand image associations. Grace and O’Cass present a model that shows the different brand images for goods and services. Grace and O’Cass’ model brings to the fore the crux of the matter in the phenomenon of images which is really about people’s perceptions. In the case of a town or a city this is about local people, visitors and any other special interest groups as investors, etc who come into contact with Oldham by way of information or visiting.

Key dimensions for branded products and services



Grace and O’Cass (2002 : p 108)

Oldham has transformed over the last five years. The city has a new infrastructure, has been socially re-engineered via massive construction and reconstruction of both the town centre and the residential areas resulting in movements of society thus creating new perceptions in the view of the stakeholders. Binstock van Rij (1996, p. 20) says that,

A brand image is conveyed in messages embedded in a communication style, a configuration of symbols, and content. Customers use the differences between brand images to make their choices among products that are essentially alike in a material sense. (Binstock van Rij, 1996, p. 20)

Cardwell and Freire (2004) conclude that brands have two main dimensions of representationality and functionality which drive stakeholders away or towards the brand. Boje (2008, p. 4) see every entity from the perspective of a story in stating , “Every workplace, school, government office or local or religious group is a storytelling organisation”. Therefore, Oldham is a story that says something that sticks in minds of stakeholders be it positive or negative.

Key Strategic Issues in the re-branding of Oldham

Wheeler (2006) suggests nine variables that underpin the organisational brand as vision, meaning, authenticity, coherence, differentiation, flexibility, sustainability, commitment and value. In the main this amounts to an integrated approach in the key issues relating to the branding process. As for Oldham one is prompted to ask the questions about the existence of such variables and whether or not they are integrated.

The promotional manual *Think you know Oldham? Think again..!* encapsulates what the corporate message is emphasizing in using phrases as *Great People, Great Place, Great Prospects* as its slogan on the cover page of the 60 page document. These assertions are clearly an attempt to portray Oldham as a place of preference in making these assertions.

The aims of the Oldham Town Centre Partnership business plan April 2006 –March 2009 (2006, p. 11) are laid out as follows:-

- to improve the image of the town centre and promote it as a sub regional shopping, leisure, tourism and commercial destination
- to further enhance the communication and co-operation within the town centre and between all town centre organisations and individuals
- to encourage and facilitate improvements to the physical environment of the town centre and to ensure high standards of maintenance
- to continue to improve and promote the safety, security and accessibility of the town centre to all its users
- to promote the town centre as a focus for community cohesion and encourage ownership of the town centre as ‘common ground’ for all sections of Oldham’s community
- to aid the process of inward investment into the town centre
- to monitor the performance of Oldham town centre and the town centre management initiative

Oldham’s Community Strategy –Planning for Sustainable Communities 2005-2020

The community strategy document clearly states on page 4 that the vision for 2020 is meant to ensure that; *“The world will see the Borough as a transformed place.”*

Page 3 of the strategy document states the mission as follows:-

Our Values, on which we will build a better future, will continue to shape everything we do:-

- We believe in good, safe, living environment for everyone present and future
- Oldham, a place where everyone is proud to live
- We believe in an inclusive and openly democratic Oldham
- We oppose all forms of unfair discrimination
- We believe that everyone has rights and also responsibilities
- We believe in an open Oldham in which all benefit fairly
- We believe in a multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-racial society
- We believe in the worth of every person in Oldham

The commonality and integration of communities is the core of the strategy. The borough has aligned itself to the Northern Way agenda (ie, the development of a significant national contribution in the Northwest of England) and the fifteen year Housing Market Renewal for the transformation to be realised. The main issues of focus are, community cohesion, a strong and vibrant economy, health and well-being for all, safe and strong communities, well educated and highly skilled people, children and young people – our future, an improved and valued environment. Trueman et al. (2004) argue that poor perceptions of a city can adversely impact on the image of a city and have far reaching consequences for its future development and Oldham will be no exception in its quest for a better brand. The different sections of the

community need to be integrated and work towards a common purpose driven by a clear vision with a dynamic champion of the change agenda.

The Re-branded Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council

The consultant, Hemisphere was commissioned to rebrand Oldham in the light of the crisis of the past and the need to re-establish Oldham as a preferred destination for a variety of stakeholders. The observations and recommendations are as outlined below:-

The consultant's report states that "The aim of this rebranding project is therefore to arrive at a strong, positive and distinctive brand positioning for Oldham that will inform all of the borough's communication activity across its varied partnerships, helping to reposition Oldham to its key target audiences and improving how it is perceived, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally." (Hemisphere, 2008)

In developing the new image the consultant went through stages of; ascertaining existing perceptions of Oldham, identifying the image of Oldham we want to portray - its brand, creating a means of communicating the new Oldham brand in written and visual form and devising a marketing and communications strategy to convey Oldham's new image to its target audiences. The framework employed in developing the new brand mirrors Ghodeswar (2008, p. 6)'s approach, "positioning the brand, communicating the brand message, delivering the brand performance, and leveraging the brand equity..."

The consultant argues that the sense of potential, opportunity of youth, accessibility and location, diversity of environment, hard-working and resilient, practical and down-to earth, vision for the future not evidenced or understood, low aspiration and lack of self belief, insular and backward looking, fractured community, issues about the built environment were the underpinning factors from which to develop a new brand. It is important to emphasize that a lot of the facets needed to improve.

The Oldham of the future

The different stakeholders suggested that the Oldham they will desire would be devoid of the issues that have been raised about the borough and its shortfalls. The Hemisphere report (2008) points out that the future Oldham shall provide a better living environment where services are easily accessible and the different stakeholders cooperate in ensuring Oldham is a better place.

The combination of attributes, personality and brand values help to create and articulate Oldham's point of distinction, giving it a new sense of its identity and future that builds upon where it has come from. The main attributes include cultural diversity, a young population, 50% of the countryside is green, has a strong heritage, easily accessible and in the proximity of expansive Manchester, enterprising and home to hardworking people. The personality of the town is characterised by caution, innovation and constructive thinking. The brand values of Oldham are summarised as Friendly/inclusive/contributing, Pragmatic/ intelligent/wise, productive/positive/moving forward. The different elements of the brand pyramid come together to create Oldham's brand positioning. It gives us the basis for what we promote about Oldham (*the brand attributes*), it identifies what our messages are (*the brand benefits*), it indicates how we can make Oldham's offer distinctive compared to other places (*the brand personality*) and provides the clear themes behind the vision for the borough that we are trying to create (*the brand values and brand essence*). In the main addressing the different

brand elements addresses a number of questions; *What Oldham looks like? What Oldham says? What Oldham does?*

The Reality of Re-Branding Oldham in the Mirror of the Conceptual Frame

The wealth of literature on branding and place marketing leaves one in no doubt that branding is a key tenet of place marketing (Kadembo, 2009; Cardwell and Freire, 2004; Trueman et al, 2004) and guides consumer decision making (Binstock van Rij, 1996). Solomon et al (2008) argue that brands provide the recognition factor for marketing success in regional, national and international markets. Bradley (2003) asserts that a brand would be as strong as the organisation behind it, related investment and the ability to keep the promise made which is difficult to uphold. Balakrishnan (2008, p. 63) provides the reasons why places cannot be branded like goods and services as the past history; geographical constraints (location, weather, resources, infrastructure and people), inherited names, stakeholders – destinations are run by governing bodies which often report to their citizens and are influenced by other stakeholders limiting the decisions they can take and personal, consumer, business and government service dependency.

The rebranding of Oldham cost £150 000 (approximately USD225 000) to re-launch a new logo with green a green ring which is meant to represent “Oldham One”, ie a united town of diverse ethnicity. The repositioning/rebranding put emphasis on brand identity or image at the expense of what is on offer. The use of the framework that encompasses the brand attributes, the brand benefits, brand personality, the brand values and brand essence helped capture that diverse issues that shape a town brand as argued by Bradley (2003). The analysis has also encapsulates the story element that projects its history (Boje, 2008) and the idea that place branding is multi-faceted. It is therefore irrefutable that the branding of Oldham takes a multidisciplinary approach, thus encompassing marketing, town planning, social development, history etc, thus confirming the assertions by Bickerton (2000). Overall, the approach used closely mirrors the body of literature that epitomises the essence of branding.

Conclusions

The rebranding of the town of Oldham as recommended by the consultancy, Hemisphere presents an image that portrays the best aspirations for the town in the desire to reconstitute community cohesion. However, the town identity on its own does not complete the true re-branding of the town, ie branding is not only about what the organisation or individual says. From the analysis of the assertions of the report one is reminded about the political implications which might have swayed the tone and focus of the report probably at the expense of a well grounded approach. Oneness is politically appealing but an investor, a tourist; an employee finds no meaning in putting emphasis on that phenomenon. Therefore ultimately the brand while sounding ideal does not seem to make a strong case to sell Oldham as a tourist destination, an investment destination, sporting destination etc. The oneness sounds like an attempt to appease those who were aggrieved in the mayhem of 2001. Ultimately the new image of Oldham only tells half the story of selling Oldham as it seems to be directed to those already living in Oldham to feel part of a cohesive town and wide borough.

In the main the conclusions of this paper are that the consultant’s recommendations do not go far enough, tend to be simplistic and do not engage the gamut of the strategic ethos. There is no substance in sloganeering without a strategic approach, team driven cohesive total

approach cutting across both the social and business fraternities. More was needed in establishing the conceptual frame in shaping a brand for Oldham and a befitting story that would project Oldham is a desirable destination for the worker, the tourist, the investor and the home seeker.

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