

## **“Desti–Nation Branding”: what for?**

### **From the notions of tourism and nation branding to an integrated framework**

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#### **Abstract**

**In the era of globalization, countries compete with each other for attention, respect and trust of potential consumers, investors, tourists, media and governments of other nations. A positive and strong nation brand provides a crucial competitive advantage in this international arena. This paper focuses on tourism, the most visible aspect of the nation brand. Although tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors nowadays, there is a paucity of academic research on how branding theory can be applied to the tourism destination context. Thus, a coherent framework is developed for designing successful destination brand strategies, supporting powerful nation branding initiatives. The authors synthesize knowledge on the subject and provide a foundation for future research based on the previous writings, research work in related disciplines, and 37 in-depth interviews with key-informants in the hotel industry. Implications are finally discussed for the tourism private and public sector alike.**

## **1. Introduction**

In today's intensely competitive world, where access to capital, talent, ideas and consumers gets ever easier, countries' ability to compete against each other for share of mind, share of income, share of talent and share of voice, is significantly determined by the power of their brand image (Anholt, 2004). Unless a country "stands for" something special and different, there is little chance that this country will be able to compete successfully for any of the precious attention.

According to Anholt (2005a), countries have always been brands, in the truest sense of the word. Like any brand, nations have individual identities which are unique unto themselves (Jaworski & Fosher, 2003); no two nations are alike. Based on their unique identities, many countries have been branding themselves deliberately and systematically for centuries, even if the respective vocabulary has only recently been adopted. Whereas the idea of branding nations is still questioned by most people (Olins, 2002), the notion of brand management for countries has been established as one of the key tools for attaining nation-wide competitiveness.

However, the multidimensionality and the abstract notion of a country, as a whole, impose complex challenges in the development of an applicable framework for nation branding. Additionally, branding a nation requires the coordination of numerous stakeholders who are almost impossible to be managed and controlled in a free-floating environment. This imposes several restrictions while trying to build a powerful nation brand.

In this vein, we propose that each country should emphasize on its core strengths and the most malleable characteristics in order to build a successful nation brand. This preliminary work delves into one important aspect of the nation brand, namely tourism. The main scope of the study is to present a sound way of enhancing the nation brand image through destination branding (Balakrishnan, 2008), especially in cases where tourism may constitute a country's competitive advantage, the lifeblood of its economy, and consequently a dominant nation brand dimension. Merging together the concepts of nation and destination branding, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to the scarce existing literature on destination branding by providing a coherent branding strategy framework for destinations.

Defining destinations at a national level, a foundation for the systematic development of a theory of destination branding is formed, by roughing out its basic dimensions and developing a comprehensive framework for tourism policy-makers to build upon (e.g. destination marketing organizations – DMOs, national tourism organizations – NTOs, local authorities). To accomplish our purpose, we first drew on relevant literature that either explicitly delves into destination branding or implicitly contributes to a deep understanding of the construct. Then, we conducted carefully planned in-depth interviews with key-informants from the hotel industry, in order to incorporate their feedback and translate it into novel insights regarding the necessary steps of a destination branding strategy. These steps, finally unveiled with the aid of the elaboration on the literature and the qualitative findings, led to the conceptualization of a preliminary destination branding framework. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for tourism practitioners and an agenda of topics regarding destination branding that call for future research efforts.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### *2.1. Nation Branding and Tourism*

In 1990's, branding literature witnessed the first conceptualizations broadened at a national level. Almost all relevant studies to date, though, agree on the complex character of

this research domain, since, in essence, a nation's brand identity is based on the nation's people, beliefs and history (Jaworski & Fosher, 2003). As a matter of fact, many academics and practitioners have recognized that the image of a country is so complicated and fluid as to deny the clarity implicit in a term such as nation brand image (e.g. O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000).

The term "Nation Brand" was coined by Anholt in 1990's, when he defined it as the sum of people's perceptions of a country across the following six areas of national competence: exports, governance, tourism, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, and people. Each country's strengths and weaknesses rely on each point of this "hexagon" (consisted of the six respective angles named after the key-components of the nation brand notion). Amid the six sub-components, tourism may play a vital role in the research arena of nation branding.

Hence, this study elaborates on the tourism sector, as one of the most 'tangible' and manageable elements pertaining to the nation brand concept. Branding a nation is certainly different from destination brand building, revealing a relationship of 'field-subfield'. Nonetheless, it cannot be ignored that tourism, in general, obviously occupies more common ground with nation branding than any other aspect of a country's international publicity (Kerr, 2006). From a nation branding perspective then, focusing on tourism, destination branding is the next subject to be discussed.

## 2.2. Destination Branding

Highlighting the significance of destination branding, Morgan and Pitchard (2000) argued that the battle for customers in the tourism industry will be fought not over price but over the hearts and minds, indicating that branding will be the key to success. Based on Richie and Richie (1998), later work made by Blain et al. (2005: p.337) resulted in the definition of destination branding as "*the set of marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word, mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk*", all with the intent purpose of creating an image that influences consumers' decisions to visit the destination in question, as opposed to an alternative one.

Unlike many scientific contributions in the field of product brands, the research line of tourism destination brands is still in its infancy (Hosany et al., 2006; Park & Petrick, 2006). The question remains as to whether already embedded branding principles can be transferred to destinations. Increasingly, there is a general agreement among academics and practitioners that destinations can be branded in much the same way as consumer goods and services (e.g. Olins, 2002; Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Anholt, 2002; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Hence, despite earlier skepticism about transferring the brand concept to the tourism destination context, this research topic has recently attracted the interest of academics and practitioners (e.g. Curtis, 2001; Anholt, 2002; Cai, 2002; Pitchard & Morgan, 1998; Olins, 2002; Caldwell & Freire, 2004). However, the interest in the subject remains limited, since efforts applied to the destination marketing field constitute a knowledge-intensive and an exceptionally complicated task (Singh & Hu, 2008). The complexity seems to be inherent in the process of capturing the essence of a destination, which is multi-attributed per se (Pike, 2005). The perplexity of the tourism destination concept is based on a myriad of different products, services and experiences, which are all managed, distributed and 'consumed' by different stakeholders (hoteliers, travel agents, tour operators, transportation companies, local

authorities and residents, destination management organizations, tourists etc.) with a variety of ownership forms, and often without an appropriate hierarchy with a set of rules for stakeholders to adhere to (Konecnik & Go, 2008; Konecnik, 2005).

To date, the vast majority of tourism destination studies have addressed and examined the brand concept primarily from a demand-side perspective, adopting a consumer-perceived-image approach (e.g. Echtner & Ritchie, 1993; Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Anholt, 2005). In contrast, only some years ago did researchers advocate the importance of a supply-side managerial perspective on tourism destination branding (e.g. Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2007; Blain et al., 2005; Balakrishnan, 2008; 2009). Beyond research efforts particularly dealing with destination branding, important input in the present study definitely stems from the work of top academics in the branding field, with a research focus on brand building and the development and maintenance of strong brands, without direct connotation of the tourism destination context (e.g. Doyle, 1990; Aaker, 1996; Davis et al., 2002; Keller, 2008).

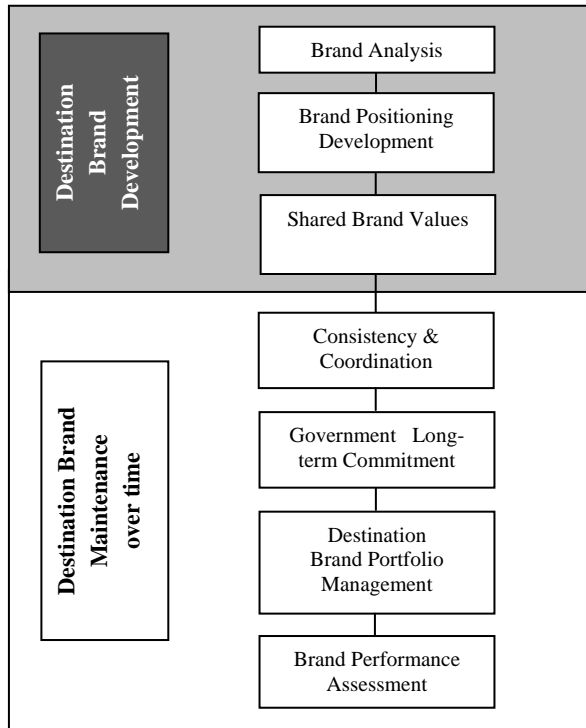
Nevertheless, a profound research work particularly focused on delineating the necessary steps of a successful destination brand strategy seems indispensable. Indeed, a close examination of the literature reveals a lack of clear definition of a successful destination brand strategy process, very little careful attention to management issues and virtually no empirically tested theory. Thus, in order to further contribute to the theoretical development of a destination branding framework, we specially designed a qualitative study.

### **3. Field Interviews**

The qualitative study comprised of in-depth interviews with 37 hotel managers in four-star, five-star hotels and five-star deluxe hotel units located in Greece. Especially in the private tourism sector, hotel managers represent one of the most crucial parts of the travel and tourism community (i.e. accommodation); they are perceived as the principal stakeholders of the hotel industry with a holistic view of the destination's strengths and weaknesses and with crucial role in issues pertaining to destination brand-related policies. Additionally, as part of the industry, single service providers (e.g. hotels) stimulate tourism experiences at a micro-tourism level that can affect destination image at a macro level. Judging from all the above and in combination with the fact that tourism in Greece is considered the lifeblood of the country's economy (e.g. World Economic Forum; Blanke & Chiesa, 2009), Greek hotel managers were selected as the key-informants in our qualitative research design. In order to tap a wide range of views and perspectives in the course of the data collection, attention was paid in order to ensure that the sample included key-informants from both city and resort hotels dispersed across continental and insular Greek tourism destinations. The personal interviews, typically, lasted around 50-60 minutes and were audio taped. A standard format was followed for all interviews, whose main aim was to investigate the building blocks of a successful destination brand strategy. For this reason, interviewees were asked to express their opinion on what they believe destination brand is, why it is important at a national/country level, what specific activities a brand-oriented destination undertakes and, in general, anything they perceive as important for a destination in order to build a successful brand. In this way, we were also able to ascertain the external validity of the elements that we had identified as important for destination branding through the extensive review of the relevant literature. These elements are presented in the following section enhanced with the valuable view gained from the field-interviews.

#### 4. Analysis-Results: Destination Branding Framework

Taking into account the research viewpoints expressed in the literature and based on a thorough analysis of the 37 in-depth interviews, we have uncovered an important number of elements which appear to represent the building blocks of a destination branding strategy. In



**Figure 1:** Destination Branding Framework

*weapons hereafter*" (16)<sup>1</sup>. This step can lead to a deep understanding of: 1) what target tourists need and desire from an ideal destination, 2) what functional, emotional, and/or self-expressive benefits are offered by the other competitive destinations, and 3) what are the strengths and limitations of the destination under investigation as these are set by the history of the destination, its culture, as well as its geographical and morphological settings. Another hotel manager mentioned: "A deep understanding of what we possess, how we are perceived and what our capabilities are, would be of utmost importance [...] starting from infrastructure, existent units, accessibility and all the activities included in an attractive package offered to our visitors". Through all the above, a stable ground is formed for the development of an appropriate positioning.

▪ **Brand Positioning Development:**

Based on a thorough tourist, competitor and self-analysis, a destination should be in a solid position to clarify its unique brand identity, namely what the destination "stands for", providing direction and purpose for the future (Aaker, 1996; Keller 2000a; Cai, 2002). As an interviewee commented: "There are people out there who are willing to buy our product, they can afford it... we can only reach them by clarifying who we are and what we can deliver. [...] Take for example Dubai. It is not by chance that it is positioned as such." (33)<sup>1</sup>. This step results in the selection of a brand positioning that successfully reflects the part of the brand identity that is to be actively communicated to the target audience, setting the direction of marketing activities and programs and creating key brand associations in the minds of tourists and other important stakeholders that differentiate the destination brand in a meaningful way

<sup>1</sup> The number refers to the sum of respondents who mentioned the specific dimension of the destination branding framework, in one way or another.

particular, based on the concession that brand building theory can be transferred to the field of destination branding and merging together the qualitative insights with the extant literature, we briefly describe a preliminary framework for developing and maintaining successful destination brands over time. The framework is divided into two distinct stages as shown in *Figure 1*.

During the stage of "Destination Brand Development", three steps are important and necessary for the formation of a successful destination brand:

▪ **Brand Analysis:**

It refers to the development of a thorough knowledge regarding tourists' brand needs, competitive brand offerings and internal brand destination capabilities (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Balakrishnan, 2009). A hotel manager characteristically stressed: "To successfully build the destination brand, information and knowledge are the best

(Aaker, 1996, de Chernatony 1999; Urde, 1999; Blain et al., 2005; Ghodeswar, 2008; Balakrishnan, 2008). *“Differentiation in how the destination is positioned...that’s the answer to global competition [...] there is space for everyone in the tourism market”*, as another manager mentioned. To be effective, a destination brand positioning must be close to reality, believable, simple, appealing and distinctive. It should not promise what a destination cannot and will not deliver (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

▪ *Shared Brand Values:*

The destination brand positioning must be effectively communicated to all the internal stakeholders, in order to create a common understanding of the destination brand values, form positive beliefs and attitudes towards the brand (e.g. Davis et al., 2003; Tybout & Calkins, 2005; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005) and facilitate the proper delivery of the brand promise to tourists and visitors (e.g. Keller, 1999; Balakrishnan, 2008; 2009). Herein, the words of various respondents are indicative: *“Let’s all feel that we sell something more than accommodation, we sell part of a whole destination [...] we definitely know ourselves much better than the intermediaries and, to communicate it externally and sell it effectively, we should all agree on a common branding philosophy”*, *“...Branding our country is our own affair [...] hoteliers, managers, local agents, municipality, government and so on”* (28)<sup>1</sup>. Local community as well as the private and public sector need to agree with, subscribe to, and enact the destination’s vision of what it is, what it stands for, and where it is going (Anholt, 2005).

After a destination brand is successfully developed, it must be maintained and enhanced over time through (*“Destination Brand Maintenance over time”*):

▪ *Continuous coordination of marketing activities:*

It is pursued in order for the essence of the destination brand to remain consistent across all tourist contact points (e.g. Keller 2000b; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Hankinson, 2007; Balakrishnan, 2009). A hotel manager wondered: *“If you try to sell luxury properties and your country’s communication message refers to a financially affordable destination, then you do have a serious problem [...] what do we really try to say altogether?”* and continued *“...an ideal destination would be the one where tourism practitioners take coordinated actions toward a unified message, a common strategy, an agreed level of prices etc.”* (35)<sup>1</sup>. As Anholt (2004: p. 222) has noted: *“We know from experience that getting many independent people and organizations (all with very different interests, opinions and agendas) to speak with a single voice is a hard thing to achieve. But it is clear that unless such a homophony is accomplished, a destination brand program is guaranteed to fail”*.

▪ *Government long term commitment:*

If it is ensured, it should be directed in a way to support the development and infusion of the destination brand values across multiple stakeholders, in order to generate an ongoing commitment of all people to the destination brand, encourage brand supportive behavior and facilitate the necessary consistency mentioned earlier (e.g. de Chernatony, 1999; Tybout & Calkins, 2005; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005; Hankinson, 2007). The words of a hotel manager briefly describe the rationale of this dimension: *“Governmental bodies don’t need to interfere with the specific business (e.g. hotels) but they should be interested in the impact of it on the national tourism destination strategy. That would be a really participative approach. [...] Government commitment to our destination brand’s vision is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of necessity”* (26)<sup>1</sup>. The interviews pointed out the significance of the ever-existing political responsibilities in this context, as a hotel manager reported: *“They should put themselves in the hoteliers’ shoes on the one side and think as tourist on the other”* (28)<sup>1</sup>.

▪ *Proper destination brand portfolio management:*

It represents the necessity of successfully managing the multiple different *“product”* brands of a destination, in such a way that synergies are fostered, brand assets are leveraged, tourism

market relevance is maintained and confusion of the destination brand to tourists' minds is avoided (Aaker, 2004). According to a hotel manager: "...different tourism products require special branding efforts without ignoring the 'national destination brand umbrella'" (19)<sup>1</sup>. The words of another hotel manager are also indicative: "Consistency between different tourism products under the same "destination brand" is a sine qua non [...] the case of some hotels operating somehow in a network promoting cultural tourism here in Greece is a good example at hotel level... let's imagine how it could work at country level".

▪ *Periodical monitoring of brand performance:*

This process should be based on primary and secondary findings accumulated through tourist and internal based research, in order to identify gaps between tourist and locals perceptions regarding the destination brand and consequently refine, if necessary, the branding efforts (e.g. Aaker, 1996; 2004; Keller, 1998; 2000b; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Ghodeswar, 2008). The need for brand performance assessment is exemplified by a hotel manager's remark: "How did tourism market perceive our branding efforts? Which part of the market did we actually 'touch' with our activities? Did anything go wrong?" (22)<sup>1</sup>. Another manager suggested: "We may have a powerful brand, we may believe in that, but at the end of the day, what's the experience the traveler gets? What else do I need to do as a country destination? And what are the challenges lying ahead? [...] We should mind the gap, and if it does exist, then destination branding should be modified".

## **5. Managerial Implications and Research Agenda**

As a nation's valuable asset, a positive brand image provides the national identity with a robust, tangible, communicable and useful character. From a nation branding standpoint, as we begin to tackle the challenges discussed before and in line with the framework depicted above, it is imperative that specific steps are followed by all potential actors in the tourism sector in order for a powerful destination brand to be established. On the grounds that the nation brand can also be supported by organized national tourism efforts, destination brand building can facilitate the process of nation branding. Inter alia, effective destination branding provides tourists with an assurance of quality experiences, reduces visitor search costs and offers a way for destinations to establish a unique selling proposition (Blain et al., 2005). This is the case of the 'favoured few' countries that enjoy remarkable growth (Kerr, 2006). It is then suggested that a long-term macro-destination branding strategy might have a direct, highly promising impact on nation branding.

The proposed framework, following a supply-side managerial perspective and adopting a corporate branding conceptualization, presents the specific stages that must be followed by all potential actors in the tourism sector in order for a powerful destination brand to be established. From tourism practitioners' point of view, the coordination under a coherent 'destination branding umbrella' provides opportunities for synergies such as targeted marketing activities within the same frame of reference (i.e. destination profile, tourist segments etc.). DMOs and other tourism stakeholders can altogether share a common vision expressed through daily marketing practices based on a cohesive strategy, according to the dimensions discussed. The necessity of such a strategy was actually confirmed by a hotel manager stating that "we should all opt for a common destination branding strategy in order to be at the top of the travelers' wishing list in such a fierce competition".

From tourism practitioners' point of view, the coordination under a coherent 'destination branding umbrella' offers new opportunities for synergies (marketing activities within the same frame of reference i.e. destination profile, tourist segments etc.). National tourism development strategies can be supported by both private and public sector, reaching a consensus built upon a widely accepted destination branding framework. In this case, public-

private partnerships (e.g. regarding tourism projects) may be more easily cultivated. Besides facilitating context-specific policies (i.e. tourism), a robust model of destination brand policy might indirectly support the communication with potential investors and publics overseas, raising country's awareness. By and large, in the area of public diplomacy, international relations and countries' position in the global arena may be partly influenced, promoting national interests and advancing foreign policy goals.

However, it is difficult for a nation to have "a consistent persona" since it seems to be a constellation of various images (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2000). The overall reputation of a country has to be measured, managed and influenced by a partnership between tourism, culture, government and civil society. As Anholt has stressed (2005b) "By applying destination branding strategies, a country might attract more tourists, but it won't do nearly as much to affect the 'nation brand' as when all stakeholders work together around a single, visionary national strategy".

Countries have to go a very long way before they can prosper in the global market for tourists, investors, consumers, the respect and attention of the world's media and other governments. Provided that a strong national destination brand may not be easily engendered, "desti-nation branding" might be considered an additional and distinct form of sustainable, nationwide, competitive advantage. Exciting opportunities are offered for researchers and practitioners to undertake pioneering work in the development, implementation and assessment of a destination branding success story with an overall positive effect on the theoretic notion of nation branding.



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