

EDUCATING SOCIETY: ASSOCIATIONS METHOD AND PARTICIPATORY PLACE BRANDING

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***Abstract.** Places like people have their own image now. It is best to be there, to live there and consume all what this place can afford. In theoretical literature this is characterized as an competition between places to be leaders in marketplaces.*

Places include more and more efforts on techniques and methods in their governing philosophy. Place branding is a planned activity that describes the city as an appropriate environment for living, working, shopping, leisure.

While for already known places it is just rebranding or improving existing image, many local places are doing it for the first time to be competitive.

This paper analyzes the use of associations method in building brand of the places. Research is based on two case studies on towns in Latvia – Rezekne and Preili. The purpose of this article is to find out how a city brand can be created using the associations method. Based on the analysis of stakeholders' associations, the effectiveness of associations is described.

***Keywords:** associations method, brand, brand theory, identity, image, education, place branding.*

Introduction

Global marketplace makes the need for towns and cities to create a unique image, to differentiate themselves from competitors. Technological advancement and increased international competition affect the way in which places are imagined, perceived and consumed (Govers & Go, 2009).

Competition is taking place among countries, regions, and cities with the aim of attracting more financial and human capital. In this context, place branding is widely viewed as a tool for competition among places (Shahabadi, et al., 2019). It is associated with the concept of identity that forms the brand of a place (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013) and image how others see it. From a theoretical point of view, the main and broadly defined target groups in place marketing and place branding are: (1) visitors; (2) residents and workers; and (3) business and industry (Zenker & Braun, 2010).

The story of the place is being created based on cultural realities, historical circumstances, ethnic situation, etc. As a result, municipalities allocate significant resources to brand development and its implementation activities. According to the researchers, this is mainly done to attract the population to the place (Brencis, 2015). Cities are striving towards the creation of the most competitive and attractive image in order to increase their market share in a global economy (Deffner & Metaxas, 2005).

Creating an image of the city applies to marketing activities that perform several city-branded functions:

(1) that support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates a destination;

(2) that convey the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination;

(3) that serve to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, 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 (Blain, 2005).

This study uses the term brand, meaning that *brand is a network of associations in consumers' minds* and is therefore based on the perceptions of the different target groups, making branding a multi-faceted subject (Zenker & Braun, 2010). The essence of the place brand is to 'develop sets of shared values, quality standards and pricing signals even in the face of local, regional and national competition among industry participants themselves'. It is about the relationship between place identity (including attractions), experience and visitor (Govers & Go, 2009). Brands are psychological concepts held in consumers' minds (Baalbaki & Guzmán, 2016).

It was shown that identity is in fact a complex process that encompasses partial sub-processes and that branding is equally complex. Branding has a role to play in all parts of identity formation and should be thought of as a set of processes that facilitate the whole identity process. Effective place branding at the same time expresses the place's culture, leaves impressions on others, mirrors these impressions on the identity, and reflects the changes evoked back into the place culture. Place branding is best understood as dialogue, debate, and contestation. This is obviously a dialogue between stakeholders because brands are built out of the 'raw material' of identity and identity emerges in the conversation between stakeholders and what brings them together (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

Place identities are constructed through historical, political, religious and cultural discourses; through local knowledge, and influenced by power struggles (Govers & Go, 2009). If the right expectations are to be created in the minds of

potential visitors, and to avoid unpleasant surprises, the ‘true identity of place’ should be the foundation on which to build the place brand propositions.

Researches of places and its planning Alex Deffner and Theodore Metaxas believe that several factors influence the formation of the place identity:

- Stable/structural factors – geographical location, climate, history;
- Changing long-term factors – size of municipality, population density, appearance, well-being of the population, cultural traditions;
- Symbolic factors – symbol of the territory, political climate, culture of behaviour of the population, significant events, well-known personalities, popular products, etc. variables (Deffner & Metaxas, 2005).

The study uses brand-building theory, which states that when we perceive something, we use our general knowledge of the world around us to create a more complete description of the event. As a result, our total memory exceeds the initial information provided. The paper analyzes the use of associations method in building brand image of the cities. Research is based on two case studies on cities in Latvia – Rezekne and Preili.

The purpose of the paper is to find out how a city brand can be created using the associative method. Based on the analysis of inhabitants' associations, the effectiveness of method of associations is described. As a result, the study looks at whether it is possible to create an appropriate image of the place using information and knowledge of the stakeholders – residents, non-residents.

In order to achieve the objective, the following tasks are set out:

- 1) to study theoretical literature on place branding and the associative method;
- 2) to summarize existing research on the use of the method in brand building;
- 3) to carry out data analysis of associative approach of Latgale cities (Rezekne and Preili) that are developing a new city brand.

The article analyses the interviews and survey data of the inhabitants of two Latgale cities, Rezekne and Preili, whose questions are based on the associative approach.

Brand building theory

The identity of the place is shaped by giving it a particular meaning, but it cannot be created by one person. The different target groups should be involved in the development of the brand. Place branding is the idea of finding or creating unique items that are different from anywhere else (Shahabadi et al., 2019).

The relationship between place image and place identity could be described as follows: The place/city identity concerns those distinctive characteristics that

historically more or less provide the city/place with its character. The most important consideration is that this character may be either strong or weak. The creation of the city/place image is a supportive tool in order to secure two things: a) to maintain the strong identity and distinctiveness of the city as part of an ongoing process and b), to improve the weak identity of an area so that it becomes strong and competitive, by creating effective cities images (Deffner & Metaxas, 2005). It means the place has identity already, but image could be created.

A place brand is a representation of identity, building a favourable internal (with those who deliver the experience) and external (with visitors) image (leading to brand satisfaction and loyalty; name awareness; perceived quality; and other favorable brand associations) (Govers & Go, 2009).

It is shown that place identity is better understood as a process of dialogue between stakeholders and place branding should be thought of as a similar process (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Managing a brand without knowing how stakeholders perceive the brand is like flying an airplane without information about position, speed, or weather (Koll, Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010).

Constructive memory theory argues that, when we perceive something, we use our general knowledge of the world around us to construct a more complete description of the event. Our total memory therefore goes beyond the original information given. Human beings do this in several ways: simple inferences; stereotypes (a group of inferences about the personality traits or physical attributes of a whole class of people); and schemata (a mental representation of a class of people, objects, events or situations). Stereotypes are thus a kind of schema because they represent classes of people. However, schemata can be used to describe not only our knowledge about particular objects and events, but also our knowledge about how to act in certain situations, such as eating in a restaurant or checking in at an airport. By linking schemata to each other in complex networks of inferences, we simplify our cognitive processes. However, the price we pay is that an object or event can be distorted if the schema used to encode it does not quite fit (Govers & Go, 2009).

Free association technique is the most popular method for investigating brand knowledge (Koll, Wallpach, & Kreuzer, 2010). Consumers receive a stimulus - for instance, a brand name or a brand-related picture - and have to spontaneously name or write down a certain number of words that come to mind. Even though the stimulus can tap nonverbal reactions, including images, the focus is typically on retrieving easily accessible and recordable verbal associations from associative/semantic memory. The external target audience (out-group) shows a much more common and stereotypical association set with a place, while the internal target audience (in-group) has a more diverse and heterogeneous place brand perception.

The use of the free association method requires some stimulus, maybe both verbal and non-verbal. For example, pictures can be used in constructing image of the place:

“In order to attain a sense of identity, researchers-based questions on the sensory and experiential emotions that the material or physical attributes of Zeeland, contained in a series of photo images, would trigger in respondents. They used a series of twelve photo images and asked respondents to select the three images they felt were most representative of Zeeland. Accompanying the choice of three photographs out of the twelve presented in the resident survey, respondents were asked to indicate which primary affective response each image generated. They had a choice of 25 types of feelings. Respondents were also asked about typical colours, sounds, smells and tastes they associate with Zeeland. Finally, there were questions about symbols, heroes, rituals and values aimed at identifying Zeeland’s cultural identity” (Govers & Go, 2009).

Rely on the brand as a stimulus to retrieve knowledge (as opposed to techniques rating or ranking the brand on a set of predefined items), and hence allow respondents to elicit knowledge at their own discretion. Thus, some of the most important aspects of our thought and behavior arise via emotionally laden, nonconscious processes. Returning to and reconceptualizing areas previously relegated to the history of psychology has proven powerful and informative (Elsy & Joffe, 2014).

However, not all researchers welcome the effects of the method, thus pointing to the general nature of the method - free association tasks focus on retrieving conscious brand knowledge (via declarative and explicit memory) while not giving insights into deeper, implicit brand knowledge (Batey, 2008). Summarizing the role of stakeholders participation in place branding process is visible: a place brand must therefore respond to three principal objectives, which are, in order of importance: a) positioning; b) a sense of ownership of the brand and identification with it on the part of local communities and, finally; c) the brand must act as a mechanism through which to generate positive perceptions of the space it represents (Eugenio, 2013).

Methodology

Based on the place branding theory, one of the findings of which is that there are several target groups involved in the process, brand building or construction was done through the involvement of inhabitants also in this study. Place branding process starts with the formulation of a vision for the place, which is then open for consultation with the people responsible for branding, the local population, and all potential partners (Karavatzis & Hatch, 2013). Brand associations, or brand associations, are further grouped into different attribute

categories. In most principled models, associations fall into two categories: Functional attributes, characterized as tangible features of a product or service, and emotional / symbolic attributes, expressed as intangible features of a product that meet a consumer's need for self-assurance, self-expression, and public acceptance (Brencis, 2015).

Research was carried out using data obtained from interviews and surveys of inhabitants of Rezekne and Preiļi cities. It should be noted that the study of the inhabitants' associations was the basis for the development of the brands of both cities, but the methodologies varied, for example, interviews with inhabitants, which were organized in Rezekne, did not take place in Preiļi. The divergent approaches were determined by the resources devoted to brand development, but the two case studies had in common the incentive - a specific location.

Work on the renovation of Rezekne city brand was started in 2019 by organizing several interviews with inhabitants, opinion leaders and representatives of various fields.

Different sources were used to create a brand platform. The historical communication of Rezekne City, research of planning documents, an internet and social network case study on the views of people on Rezekne was carried out.

During the process, 16 individual and group interviews were also organised with representatives of Rezekne municipality, residents, non-governmental organisations, businessmen and representatives from local mass media. Together 20 people were interviewed. Interviews were conducted by a representative of the affiliated company and the local government on arrival at the interviewee. Interviews were conducted with young people of different ages. In order to get the widest possible opinion, both pupils and students were interviewed, as well as retirement-age residents, who are still active in one of the areas. The interview questions mostly concerned the image of the city, but in order to have as various answers as possible, abstract questions were used, which had to be answered in an associative way.

There were two creative working sessions carried out: one with representatives of the municipality, one with representatives of NGOs and business representatives. Participants worked in groups on associations based tasks to elaborate main key associations of Rezekne brand. Members of working sessions were also selected on a similar basis. There were 15 participants in each working session. They took place in the Rezekne City Council. The information gathered so far and the main objectives of the working session were presented at the beginning to give some stimulus information.

The results of interviews and working sessions were collected on a brand platform, which was published in a survey by local media and social networks to

allow people to express their views. Inhabitants' views were taken into account when supplementing and refining upon the brand platform. The information collected on the brand platform was passed on to designers, and it serves as a basis for the development of Rezekne's visual identity. In the future, it will be used as a basis for marketing communication strategy.

In 2019, work on the development of Preili brand was started. Initially, interviews were conducted with the leaders of the City Council's departments about their wishes for the city brand in the form of a discussion and expressing opinions, but the associative method was used in the survey.

In January and February 2020, Preili inhabitants were surveyed; people were asked to fill in an electronic questionnaire. 105 responses were received in total, which were filled mainly by residents of Preili municipality (71.4%), representing both the city authorities and persons not involved in these processes.

Initially, inhabitants were asked to describe the attractiveness of the city in order to guide survey participants to think and look at the city from different angles. The factors identified were nature, creativity and innovation in business, shopping opportunities, transport system/infrastructure, culture (events and festivals, cultural centers), services (health care), educational opportunities, job opportunities, security. They had to be rated on a scale of 1-5, where 1 meant the lowest and 5 meant the highest.

In order to find out what people's associations about Preili are, it was suggested to write answers to the following associations:

1. The brightest associations when you hear the word 'Preili'
2. Personality associated with Preili
3. Company associated with Preili
4. Animal associated with Preili
5. Colour associated with Preili
6. Scent associated with Preili
7. Figure associated with Preili

The afore mentioned stimuli were selected based on the requirements of the city in the development of the brand, so that visual elements of the city, such as environmental objects, could also be created based on the brand.

Results of the research

When gathering information for the renewed brand of Rezekne, a total of 20 representatives from different fields and opinion leaders were interviewed. Most of the questions were about the advantages of Rezekne city in the eyes of local people, as well as the main advantages in attracting tourists and investors. In order to get as much information as possible and get acquainted with the

characteristics of the city attributed by the locals, they were asked to compare Rezekne with an animal and justify the answer. Similarly, three qualities attributed to Rezekne, if it was a person, should have been named. These associative questions made it possible to gather information about the values that locals associate with Rezekne city.

Several respondents named specific animals, but many people could not imagine an animal and listed such characteristics as unpredictable, cunning, promising or lazy city. Interviewees justified the choice of animals by both appearance and behavioural characteristics of the animals.

Rezekne city was compared to a fox, because it is beautiful, or a deer, which is light, graceful, impresses, is not aggressive, others admire it from a distance. Similarly, Rezekne was compared to a bear or a wolf; this choice is based on similarities in behaviour: strength, peace, stability, if needed, it can be fast, placidity, maverick, a leader followed by others. These associations provide information that is not always directly discoverable, because it is difficult to name the characteristics of a city, but it is easier to discover them through associations and comparisons.

The answers to the question about Rezekne's "personality" contained mostly human characteristics, so this information made it possible to infer the values that are important to the locals when creating the brand platform. Among the responses, the most popular options were sincerity, openness, affection, humanity, familiarity, creativity, passion, joy, survival, and more.

In order to get an even deeper map of Rezekne city values, two working sessions were organized with 15-20 people divided into four groups. The aim of the creative working sessions was to discover the attitudes of Rezekne inhabitants to the existing image through creative tasks and to outline the values they want to see in the renewed brand.

In order to achieve the aim, the working groups had to complete four associative tasks:

- Brand's Loft. The team divided a piece of paper into two parts - "a treasure chest" and "a trash can". The team had to write down as many associations, values, projects, objects, customs, etc. that characterize Rezekne as possible;
- Brand's Culture and Relationships: "Archetypes". The teams were issued cards with 12 personality type descriptions based on K.G. Jung's classification. Within 20 minutes, the team had to choose which one archetype describes Rezekne's culture and attitude in the future and write down the reasons for the choice;
- Vision and Mission: Building the World. Each team, in association with Rezekne, had to finish the phrases "We are building a world in which ...", "If Rezekne ceased to exist, the world would be missing

...”, “In 10 years, I think there will be more and more people, who ...” and “In 10 years, I cannot imagine anyone else going to tolerate that...“;

- Brand's Kernel: “Brand's Form”. Each team had to answer four questions from the future brand position of Rezekne within 20 minutes. The exercise had to take into account the conclusions. The questions to be answered in the exercise were as follows:
 - Who are you?
 - What are you advocating for?
 - What is your main goal in life?
 - What are you doing to achieve your goal?

Summarizing both the interview responses and the results obtained during the working sessions, the brand platform brought together the values that appeared most often and were emphasized most in both direct responses and through associations.

The sketch of the brand platform was compiled in a presentation, which was published together with a survey inviting citizens to comment on it. In total, 160 respondents participated in the survey.

The brand platform lists four key strengths highlighted in interviews and the working sessions:

- Rezekne is “Different Version of Latvia” - open, colourful and creative;
- In Rezekne, there is an environment that cares for people, and there are people, who reinforce each other.
- Rezekne is a city that has the courage to create and do.
- Rezekne is a city characterized by rebirth, because the city has always found a way to regenerate.

Strengths were also highlighted on the basis of associations. The motive of courage, splendor and openness was often mentioned in description of both animals and personality. The statement of rebirth was the most supported in the inhabitants' survey (63% of respondents supported it). 56% also agreed with the statement that Rezekne has the courage to create and do.

The platform also outlines the position of Rezekne: Rezekne is an open and ready workshop where you can try original things, develop new talents and launch fresh ideas. 44% of respondents supported the statement. The vision of Rezekne brand that Rezekne city and Rezekne inhabitants create an environment with a huge diversity in a small area that encourages learning and trying out new things, so everyone can find own talents and live according to them was shared by 50% of respondents. Inhabitants indicated “Rezekne is a city with a big

heart” and “Rezekne has sincerity and family spirit” as the brightest features of Rezekne “personality”.

The creative tasks and interview questions based on the associations allowed gaining a broader view of the local people's perception of Rezekne city. These values and a set of characteristics described were compiled in the brand platform that serves as a basis for further work on the visual identity and marketing communication strategy.

Up to 10 representatives participated in the discussion with the representatives of structural units of Preili City Council, who mainly expressed their thoughts on what could be a potential symbol of the city. As a stimulus, a raven displayed in the existing coat of arms of the city was mentioned, however, as the answers show, this bird does not create positive associations for the participants and is used very little in the visual attributes of the city. Consequently, the participants were asked to name the associations with which they would describe the city. The most frequently referred to were the buildings of cultural and historical interest, namely those objects, which are found in the environment and which are significant monuments of cultural history, for example, the complex of Preili manor, concrete gates. At the same time, companies, personalities (especially artists), as well as museums were mentioned, showing that interviewees' associations are connected with practical examples.

Summarizing the survey data, it can be seen that the respondents are influenced by objects and personalities in Preili, as well as information in the public environment, especially in the media environment. One of the questions in the survey was to write any associations hearing the word 'Preili'. The most important were named the following: Preili manor, “Preilu siers”, Puppet Museum, which are specific realities found in the city. Personalities were also mentioned - Janis Eglitis, Rainis, Janis Ivanovs.

At the same time, abstract and emotional feelings dominate as well, for example, Preili is associated with birthplace, home, childhood, parents' home, people, warmth and peace. These statements vividly illustrate the importance of the city in the region, which means that it is mainly associated with pleasant experiences, a peaceful environment and the presence of nature.

A number of responses also raised the issue of the arrest of council officials, which was recently reported in the media.

Preili personalities were mentioned as the second of the stimuli. The most frequently mentioned were Janis Streics, Jazeps Snepsts, Artis Plivda. These personalities are people known in the public - artist, entrepreneur and athlete.

Answers to the question of what colour and animal are Preili associated with show that the existing symbol and colour of the city - raven and green

colour - are deeply rooted in public consciousness, so there is no need to drastically change individual visual elements as they can cause confusion.

Lime-tree, lilac, fresh air, as well as the smell of cheese were mentioned as the predominant scent, which shows that the city is not only associated with plant scents. The answer - fresh air - confirms that Preili associates with a clean and natural environment.

The question about the figure associated with Preili shows that the stimulus to the figure has been perceived in very different ways. The figures include raven, triangle, cheese roll, church tower, clay pot, but the dominant association is the manor gate. Similar answers - about the gate of Preili manor - were received during the discussion.

As can be seen, the study used a specific location as an stimulus without any additional features, for example, a photo. This was done deliberately in order to get answers based on the experience of the people themselves, rather than being directed in a particular direction.

Conclusions

The associative method acquires a significant meaning, when applied to a wide group of people. It does not provide the most specific knowledge, but quite accurately expresses current attitudes and opinions, as well as habits. A resident perception approach is likely to raise potential biases and stereotypes but has advantages at the same time. For example, it offers a unique opportunity to represent a place's common history and surroundings as experienced by local 'insiders' (Govers & Go, 2009). Summarizing the results obtained, it can be concluded that the associative method can serve as an effective method for gaining in-depth inhabitants' views about the city and region by describing characteristics that would not be directly attributed to the city. In this way, the planning and evaluation process involves the public. The winner is not only brand developers but also residents. They acquire knowledge and skills to look on their place from different perspective.

In order to get the most genuine message of the city brand, it is important to find out the values that the locals associate with the city, and the associative method allows talking about such abstract city values like "sincerity", "openness", "purposefulness" and other characteristics that are commonly attributed to a person. The main difference between the two case studies is that the Rezekne association method was based on exploration and acquisition of values, whereas in Preili the visible and functional attributes, such as the gate, were acquired.

Application of the associative method is more effective by combining it with direct questions and opinions, so that the brand does not lose structure and is not too abstract.

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