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# **RE-BRANDING TOURISM: A PROCESS VIEW OF REGIONAL DESTINATION BRANDING**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The aim of this paper is to explore the branding of regional (i.e. rural) destinations from a process perspective. Specifically, it discusses some of the factors which facilitate and / or impede the regional branding process. A destination brand is considered to be that which 'helps tourists develop a coherent, consistent and meaningful sense of place, and offers a "brand experience"' (Olins, 2000, cited in Ooi, 2004, p.113) in that the brand 'provides a story that tourists can build their experiences around'. A distinctive brand, based on a destination's unique identity, is a key source of competitive advantage for destinations (Buhalis, 2000; Prideaux & Cooper, 2002) and is touted as a remedy for at least some of the economic and political ills of most places (Anholt, 2004).

Akin to corporate master branding, regional destination branding is based on the concept of an overarching umbrella brand for a geographic region with intended benefits for regional tourism planning, management and marketing including

providing a sense of cohesiveness and a basis for collaboration between regional destinations and operators. However, research has shown that it is not easy to build a strong and sustainable destination brand due to a number of challenges beyond the control of destination marketers (Morgan, Pritchard & Pride, 2004). Pike (2005, p. 258) acknowledges the complexity of destination branding, in particular the ability to capture the essence of a multi-attributed destination in a way that is both meaningful to multiple tourism markets and effectively differentiates the destination. However, he laments the paucity of research providing pragmatic guidelines to assist marketers in this complex task.

To date there has been only a handful of studies of Australian rural destination regions (Dredge & Jenkins, 2003; Prideaux & Cooper, 2002). While these studies have served to identify the challenges of regional tourism marketing, few have questioned the applicability of the regional branding concept or fully explored the contextual factors and processes which influence its implementation (Wheeler, Weiler and Frost, 2007). This paper seeks to address in part some of these issues by drawing evidence from a larger program of research which examines how the principles and practices of branding apply in a rural tourism setting. In particular, this research explores the engagement of local communities and operators in the regional branding processes.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper is based on a qualitative case study of rural north east Victoria, Australia. In 2006, this regional tourism area was re-branded as '*Victoria's High Country*' (VHC) which provided a unique and timely opportunity to examine first-hand the process of regional destination branding. The research has drawn on multiple sources of data such as: field observations including multiple site visits, attendance at regional tourism strategy meetings, branding forums and tourism events / festivals; analysis of secondary data including historical literature, regional marketing plans and brand scoping documents; and interviews with thirty-five government, industry and

regional community stakeholders at all scales, including individuals, operators and local tourism association representatives.

## FINDINGS

The re-branding of north east Victoria has involved the investment of substantial amounts of State and Local Government finances as well as local community resources. Since May 2006, the regional marketing committee has embarked upon a programme of initiatives directed at engaging individual local destinations and tourism operators in cooperative marketing ventures such as brand and promotional campaigns (Tourism Victoria, 2006; North East Victoria Tourism, 2008) as well as strengthening the tourism product and marketing skills of the regional industry.

At the time that the regional brand, *VHC*, was first launched, it was highly contentious. While some local destinations and tourism operators were supportive of the brand, it met with strong criticism and rejection by others, many of whom felt that it neither fit with their sense of place and identity, nor best represented their tourism offering. Many stakeholders expressed that they felt the new brand was imposed upon them by the Victorian State Government in that they perceive the process of consultation to be token and selective.

The implication of these findings is that rather than uniting communities behind regional tourism, a regional brand can in fact be a source of division, internal competition and conflict. A top-down process of branding regions without genuine local community engagement and participation may leave some local destinations feeling alienated and disenfranchised by the brand. This in turn can result in disengagement from the broader regional tourism industry which may in fact jeopardise the integrity of the overarching regional brand and the achievement of its marketing objectives.

In rural Australia, affected by drought, economic and population decline and the systematic withdrawal of services from the bush, tourism initiatives attract significant attention. However, the majority of regional tourism enterprises are small, family run 'mum and dad' businesses, which run on small budgets and with limited tourism experience and marketing expertise. In spite of this there appears to be a tendency to expect local operators and destinations to deliver the overall brand with very little pragmatic guidance or support.

This paper aims to tell part of the story of a regional tourism area facing enormous competitive pressure and undergoing unprecedented social and economic change and how it has adapted its marketing processes in an endeavour to address the issues identified above, as well as highlighting the factors which have facilitated and / or impeded this process.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings reported in this paper suggest that a strength of social capital as well as a sense of social cohesion are important in facilitating regional branding processes, in particular such things as: internal brand building; local tourism capacity building and marketing support; creating / strengthening brand hierarchies; and engaging local brand 'champions' and leveraging existing local networks. However, many rural areas may require deliberate policies and processes to help strengthen existing social capital or to create it in the first instance. In particular, this case highlights the importance of communication and patience and a reflexive, learning approach to destination branding processes as well as the need for further research in this area.

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