

Destination Branding: Insights and Practices from Destination Management Organizations

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Although the concept of branding has been applied extensively to products and services, tourism destination branding is a relatively recent phenomenon. In particular, destination branding remains narrowly defined to many practitioners in destination management organizations (DMOs) and is not well represented in the tourism literature. Consequently, this study has three goals. First, it attempts to review the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of branding as conveyed by leading authors in the marketing field. Second, it seeks to refine and enhance the definition of destination branding (acceptable to and understood by tourism destination managers) to more fully represent the complexities of the tourism product. Third, and most importantly, it seeks to improve our understanding of current destination branding practices among DMOs. The findings indicate that although DMO executives generally understand the concept of destination branding, respondents are implementing only selective aspects of this concept, particularly logo design and development.

Keywords: *destination branding; theory; management views; DMO practices; logos*

Although the historical roots of branding can be traced back to the late 19th century with the development of branded consumer products such as Gillette and Quaker Oats (Low and Fullerton 1994), researchers have only recently considered branding a "hot topic," with many contemporary books discussing this concept (D. Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; D. Aaker 1996; Bedbury and Fenichell 2002; Carpenter, Glazer, and Nakamoto 1994; Kania 2001; Kapferer 1997; Upshaw 1995). In 1998, branding within the context of tourism destinations started to gain visibility with destination branding the focal topic at that year's Travel and Tourism Research Association's Annual Conference. Since then, this concept has been further explored in the aptly titled book, *Destination Branding* (Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride 2002) and in a *Journal of Brand Management* special issue (Hall 2002; Harrison 2002; Kotler and Gertner 2002; Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2002). Despite all of these comprehensive works, our knowledge of destination branding remains poorly understood and is often misunderstood by practitioners. In an attempt to provide further clarity, this article provides a theoretical review of branding, presents an informed definition of destination branding, and delivers the results of an empirical study that examined how destination management organization (DMO) executives interpret and apply, albeit sometimes narrowly, branding in their own marketing efforts.

DMOs, whose jurisdictions may cover a country, state/province, region, or specific city or town, are a critical component of the tourism industry. The DMOs for towns and cities of all sizes, including large urban centers, or what we term "city states," frequently take the form of convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs). This study will specifically examine these DMOs, whose major purpose is to market their destination to potential visitors, both individuals and groups, to provide economic benefit to the community and its members. DMO members may include hospitality-related entities such as hotels, restaurants, tour operators, governmental bodies, and indeed any individual or firm that directly or indirectly supports tourism. For example, attractions, gas stations, retail outlets, city officials, transportation companies, incentive planners, airlines, and universities are all potential DMO members. DMO marketing expertise and coordination of marketing and sales efforts often make the organization a valuable resource for many of its members.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To support marketing efforts, many DMOs have developed logos for their specific locale that project key elements of the destination's image. It became clear from our exploratory work with groups of DMO managers that many DMOs tended to equate the development of destination logos and associated "taglines" with the more comprehensive process of destination branding. This narrow interpretation of branding proved rather frustrating for us in the design of our study and in the specific wording of the survey questionnaire employed. Despite this, we felt obliged to respect the guidance we received from the very senior CEOs we consulted regarding the terminology they felt was most appropriate in our research dialogue with CVB managers on the topic of destination branding. In brief, while the interpretation may

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not be universal, the group of CVB CEOs from whom we sought advice told us that their colleagues generally equated the concept of *branding* with the logos and associated “taglines” that destinations use on such items as business cards, letterhead paper, and various types of merchandize promoting the destination.

As a consequence, our study largely focused on logo-related destination branding issues. It further sought to determine or identify the manner in which a logo is used, the reasons that DMOs develop logos, the stakeholders and type of input involved in destination logo design, the extent to which DMOs apply the destination branding concept, and the current destination branding practices being used by DMOs. We believe that the descriptive understanding and insights we have gained concerning these logo management activities will be very valuable as a foundation for follow-up research of a more theoretical nature.

THEORY AND DEFINITION OF DESTINATION BRANDING

Our literature review focused on deriving a definition for destination branding that was based on the underlying theory of branding and that provided a definition that was more holistic than simple logo development. Given current perceptions and practices, as revealed in our exploratory research, this required that a definition of destination branding be derived from a disparate collection of branding theory and other concepts found in the marketing literature.

Our examination of the literature on classical branding found that the writings of David Aaker and his colleagues provided the greatest insight into both the classical theory and effective practice of branding. Indeed, Aaker’s definition of branding (1991) is one of the most widely accepted. He asserts that the primary role of a brand is

to *identify* [italics added] the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to *differentiate* [italics added] those goods or services from those of competitors. (p. 7)

D. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) provide a most useful supporting theoretical framework for this definition. Their theory of brand equity postulates that the value of a brand is derived from four main factors: brand awareness, perceived quality of the brand, brand associations and brand loyalty.

Similarly, Nielsen (1995), Biel (1997), Sebastiao (1999), and L. Berry (2000) describe the characteristics of strong brands as having consistent advertising and reinforcing a differentiated brand message.

Another conceptual framework that more directly relates to destination branding has been enunciated by Hankinson (2004). His proposed framework is built around the concept of *brand networks* in which place branding performs four main functions (see Figure 1). These are (1) brands as communicators, where brands “represent a mark of ownership, and a means of product differentiation manifested in legally protected names, logos, and trademarks”; (2) brands as perceptual entities, “which appeal to the consumer senses, reasons, and emotions; (3) “brands as value enhancers,” which has led to the concept of *brand equity*; and (4) “brands as

relationships,” where the brand is construed as having a personality which enables it to form a relationship with the consumer (pp. 110–111).

Hankinson’s (2004) general model of the place brand (Figure 1) postulates place as “relational brand networks” (p. 114) in which the place brand is represented by a core brand and four categories of brand relationships (consumer relationships, primary service relationships, brand infrastructure relationships, and media relationships) that enhance the brand reality and the brand experience.

Further to the foregoing, branding provides numerous additional functions for both buyers and sellers (see Figure 2). Since brands ultimately serve as “symbol(s) around which relationships are built” (p. 54) (Berthon, Hulbert, and Pitt 1999), it follows that logo design can be considered a key component of branding. While the brand symbol may encompass a distinguishing name, logo, trademark, or package design, logos often become a central brand image representation of products, services, or destinations.

For tourism destinations, we strongly support the idea that the concept of the visitor *experience* (identified as a critical tourism concept by Ryan [2002]) needs to be incorporated into the process of branding (L. Berry 2000; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Research has demonstrated that although visitors purchase individual tourism services, the entire visitor experience is what is effectively being bought (Otto and Ritchie 1996). In an attempt to incorporate the importance of the symbolic representation of the brand, we note further that Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) have defined a “destination brand” as

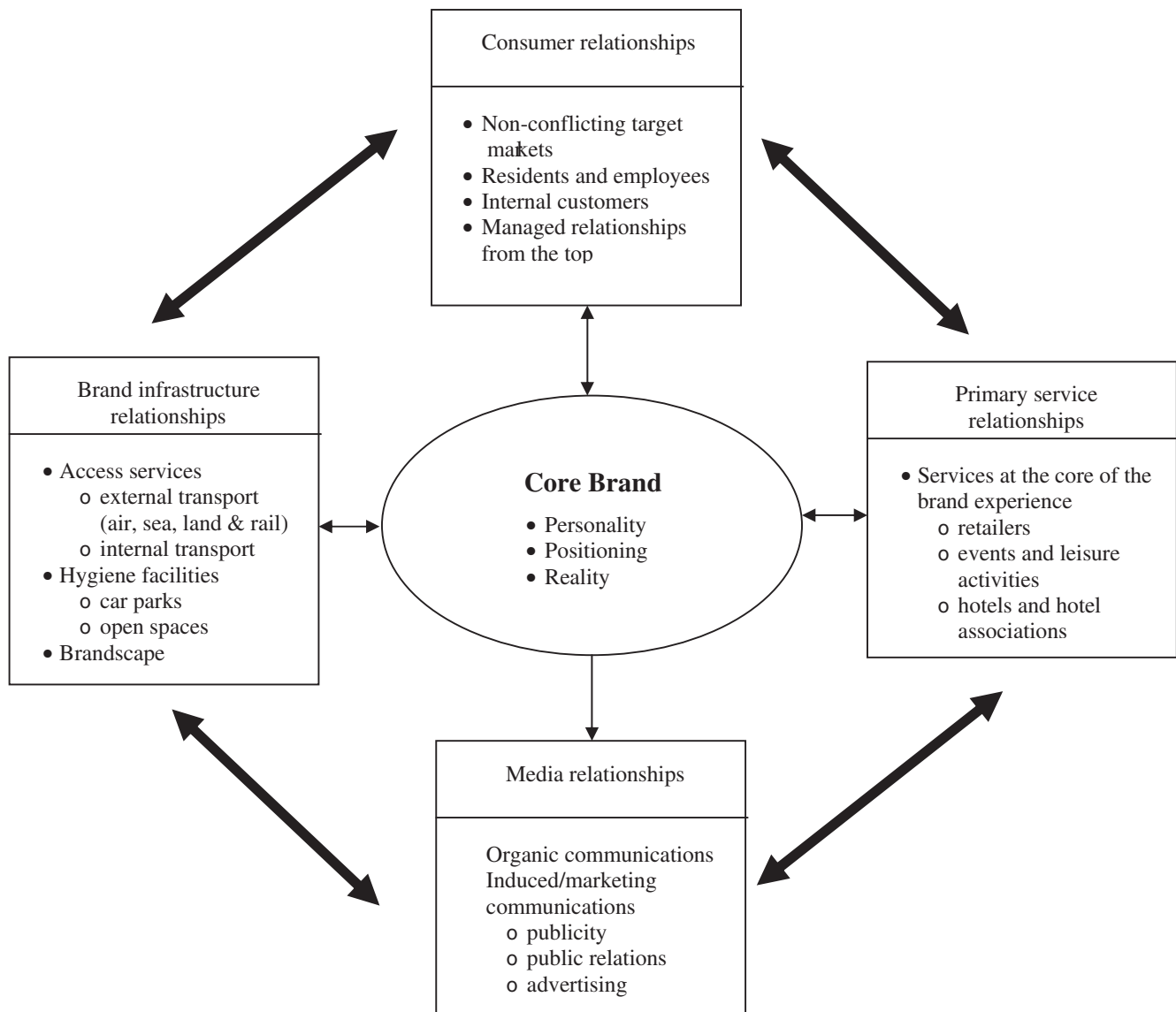
a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both *identifies* and *differentiates* the destination; furthermore, it conveys the *promise* of a memorable travel *experience* that is uniquely associated with the destination; it also serves to *consolidate* and *reinforce* the recollection of pleasurable *memories* of the destination experience. (P. 103; italics added)

As seen, this definition addresses D. Aaker’s (1990) core branding concepts (identification and differentiation) while drawing from of the concept of experiences marketing (e.g., Pine and Gilmore 1999; Schmitt and Simonson 1997).

The promise of a brand is just as important, if not more so, for destinations than it is for other service organizations. Although the promise is not necessarily a guarantee, it extends a degree of comfort to visitors, as they can more fully and accurately anticipate their imminent or upcoming vacation experience. As with other service organizations, if the promise cannot be delivered, the visitor is dissatisfied. Admittedly, the term *promise* may be somewhat too strong a term for DMOs as it implies a guarantee for a very complex entity. Such a complex experience is difficult to guarantee every time, given the variable nature of tourism products and the fact that all its elements are not under the control, or even the direct influence, of the DMO. This lack of DMO control over the entire visitor experience may contribute to the underdevelopment of destination identities and lead to the perception by the general public that destinations are not brands (Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2002).

The definition of branding adopted for this research combines the previously discussed branding concepts with the concepts of *destination image* (Morgan and Pritchard 1999)

FIGURE 1
PLACES AS RELATIONAL BRAND NETWORKS



Source: Hankinson (2004).

and the fact that the brand should ultimately influence destination choice. According to Echtner and Ritchie (1991), destination image is defined as “not only the perceptions of individual destination attributes but also the holistic impression made by the destination” (p. 8). Destination image has been shown to be a significant factor in determining visitor choice (Lee, O’Leary, and Hong 2002). So as the competition for tourists and their spending dollars continues to increase, it follows that a definition of destination branding should include the concepts of *destination image* and *competitiveness*.

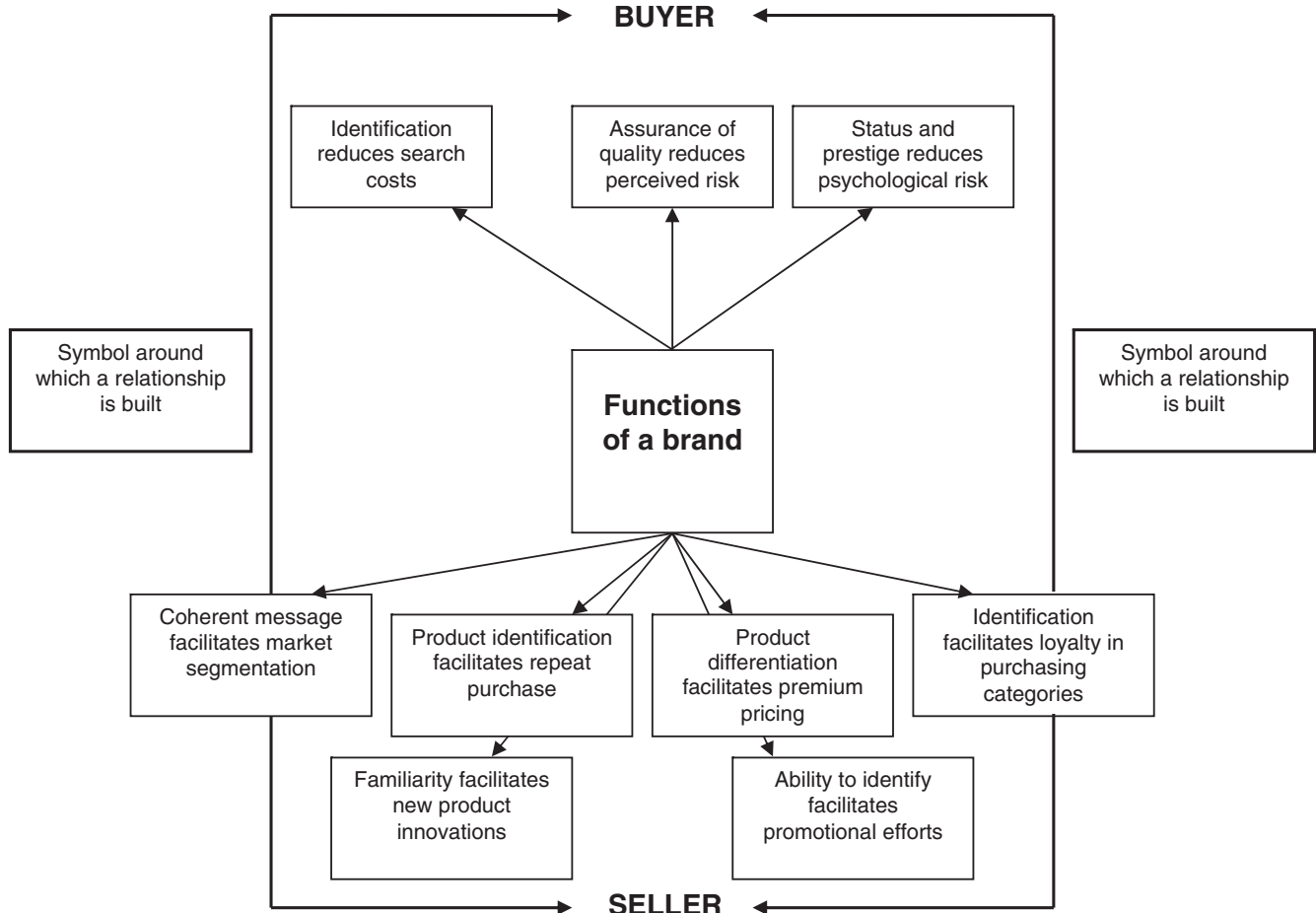
We emphasize at this point that from a theoretical perspective, the above definition essentially reflects the seller’s point of view (see Figure 2). Figure 2 also conveys that theory dictates that we must understand a brand from the buyer’s perspective (Woodside 1982), in which the brand reduces search costs as well as reduces perceived and

psychological risk. Specifically, effective destination branding provides visitors with an assurance of quality experiences, reduces visitor search costs, and offers a way for destinations to establish a unique selling proposition.

Assurance of Quality

A recognized brand is a promise to consumers who generally know what to expect from that brand and trust that their expectations will be met. Viewed within a hospitality context, visitors will likely expect high-quality facilities and customer service at an upscale internationally recognized chain (brand) of hotels. At the same time, visitors can also expect to pay a premium for this assurance of quality and reduction of perceived risk. L. Berry (2000) states that “a brand reduces customers’ perceived monetary, social, or safety risk in buying services, which are difficult to evaluate

FIGURE 2
FUNCTIONS OF A BRAND FOR THE BUYER AND SELLER



Source: Berthon, Hulbert, and Pitt (1999).

prior to purchase” (p. 128). It is admittedly more difficult for destinations to assure quality because of the variance of products and services a given visitor experiences within a destination. However, strong coordination between the DMO and destination stakeholders in shaping a common vision and developing consistent visitor experiences can help ensure that visitors expect, and receive, a high-quality destination experience.

Reduction of Search Costs

It is suggested that consumers use a more extensive purchase process for premium goods relative to lower priced products (Smith 2000). Numerous empirical studies report relationships between information search costs and product price (Bucklin 1966; Keil and Layton 1981; Newman and Staelin 1972; Weitzman 1979). Since vacation travel often entails significant consumer expenditures, it is therefore likely that prospective visitors spend significant time and energy determining the destination that will be visited. A high and positive destination brand awareness reduces the need for detailed information search and contributes toward a destination ultimately becoming the destination of choice for the visitor (Seddighi and Theocharous 2002).

Establishing Destination Uniqueness—Destination Differentiation

Many destinations promote similar attributes such as scenery, history, and culture. However, effective destination branding requires a unique selling proposition that is sustainable, believable, and relevant and that “the competition wants and is maybe able to copy but which they cannot surpass or usurp” (Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2002, p. 21). This differentiation is critical in the determination of destination choice. It can also help limit discounting (J. Aaker 1997) and prevent slippage into the maturation phase of the destination life cycle.

Accordingly, we refined and enhanced the previously cited branding definition of Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) and introduced the following definition to DMO practitioners:

the marketing activities (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; and (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.

As is evident, our proposed modifications add a phrase that emphasizes the importance of branding in influencing the consumer decision process regarding the choice of a destination to visit.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESTINATION BRANDING

Empirical research has demonstrated that branding enhances destination image among visitors and assists DMOs in measuring achievements. Branding successes include the Courtyard by Marriott (Alford 1998), Forte Hotels (Connell 1994), and Florida (American Marketing Association 1997). In addition, the 1998 Annual Travel and Tourism Research Association conference reported a number of destination branding success stories. These included New York; Tasmania, Australia; Canada; New Orleans, Louisiana; Texas; and Oregon. The success stories of two smaller destinations, Fredericksburg, Texas, and Branson, Missouri, also demonstrated how branding can be a positive force for municipalities. The branding success for hospitality firms (Beirne 1999; Higley 1999; Hodge 1998; Salomon 1998) has also been evidenced.

Different aspects of the branding concept have been described by the Canadian Tourism Commission (2004), Alford (1998), and Henry (1998). From a nation branding standpoint, Hamilton (2000) viewed Scotland as uniquely strong in integrity, inventiveness, tenacity, and spirit. All of the studies stressed the importance of reinforcing a unique image or personality as well as differentiating the destination from competitors.

THE CENTRALITY OF LOGOS IN BRANDING

One does not need to look further than the Coca-Cola signature, the McDonald's golden arches, or the Nike swoosh to understand the importance of logos in establishing brand identity and enhancing brand equity. Logos are considered graphic designs (with or without words or "taglines") and are used by companies to identify the firm and/or products that they create (Bennett 1995). As logos help raise consumer awareness of the brands they represent (N. Berry 1989), companies are spending vast sums of money on promoting them (van Riel and van den Ban 2001).

Logos perform numerous functions in establishing and enhancing corporate brands. They are "one of the main vehicles for communicating image, cutting through clutter to gain attention, and speeding recognition of the product or company" (Henderson and Cote 1998, p. 15). In today's world of increased standardization because of globalization, logos play a critical role in creating a readily identifiable, distinctive image for differentiating the product, service, or firm that employs effective visual stimuli (Henderson et al. 2003).

These visual cues can enhance firm reputation and serve as a competitive advantage (Baker and Balmer 1997).

Within the context of tourism, destination logos can facilitate many DMO marketing activities to establish brand image and identity, particularly relevant before the actual visitor experience. As consumers can choose among thousands of destinations to visit, logos can effectively stimulate awareness and communicate desired attributes (van Riel and van den Ban 2001) to visitors, thereby reducing search costs and influencing visitor choice behavior, particularly if the logo "connects" with the target markets that the DMO is attempting to attract by positively symbolizing the anticipated visitor experience.

This research does not examine the elements and determinants of effective logos, which have been explored extensively by marketing practitioners and academics (e.g., Robertson 1989; Vartorella 1990). Although logos are critical components of establishing destination brand identity and image, no tourism-specific literature has addressed elements of the logo development and design process. This study offers some insight into the DMO practitioner view of destination branding, particularly as it relates to aspects of logo creation and use.

AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DESTINATION BRANDING

In an attempt to provide some insight into current destination branding practices, we undertook the following survey of a particular subset of DMOs.

Methodology

The final questionnaire used in our survey was based on both our literature review and interviews with practitioners. The survey instrument was pretested with four senior DMO marketing managers. After several iterations of testing and incorporating comments, the design was finalized. The sampling frame in this study consisted of members of the International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus (IACVB). The survey questionnaire was sent by fax to the senior executive in 409 DMOs (369 in the United States, 14 in Canada, and 26 in other countries). Because of problems with faxing internationally, 14 of the surveys were mailed to international DMOs. Many DMOs, particularly smaller entities, are not IACVB members. As a result, the data cannot be generalized beyond the group of DMOs who responded. From our respondents for which total funding statistics have been reported, 50% have annual budgets that are less than \$2 million. The range of DMO budgets is from \$98,500 (Livingston Country, Michigan Visitors Bureau) to more than \$116 million dollars (Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority). This indicates that our sample reflects the IACVB member spectrum (see Table 1).

In most cases, the questionnaires were sent directly to the executive by name. When a name was not available, it was requested that the questionnaire be completed by a person who was most familiar with the marketing process of the bureau in question. Although the results show that the title of

TABLE 1
A FUNDING COMPARISON BETWEEN DMO RESPONDENTS IN THIS STUDY SAMPLE AND THE 1998 IACVB FINANCIAL SURVEY SAMPLE

Total DMO Funding	Study Sample (n = 56) ^a		IACVB Sample (n = 170) ^b	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Less than \$500,000	7	12.5	30	17.6
\$500,000–\$999,999	5	8.9	33	19.4
\$1,000,000–\$1,999,999	16	28.6	30	17.6
\$2,000,000–\$4,999,999	13	23.2	30	17.6
\$5,000,000–\$9,999,999	10	17.9	29	17.1
\$10,000,000 or More	5	8.9	18	10.6
Total	56	100.0	170	100.0

Source: International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus (1998).
 Note: DMO = Destination management organizations; CVB = convention and visitor bureaus; IACVB = International Association of Convention and Visitor Bureaus.

a. Of the 99 DMOs in the study sample, financial budgets were reported by 56 of the DMOs in the 1998 IACVB Foundation CVB Financial Survey.

b. Of 420 DMO members of the IACVB in 1998, 170 reported financial budgets in the 1998 IACVB Foundation CVB Financial Survey.

the respondent often varied, a person who intimately understood the DMO marketing process (e.g., president, director, marketing manager, communications vice president) completed the survey. With the inclusion of a fax reminder to the DMOs that did not initially respond, 99 of the 409 surveys were collected, providing an overall response rate of 24.2%.

The Survey Instrument

The first section of the survey focused on destination logo design and development, considered particularly critical activities by DMO executives. In this section, respondents were asked if their destination had a logo and, if so, to rate the importance (from *not at all important* to *very important*) of eight reasons for logo design, including “to support our destination image,” “to differentiate us from other destinations,” and “to have a label that describes us.” Respondents were also asked the extent (from *not at all* to *a great extent*) to which stakeholders, including the DMO president, marketing manager, and members, were involved during logo design. Next, we asked respondents to describe their conceptual understanding of destination branding. As described in the following section, comments were solicited on the definition of destination branding that was supplied earlier. Then, several questions were asked to gauge the effect of destination branding on visitor perceptions, with respondents being asked to provide an image statement that they felt described their destination.

RESULTS

Most (97%) of the DMOs responding to the survey reported having a logo for their destination. However, the results of the reminder fax (which allowed DMOs to indicate why they did not initially respond) illustrated that a substantial number of nonresponding DMOs (30%) do not have logos and for this reason initially decided not to complete the questionnaire. Although this could be because of a variety of

TABLE 2
DMO REASONS FOR DESTINATION LOGO DESIGN

Reason	M	SD
Supports our destination image	4.78	0.512
Provides a label that describes us	4.66	0.654
Differentiates us from other destinations	4.59	0.649
Creates a consistent image of what guests can expect to experience	4.24	0.981
For use on merchandise	4.05	1.004
Supports the overall vision and strategic plan of the organization	3.89	0.96
Unites all destination firms/organizations under one symbol	3.68	1.084
Ensures copyright protection	3.43	1.066

Note: Ranked using a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*). DMO = Destination management organizations.

reasons, including scant resources for logo development, it could also reflect a lack of branding awareness and sophistication among many DMOs.

DMO Use of Logos

DMOs with destination logos traditionally use their logos in print materials (98% of respondents), on merchandise (73%), and in videos (68%). These results indicate that DMOs are using logos in multiple media, which contributes to enhancing brand identity and creating a consistent and distinctive image (Kohli, Suri, and Thakor 2002).

DMO Reasons for Logo Design

The respondents were asked, using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*), to rate the importance of different reasons for destination logo design. Eight measures were identified from our

TABLE 3
PAIRED SAMPLE T-TEST OF DMO REASONS FOR DESTINATION LOGO DESIGN

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Supports our destination image	—							
2. Provides a label that describes us	.063	—						
3. Differentiates us from other destinations	.005*	.434	—					
4. Creates a consistent image of what guests can expect to experience	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	—				
5. For use on merchandise	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	.179	—			
6. Supports the overall vision and strategic plan of the organization	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	.011*	.188	—		
7. Unites all destination firms/organizations under one symbol	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	.14	—	
8. Ensures copyright protection	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	< .001*	.082	—

Note: DMO = Destination management organizations.

* $p < .05$.

exploratory research with DMO executives (see Table 2). Researchers conducted a general linear model (GLM) one-way repeated measure ANOVA with a significance level of .05, which demonstrated that the tests of within-subjects effects were highly significant as shown by $F(7, 630 = 34.947, p < .001)$. Pairwise t -tests were then used to determine statistical differences between the means of the seven reasons for logo design (see Table 3). Of the reasons supplied, the most important three reasons were “to support our destination image,” “provide a label that describes us,” and to “differentiate us from other destinations” (see Tables 2 and 3). Respondents were also prompted to list other measures of importance in logo design. However, the few additional reasons provided did not shed any new light beyond the eight included measures.

The responses to this question on the reasons for logo design revealed a close linkage between image and branding. DMOs apparently believe that branding efforts play a critical part in supporting the image that they wished to be conveyed. Although Morgan, Pritchard, and Pride (2002) believe that a destination’s brand personality cannot be adequately described within the confines of a page, DMO respondents strongly believed that logos exist to provide a succinct label for the destination, possibly to aid in recall and enhance brand awareness. Product differentiation was another critical reason for developing a logo, supporting past research indicating that differentiation is an essential element of a strong brand. Regardless of whether the particular destination logo actually differentiates the destination, respondent awareness of differentiation as an important measure in destination branding suggests DMO’s understanding of the branding concept.

In addition, DMOs recognized the critical need to achieve consistency, if not in actual product and experience, at least in the minds of potential consumers as they construct an image of the destination. This is related to the assurance of quality and the promise to consumers of an enjoyable vacation experience, particularly to those who are more risk averse and rely on a vacation experience with no real surprises. The sale of merchandise to visitors provides income for many hospitality-related firms at the destination, possibly including the DMOs themselves. As a result, the use of logos on merchandise was considered important and might also provide opportunities for visitors to reflect on vacation

TABLE 4
STAKEHOLDER INFLUENCE ON LOGO DESIGN

Stakeholder	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
President ($n = 89$)	4.37	1.122
Marketing manager ($n = 77$)	4.35	1.023
Outside consultant ($n = 83$)	4.28	1.063
Marketing/communications staff ($n = 81$)	4.22	1.037
Marketing committee ($n = 65$)	3.49	1.522
Board of directors ($n = 90$)	3.41	1.348
Members ($n = 70$)	2.79	1.423

Note: Ranked using a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*).

experiences once back home by drinking out of a branded mug (or shot glass) or wearing a branded T-shirt, which also has the added value of creating additional exposure for the destination. Finally, respondents also believed that logos can ensure copyright protection, which may signal perceived problems created by opportunistic privately held firms that might possibly “hijack” the destination image.

Stakeholder Involvement and Input Into Destination Logo Design

To determine the players involved in the logo design process, DMO respondents were asked to indicate the level of influence exerted by key stakeholders (Table 4). The DMO president and marketing manager appeared to be among the most influential, while DMO members were reported to be the least involved in designing the destination logo. Although DMOs exist to serve their membership, members still ranked low on the list of influential stakeholders in the determination of the destination logo, which is ultimately used to represent member products and services. Perhaps DMO executives believe that there are too many competing forces within their membership to result in a politically feasible, all-inclusive logo design process.

Logos are traditionally designed to reflect the image of a product or service. For destinations, the image is intended to convey the overall idea of the experience a visitor can anticipate at the destination. Therefore, it would seem logical that

TABLE 5
LOGO DESIGN INVOLVEMENT AND PRETESTING

	<i>Not at All</i>			<i>Great Extent</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5
Extent of stakeholder involvement in logo design (for all DMO respondents)					
Visitor involvement (%)	40	20	14	17	9
Tourism business involvement (%)	35	19	17	24	5
Extent of stakeholder involvement in logo design when a consultant was used					
Visitor involvement (%)	42	19	14	17	9
Tourism business involvement (%)	32	19	17	27	5
Extent of DMO logo pretesting					
DMO pretesting of logos (%)	36	19	20	17	9

Note: Ranked using a Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a great extent*). DMO = Destination management organizations.

local hospitality firms, which strongly influence the nature and quality of this experience, should have input into the branding process and the logo design.

Furthermore, since one of destination branding's main purposes is to attract visitors, the input of past and potential visitors may also provide valuable design insights. With these thoughts in mind, respondents were asked to indicate the extent, from *not at all* to *a great extent*, that hospitality firms and visitors had been involved in the logo design process. As shown in Table 5, many DMOs did not involve local hospitality firms (35%) or visitors (40%) in the logo design process to any extent. A lesser percentage of DMOs substantially involved local tourism businesses (29%) and visitors (26%) in logo design (indicating a 4 or 5 out of a possible 5). These results were somewhat disappointing but perhaps not surprising, as it was anticipated from our exploratory work that a meaningful number of DMOs might not involve either local tourism-based firms or visitors in their destination logo design process.

Of the DMOS with destination logos, 87% hired an outside consultant to help develop the logo design. It was thought that a consultant might improve the logo design process because of his or her expertise. In this case, for example, the assistance of a hired consultant did not guarantee the involvement of visitors or local hospitality firms in logo design. This was despite the fact that it might be assumed that consultants would have a greater appreciation for the need to involve these key stakeholders in the design process. Of the DMOs that hired an outside consultant, only a minority involved tourism businesses (32%) and visitors (26%) to a substantial extent, while a surprisingly high percentage of consultants did not include local firms (32%) or visitors (42%) in the logo design process at all.

A successful brand must accurately reflect the image and experiences of the destination. Brand logo development and pretesting among consumers is appropriate and even critical (Kohli, Suri, and Thakor 2002). Pretesting can help ensure that the image DMOs wish the logo to portray is accurately perceived by visitors. Furthermore, the logo should be pretested to make certain that it truthfully reflects the image and experiences of the destination. Nevertheless, more than one-third (36%) of respondents indicated that they had "not at all" pretested their logo, while just more than one-quarter (26%) had done so quite extensively (see Table 5).

DMO Understanding of Destination Branding

The development of an agreed upon definition of destination branding, which could be tested with DMO respondents, was another purpose of this research. The definition of destination branding proposed earlier in this article incorporated numerous branding concepts from previous research. In fact, the majority of respondents (86%) concurred substantially with the provided definition by selecting a 4 or 5 on a 5-point Likert-type scale, in which responses were measured from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great extent*). At the same time, it was considered critical to empirically examine practitioners' own understanding of the branding concept. Therefore, respondents were asked to provide their own definition of destination branding, and most (91.9%) complied. Results were content analyzed, and seven broad themes concerning the rationale for destination branding emerged—image, recognition, differentiation, consistency, brand messages, emotional response, and expectations.

Theme 1: Image. The destination branding theme most put forth by respondents (33.3%) was related to the concept of *image*, oftentimes the image that visitors themselves possess of the destination. Respondents also asserted that the process of destination branding should allow destinations to create the particular image that the destination intends to portray and then, once it is well defined, accurately convey that image to visitors.

Theme 2: Recognition. Recognition, awareness, and the ability to be memorable were concepts mentioned by 21.1% of the DMOs. Brand recognition is a crucial first step in the awareness-trial-purchase consumer decision process. However, many destination logos are not immediately considered "recognizable." Supported with effective and appropriate DMO and hospitality firm marketing activities, logos can achieve awareness among prospective and actual visitors.

Theme 3: Differentiation. Differentiation, mentioned by 17.7% of respondents, was already discussed as an integral element of creating strong brands. Thus, it was encouraging to have numerous DMOs reflect this concept in their own definitions of destination branding. Although many destinations appear undifferentiated and offer similar experiences to visitors, DMOs are cognizant of the importance of conveying a unique selling proposition.

TABLE 6
DESTINATION BRANDING APPLICATION AND MEASUREMENT

	<i>Not at All</i>			<i>Great Extent</i>	
	1	2	3	4	5
Destination branding applications					
Are you applying the destination branding concept? (%)	1	12	14	46	27
Destination branding measurement					
Are you measuring visitor perceptions of the logo? (%)	34	15	23	17	11
Are you measuring visitor perceptions of the destination image? (%)	25	15	27	18	16
Destination branding success					
Are you successful in creating your desired destination image among visitors? (%)	2	16	36	36	11

Note: Ranked using Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a great extent*).

Theme 4: Consistency. The theme of *consistency*, reported by 15.5% of respondents, is another critical component of effective brand creation. These DMOs inherently recognized the necessity of delivering a consistent image, message, and experience to visitors. Consistency assists in facilitating destination awareness and providing an assurance of quality while reducing perceived risk.

Theme 5: Brand messages. A more general notion of “conveying messages” and “reflecting what we (the destination) are” was mentioned by 14.4% of DMOs. Although respondents did not explicitly relate this to destination image, the two constructs are closely related. Here, respondents acknowledge the importance of keeping the lines of communication open between destinations and visitors.

Theme 6: Emotional response. Here, DMOs (11.1%) are interested in evoking an emotional response from visitors. Vacation travel is more of a holistic experience than a simple purchase. Visitors spend substantial amounts of money and dedicate significant time in partaking of the travel experience. If visitor reactions are not emotionally positive in nature, then destinations cannot expect to keep loyal visitors, either in repeat visitation or positive word-of-mouth.

Theme 7: Creating expectations. A number of DMOs (11.1%) mentioned the need to create positive visitor expectations. Because of increased destination competitiveness and consumer choice, DMOs must not only build awareness but convey a promise of a quality experience to influence visitors during their decision-making process.

In short, DMOs believe that a recognized, well-differentiated, and consistent destination image is central to the success of destination branding. Destination logos, according to DMOs, exist to accurately represent destination image and its attributes.

To explore whether DMOs communicated explicit, well-defined images for their respective destinations, 80.9% of DMOs provided destination image statements. Many of the image statements were very similar in nature. For example, a number of DMOs conveyed images of being the “number one” place to visit, or the “number one” place to meet. The most commonly used words to describe image were *fun* and *history*. To conclude, it appears that DMOs understand destination branding and the importance of developing and

promoting a destination image. However, the images that DMOs convey are generally undifferentiated (Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott 2002) and do not make for unique selling propositions in this era of increased competitiveness among tourism destinations.

DMO Practice of the Destination Branding Concept

In this component of the study, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they believe that they are applying the concept of destination branding, as defined in this study (see Table 6). Seventy-three percent (73%) of respondents indicated they are applying the destination branding concept to a somewhat great extent (a 4 or 5 out of 5). However, successful branding application evidently does not involve the need to quantitatively measure whether their branding efforts are working. Almost half (47%) of DMOs believe that they are successful in creating their desired image, although they do not measure visitor perceptions. One key purpose of destination branding is to create an image that is accurately perceived by visitors. In addition, the consistent measuring of visitor attitude changes is necessary to continually readapt the marketing message to best fit evolving consumer perceptions. DMOs also report that they do “not at all” measure whether their logo (34%) and destination image (25%) are perceived by visitors as the way the DMO intended them to be perceived.

CONCLUSION

This study, which sought to clarify destination branding from a theoretical as well as empirical perspective, is considered timely as the destination branding concept has become an increasingly important topic among destination management organizations. Both researchers and practitioners emphasize the importance of image creation and destination differentiation as integral elements in building a strong destination brand. A holistic destination branding definition was initially developed that included the themes of *identification*, *differentiation*, *experience*, *expectations*, *image*, *consolidation*, and *reinforcement*. To this, DMO respondents added the important themes of *recognition*, *consistency*, *brand messages*, and *emotional response*, all of which

should now be further integrated into an improved definition of destination branding. As such, our revised definition for destination branding is as follows:

Destination branding is 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*. Collectively, these activities serve to create a *destination image* that positively influences consumer *destination choice*.

In terms of logo design and development practices, several themes emerged from this study:

1. Destination logos have already been developed by the vast majority of DMOs and are primarily used and reinforced in print literature as well as videos.
2. Logos are generally developed to reflect the image and attributes of the destination and are designed to be flexible for different marketing mediums and to be memorable.
3. A well-designed logo also has the ability to galvanize support for the destination vision and mission among destination stakeholders and DMO members while bonding this disparate population under a common banner.
4. The image and messaging of the brand should be consistent and integrated throughout DMO operations and activities.
5. The logo design process is most influenced by the DMO chief executive and marketing manager.
6. The logo design process does not currently involve, to any significant extent, DMO members, local hospitality firms, and visitors.
7. Although not practiced among DMOs to a large extent, efforts to ensure effective destination branding might include
 - ensuring the logo differentiates the destination to provide a unique selling proposition;
 - pretesting the logo design so that visitor perceptions are aligned with DMO intentions; and
 - continually measuring visitor perceptions of the destination image and logo with appropriate DMO refinement.

This research suggests that many destination marketing organizations have a general understanding of destination branding and are practicing it to a certain extent. However, there are many supporting activities identified in this study that could help DMOs more effectively brand their destinations.

Clearly, the ultimate goals of destination branding are identical to several important DMO objectives, namely, to attract visitors and expenditures to their respective destinations. As DMOs already have a general understanding of destination branding, an important revelation of this research is that DMOs should more fully and actively include local

stakeholders and visitors in the range of activities that lead to effective destination branding.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Branding effectiveness, as practiced by destinations, was not evaluated in this study, as it was considered more important, at this stage of research, to explore and document current branding practices. However, destination branding effectiveness is crucial to measure and can be determined through consumer research. Such research must include measurement of visitor perceptions of the destination logo and image before and after visitation to determine if the transmitted image that formed visitor expectations is matched by actual experience, which forms the heart of visitor satisfaction. For example, if a DMO “oversold” its destination based on the promotion of an unrealistic image, visitors may leave the destination tremendously unsatisfied, and a repositioning of the brand may be in order, particularly if destinations want to enhance repeat visitation and word-of-mouth referrals.

Although many destination branding activities, particularly related to logo design and development, have been explored in this study, further empirical research to examine specific steps within the destination branding process may prove beneficial to DMOs.

While the current study has specifically examined CVBs, DMOs with larger geographical jurisdictions, such as regions or countries, may perceive and apply the concept of destination branding differently and thus should be explored separately in future studies.

Evidently, many DMOs do not measure visitor perceptions on a continual basis, if at all. Perhaps the lack of effort to measure consumer perspectives of the destination is a matter of not understanding what exactly to measure or how to measure it. Further research could investigate the reasons that DMOs are not measuring perceptions or the success of their marketing efforts.

We believe that destination branding activities should also be focused on maintaining and enhancing visitor loyalty to ensure long-term destination success. As such, we suggest that relationship management techniques and practices designed to strengthen visitor loyalty within the context of destination branding could usefully be explored in future studies.

Comparative studies between branding in tourism and branding in other products or services would be useful in providing additional “best practice” revelations for DMOs to consider and implement.

Finally, we hope that future research can build upon the conceptual work and documentation of logo management that is provided by this study to postulate and test specific hypotheses and to thus further develop knowledge in this important field of destination branding.

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