



# CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY FOR A DESTINATION

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**Abstract:** The paper introduces the concept of customer-based brand equity and applies it to a destination. The theoretically proposed and empirically verified model complements previous research findings on a destination's evaluation from the tourist's perspective. In addition to numerous studies, which have stressed the importance of image, the results of this study imply that an image plays a vital role in evaluation but is not the only brand dimension that should be considered. For a more complete evaluation, the dimensions of awareness, quality, and loyalty should also be examined. The concept of brand equity was tested on two Slovenian markets. Results reveal that brand equity differed between the markets according to their evaluation of brand dimensions. **Keywords:** brand, destination, image, awareness, loyalty. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Résumé:** Équité de marque d'une destination basée sur les clients. L'article présente le concept de l'équité de marque basée sur les clients et l'applique à une destination. Le modèle, proposé théoriquement et vérifié empiriquement, est le complément des résultats des recherches antérieures sur l'évaluation d'une destination du point de vue du touriste. Comme de nombreuses études qui ont souligné l'importance de l'image, celle-ci suggère que l'image joue un rôle essentiel dans l'évaluation mais qu'elle n'est pas la seule dimension de marque à considérer. Pour une évaluation plus complète, il faudrait examiner aussi les dimensions de conscience, qualité et loyauté. On a testé le concept de l'équité de marque dans deux marchés slovènes. Les résultats révèlent que l'équité de marque variait entre les marchés selon leur évaluation des dimensions de marque. **Mots-clés:** marque, destination, image, conscience, loyauté. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

Branding has existed for centuries as a way of distinguishing the goods of one producer from those of another, while modern branding finds its origins in the 19th century (Room 1992). According to this, a brand can be treated as a legal instrument, logo, company, identity system, image, personality, relationship, and/or as adding value. A combination of all these perspectives is embodied in the definition of de Chernatony and McDonald, which equates a successful brand to “an

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identifiable product, service, person, or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely [and] its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition” (2001:20).

A significant amount of effort has been devoted to addressing the complex nature of a brand. In face of various interpretations, de Chernatony and McDonald argue that it should be understood from an input perspective as, for example, in the way managers emphasize the use of resources to achieve a customer response. Alternatively, a brand can be viewed from an output perspective, as in the way customers interpret and use it to enhance their personal experience. De Chernatony (1999) argues further that modern analysis should treat both the brand identity concept (Aaker and Joachimsthaler 2000; Kapferer 1998) and brand equity concept (Aaker 1991; Keller 1993) as interrelated. By equity is meant the sum of factors (or “dimensions”) contributing to a brand’s value in the consumer’s mind.

Unlike the many scientific contributions covering the theme of product brands, the research line of destination brands is merely in its infancy (Cai 2002). Although this branding appears to be one of the newest research areas (Cai 2002; Morgan and Pritchard 2002), the topic has been partly covered under the alternative label of destination image studies (Ritchie and Ritchie 1998), which have been investigated for more than 30 years (Baloglu and McCleary 1999; Crompton 1979; Echtner and Ritchie 1993; Gallarza, Gil and Calderon 2002; Gartner 1986, 1989, 1993; Hunt 1975; Phelps 1986). However, as Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) stated, the development of a coherent and commonly accepted framework is essential for using branding theory for destinations. According to Cai (2002), a major disadvantage of previous image studies is their inability to distinguish between the image and branding functions. Cai highlights the difference: “image formation is not branding, albeit the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image building is one step closer, but there still remains a critical missing link: the brand identity” (2002:722).

As destination branding becomes a fairly active area of research, the question remains as to whether already accepted branding principles can be transferred to destinations. A similar debate is also ongoing about the extent to which principles traditionally developed for product brands, can apply to service and corporate ones. In comparing products and services, de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo Riley (1999) concluded that the concept of a brand is similar for both, although different dimensions of branding strategy may be emphasized. Therefore, destination characteristics should be investigated before applying branding principles.

This paper is concerned with exploring the dimensions of the customer-based brand equity of a destination. Four proposed dimensions—awareness, image, quality, and loyalty—were identified, measured, and tested. While some may argue that the concepts of awareness, quality, and loyalty are inherent in the image dimension, statistically isolating them calls for a refinement of image research. Although dimensions are arguably contained within image, if the full

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