



Research Paper

Citizen brand ambassadors: Motivations and perceived effects

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes citizen brand ambassadors' motivations and the effects they perceived deriving from participation in a citizen-focused ambassador network which constituted one element of a city's destination brand strategy. The results of this study of Berlin's citizen ambassador program indicate that participating in an ambassador program resulted in perceived positive effects for ambassadors. One major finding is that few citizens engaged in the ambassador program due to feelings of commitment or civic pride, but rather as a means to enhance the reach and exposure of their individual projects. A further finding was that ambassadors did not voluntarily function as active message senders on an individual level. The study reveals new insight into the key factors of the decision-making process determining whether citizens engage or do not engage with ambassador programs.

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1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, cities, regions and nations compete ever more intensely in attracting visitors, residents and businesses (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2011). It is now recognized that destination management plays an important role in developing place brands that are positioned in a differential way in tourists' minds (Peralba, 2007). Destinations now employ concepts and techniques of brand management originally established in the domain of product and service marketing, such as brand equity (Keller, 2003), brand positioning (Ries & Trout, 2001; Quelch & Jocz, 2005), brand identity (Nandan, 2005), and brand image (Sjodin & Torn, 2006). Hankinson (2010) argues that place branding's domain origin lies in the fields of product branding, urban policy, tourism and marketing in general. As in product or services branding, place branding encompasses the concepts of brand identity and brand image (Morgan, Pritchard, & Pride, 2002; Pike, 2002; Dinnie, 2008). Vasudevan (2008) notes that a place's brand image reflects the affinity and relationship visitors or potential visitors have with the place, its attributes, values and personality. The promotion of place image is a well-established practice (Gold & Ward, 1994), although the application of branding techniques to places is a more recent phenomenon (Baker, 2007; Dinnie, 2010; Go & Govers, 2010).

One of the main challenges in place branding derives from the multitude of stakeholders involved in the place-branding process (Weible, 2006; Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Garcia,

Gomez, & Molina, 2012). Wagner, Peters, and Schuckert (2009) note in this respect that given the unique characteristics of a tourism destination, place branding can be interpreted as a complex marketing and management task. A wide range of tangible and intangible attributes of a destination and the values of diverse stakeholders should be represented in the place-branding process (Tasci & Kozak, 2006). The wide variety of stakeholders in a destination contributes to the fact that branding tourism destinations is a complex task for practitioners. Stakeholders may be internal, such as residents and local businesses, or external, such as tourists. Internal stakeholders are in direct or indirect contact with the visitor and therefore form an important group which has the potential to be the determining factor as to whether the place brand promise and brand reality are consistent. A need for internal branding (Ind, 2001) as a component of place branding strategy is therefore apparent: only if internal stakeholders understand and adopt the brand promise will the desired brand-consistent behavior be accomplished.

2. Citizen brand ambassadors

Internal stakeholders, particularly citizens, have been recognized as an important asset of places for the delivery of a brand-consistent message. As Braun, Kavaratzis, and Zenker (2010) note, residents play a fourfold role in place branding, since they are an internal target market, an integrated part of a place brand, possible brand ambassadors for the place and, last but not least, citizens wield influential political power in determining the political legitimization of place branding initiatives. Furthermore Braun et al. (2010) conclude that only through meaningful participation and consultation is more effective and sustainable

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place branding possible. In the context of destination branding, the visitor, who is the customer at the destination, interacts not only with service employees but also with residents at the destination. Thus, brand support is also needed from residents in order to deliver a consistent brand promise to the visitor (Choo & Park, 2009).

The integration of citizens into place branding is a relatively new practice. Although still quite rare, an increasing number of place-branding initiatives employ citizens as brand ambassadors. Examples of this practice include the cases of the 'Share Your Washington' branding campaign, in which residents were asked to invite friends and family to visit the state; the 'Talk for Ireland' branding campaign, which asked people to talk with pride and passion about holiday spots in Ireland; and the 'I Amsterdam' branding campaign, which featured citizens as an integral element of the place brand.

The main aim of using citizen ambassadors is to promote a place's image and attractiveness through ambassador networks, which consist of people who have a connection to the place (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). Furthermore, ambassadors are seen as a cost-effective place promotion technique, since such ambassadors provide credible testimonies of the unique character of the place and its attractiveness through word-of-mouth (Andersson & Ekman, 2009). According to these findings it is highly desirable to use ambassadors, since they provide information that is not only available at low cost but also highly effective due to the fact that consumers have more faith in friends' or peers' recommendations than in messages sent through traditional advertising channels (Silverman, 2001). As a conclusion to their research, Andersson and Ekman (2009) identify four main categories of ambassador networks: the citizen-focused network; the business-oriented network; the fame-focused network; and the niche network focused on one specific discipline. However, these categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive and degrees of overlap may occur.

The previous studies discussed above predominantly employ the views of place branding practitioners, but do not integrate the perspective of the residents who are to be involved in such place-branding campaigns via ambassador networks. It remains largely undiscovered what ambassador's motivations are to engage in branding campaigns promoting a place. This study therefore investigates the motivations for participation in a citizen-focused network in the context of the 'be Berlin' branding campaign. Moreover, our study investigates what perceived effects deriving from participation in the campaign can be identified and how ambassadors functioned as message senders.

3. Berlin's citizen brand ambassador program

In spring 2008 at the City Hall of Berlin, Mayor Klaus Wowereit introduced the new destination-branding campaign, 'be Berlin', to the public in the presence of more than 350 national and international journalists. The aim of the campaign was to position Berlin for inward investment purposes as a good place to do business, as well as to position the city as an attractive destination for tourists. As a first campaign stunt, a large canvas, stating the three-phrase slogan "sei stadt, sei wandel, sei berlin", covered the front of the City Hall. Between 15th and 17th March 2008, 1,358,205 letters announcing the new destination-branding campaign had been sent to all homes in Berlin. With this initiative the residents of Berlin were encouraged to submit and share their personal success story relating to Berlin.

The 'be Berlin' campaign is the destination branding campaign of Berlin conceptualized and implemented by Berlin Partner

GmbH on behalf of the city of Berlin. Within the framework of an integrated and interactive communication campaign, Berlin is positioned as 'City of Change' including the themes 'economy', 'science', 'culture' and 'livability'. For this branding campaign in Berlin, citizens have been directly involved as brand ambassadors. People from Berlin are encouraged to contribute their own personal stories of Berlin, as a 'City of Change', and to become ambassadors for the city. At the center of the campaign is a large online portal which can be found at www.sei.berlin.de.

According to Berlin Partner GmbH, almost every other citizen of Berlin, resulting in a total of 43%, is involved in voluntary work during his/her spare time. The 'be Berlin' campaign honored this social commitment in an innovative way. During the restoration of the Siegestsäule in Berlin, 204 pictures of people who showed social responsibility, presented under the motto 'Faces of Berlin', were displayed in larger-than-life versions from 11 August to 17 September 2010. Along with their involvement in this marketing measure, participants were pronounced brand ambassadors of the 'be Berlin' branding campaign. In addition to the public display, in the course of this marketing initiative a publication in form of a small image-book was produced. Selected brand ambassadors of the campaign were featured along with their stories.

In the case of the 'be Berlin' branding campaign, in order to become ambassadors, residents were asked to contribute their story on how they have changed Berlin. Therefore citizens were directly integrated in the branding campaign. A description of how residents were integrated in the campaign is presented in the following section.

3.1. Selection procedure for 'be Berlin' brand ambassadors

Information about the selection process of brand ambassadors has been retrieved from the annual Activities Report 2010 of Berlin Partner GmbH, as well as press releases published by Berlin Partner GmbH and individual interviews which were carried out during the research process.

Berlin Partner GmbH chose to employ an inclusive approach for the ambassador network in Berlin. This approach theoretically allowed all internal stakeholders to participate in the ambassador network. This ambassador network shows strong traits of what Andersson and Ekman (2009) identified as a citizen-focused network, the purpose of which is to produce proud and committed citizens in the destination.

In addition to the inclusive approach, individuals were also recommended or appointed as ambassadors. Therefore, the ambassador networks presented three possible entry points as follows.

1. Selected persons:

In the course of the campaign, those individuals who were particularly successful in their field or who represented a central element of the place were invited to participate in the 'be Berlin' branding campaign as brand ambassadors. These individuals were directly selected by the 'be Berlin' campaign team.

2. Recommended persons:

In the course of the 'Faces of Berlin' marketing initiative, citizens had the opportunity to recommend persons that, in their eyes, appeared to be worthy to act as ambassadors for the destination of Berlin. In total, 204 individuals were elected ambassadors by a jury in the course of this marketing initiative.

3. Self-driven persons:

Since the ambassador network in Berlin employs the typical traits of citizen-focused networks, such as inclusiveness and aim at enhancing civic pride; participation in the branding

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