

THE CITY BRANDING DILEMMA: WHAT MAKES A GLOBAL CITY BRAND?

In his article, the author argues that city branding is a kind of life buoy for some local authorities and governments to attract investors and tourists. It is overused, misused, and makes many people think of superficial marketing tricks. In most cases, attractive logos, similar taglines on empty promises, and fat budgets on advertising are used for branding, yielding nothing in return. He points out that governments should help the world understand the real, complex, rich, diverse nature of their people and landscapes, their history and heritage, and their products and resources. The author emphasizes that more engagement, not simply communication, with the rest of the world can raise the profile of cities. By drawing conclusions from Saffron Brand Consultants' "global city brand barometer" report, he points to the correlation between two aspects of a city's brand: its "assets" and its "buzz."

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Let’s make it clear: There is no such thing as “City Branding.” It’s a fairy tale. Probably the most expensive and the useless one. City Branding is a kind of life buoy for some local authorities and governments to attract investors and tourists. The ultimate aim is more money and more people.

Two primary questions are ordinarily discussed in governments: “What do we do?” and “How much money we should spent on it?” In the foreword to “How,” written by Dov Seidman, Bill Clinton, the 42nd President of the United States, writes: “In the 21st century, it’s no longer what you do that matters most, but how you do it.”¹

Everybody Competes on Everything

In 1949, there were 95 countries in the world. Today the number is around 195. More than double! Countries compete with one another for products, services, events, ideas, visitors, talent, investment, and influence. It is a huge and inevitable battle because of the reality of globalization.

On the other hand, branding is overused, misused, and makes many people think of superficial marketing tricks to attract more investors and more tourists. “Do you want to turn your location into a destination? Try branding it. Go for a logo and airy slogan, then big noise on advertising, Public Relations, inside and outside.” Does it really help? It simply does not.

There are more than 50 Cities using “Land of Contrasts” to communicate themselves. See the list below:

Don't be a land of contrasts'

Calcutta	Soweto	Bangkok	Berkeley	Nashville	Boulder
Budapest	Beirut	Hamamto	Philadelphia	Rio	Vancouver
Hong Kong	Phnom Penh	Chisinau	Hang	Dubai	Seoul
Frankfurt	Mosul	Quebec	Edinburgh	Thessaloniki	Hague
Baltimore	Seattle	St. John	Cambridge	Cleveland	Shanghai
Lagos	Boston	Ba	lv	Dallas	Lisboa
Jakarta	Leicester	Lisbon	Talinn	Limerick	Kiev
Mumbai	Morocco	Leon	Oakland	Kiev	Doha

Saffron Brand Consultants

¹ Dov Seidman, *How: Why How We Do Anything Means Everything* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2012).

Please also check the following slogans for five European countries:

- “The essence of Europe:” Slovakia
- “In the heart of Europe:” Czech Republic
- “Cool country with a warm heart:” Hungary
- “A small country with a big heart:” Austria
- “Centre of Europe:” Liechtenstein

Do these slogans say anything unique? Or do they simply look nice and fancy on billboards? That’s it! In most cases, attractive logos, similar taglines on empty promises, and fat budgets on advertising are used for branding, yielding nothing in return.



“Branding is overused, misused, and makes many people think of superficial marketing tricks to attract more investors and more tourists.”



What do you look like?

Does it say what’s unique about you?



Perception is Everything

Make no mistake, an advertising campaign serves a significant role to sell your product. But the fact is: countries or cities are not for sale. In the end, City Branding is the problem, not the solution. It is the public opinion that reduces the charm into weak, outdated, and unfair stereotypes that so damage the prospects in a globalized world.

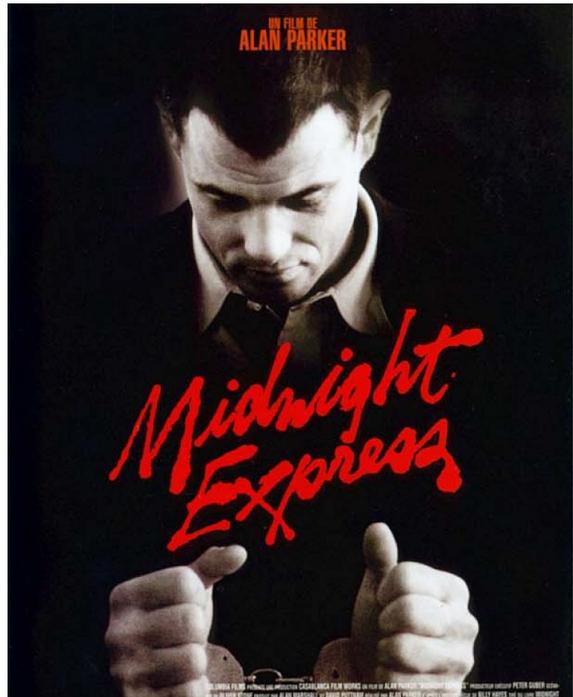
“The brand has to be based on what is already there in a city or else it is just like giving someone a nice haircut – it does not give you a new personality.”

As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously says, “Perception is reality.” You simply cannot change the image of a country solely by communication.

If you do that, it might mean something along the lines of, “Your thinking is not right. Please change your mind about this country.” Obviously no one would do that.

Example? *Midnight Express* is a 1978 American/British film directed by Alan Parker. It cost 30 years in terms of Turkey’s image; Turks were seen as “losers,” “terrifying,” and “brutal” in the movie. What did Turkish authorities do? In a nutshell, nothing – beyond getting angry and banning the movie in Turkey.

When screenwriter Oliver Stone, who won an Academy Award for the film, visited Turkey in 2004, he apologized for the portrayal of the Turkish people in the film.



How Branding Helps

Yes, successful branding can turn a city into a place where people want to live, work, and visit. More and more places are becoming the equivalent of city-states, like Dubai, Singapore, Istanbul, and so on. With more of these small countries in existence, we are going to have an increase of provenance branding – of the brand manifestation of place and “where I came from.”²

A strong identity is vital if you are vying for attention in tourism and business, or if you are re-launching an area after a regeneration initiative. However, branding is not a magic wand to mask a city’s problems. Rush hour traffic in Istanbul, squatter communities in Mumbai, or *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro are just a few examples. The brand has to be based on what is already there in a city or else it is just like giving someone a nice haircut – it might look good for a while, but it does not give you a new personality.

“You simply cannot change the image of a country solely by communication.”

Cities with Heritage or Challenge

There are lucky places which have acquired a positive reputation that enables them to do things on a global stage. New York, London, and Paris have a certain heritage and their brand precedes them, opening doors, creating trust and respect, and raising the expectation of quality, competence, and integrity.

What about places with a reputation – no matter right or wrong – of being poor, underdeveloped, uncivilized, dangerous, or corrupted? Everything they try to achieve outside of their border is harder and more costly: selling the good, finding the finance, attracting the foreign people to visit and invest everything.

They always need to prove that the established prejudiced national stereotypes do not apply to them. This is sad but true. Compare the efforts of a textile exporter from Bangladesh with one from Italy. Compare the ease with which an average tourist

² Debbie Millman, *Brand Thinking and Other Noble Pursuits* (New York: Allworth Press, 2011).

resort in Côte d'Azur can gain complimentary media coverage and celebrity endorsement with the difficulties experienced by an unspoiled and unique destination in a country with a weak or poor reputation.³

“More engagement, not simply communication, with the rest of the world can raise the profile of cities.”

Like people, in time places can get tired or sick. If they do, the time has come for them to refresh their heritage and authenticity for new opportunities. Also, technology and social media make the world much smaller than it was in the last decade. Do you remember “The Best Job In The World” contest? A chance to relax in one of the planet’s

most beautiful islands for six months and get paid 73,000 pounds for the privilege... Queensland Tourism Board understood that they had no chance of standing out by marketing the sea, sun, and sand like everyone else and decided instead to sponsor that campaign. The idea was original and the timing was right. It was in 2009 during the height of the global financial crisis, and they offered a job of caretaking of a paradise island in return for 100,000 dollars. The campaign cost around 1 million dollars, whereas it generated 80 million dollars’ worth of free publicity. It was probably the most successful tourism campaign in history.

Engage with the World

Governments should help the world understand the real, complex, rich, and diverse nature of their people and landscapes, their history and heritage, and their products and resources. There is no capsulated solution for all. Every country, city, and even region in the world is completely different. Even a small village is infinitely complex, more diverse and less unified than the largest corporation because of the different reasons why people are there. More engagement, not simply communication, with the rest of the world can raise the profile of cities. Higher visibility does tend to go together with a strong appeal.

From Milan to Mecca: The World’s Most Powerful City Brands

Saffron Brand Consultants has recently launched “global city brand barometer” in partnership with *The Guardian*.⁴ The study aims to examine which cities are

3 Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

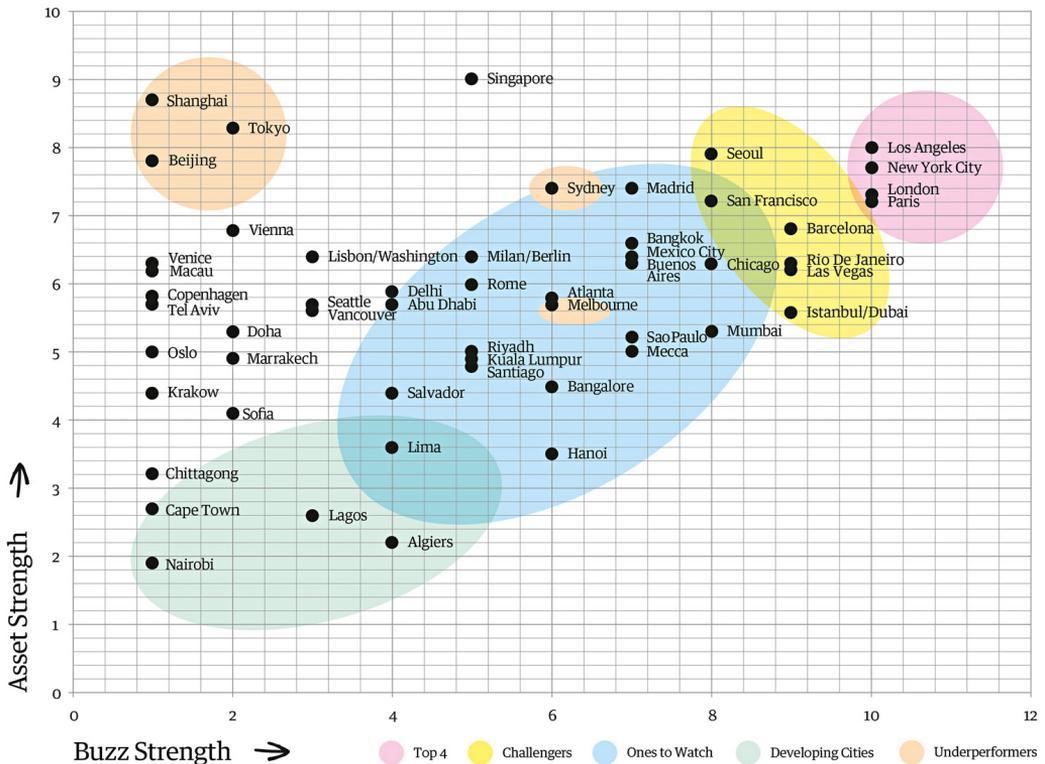
4 “From Milan to Mecca: the world’s most powerful city brands revealed,” *The Guardian*, 6 May 2014, www.theguardian.com/cities/gallery/2014/may/06/from-milan-to-mecca-the-worlds

best at utilizing their assets to generate awareness and engagement around the world – global buzz – in creating a global city brand.

The report measures two aspects of a city’s brand: its “assets” – attractions, climate, infrastructure (particularly transport), safety, and economic prosperity – and its “buzz,” a combination of social media (Facebook likes and Twitter sentiment analysis) and media mentions. Assets and buzz were each graded out of 10 and the numbers were added to produce a total score.

“To become an enviable brand, cities must create a compelling story, a story that captures the essence of what makes them special – a story to tell the world.”

The results were used to produce a graph that examines the relationship between a city’s assets and the buzz it generates – and consequently how cities compare with each other.



The resulting “brand barometer” is eye-opening: A surprise winner. Would anyone expect Los Angeles to beat New York or London? There are also some interesting examples of up-and-comers (Mumbai and Mecca). Also plenty of surprise losers like Sydney, Tokyo, and many European cities – with the exception of London and Paris – struggle. Venice is not the only loser, just the most surprising. Almost all the European cities do relatively poorly, perhaps because there are so many crammed up against each other. The results are best summarized by placing cities in the following categories:

Top 4	Challengers	Ones to Watch	Underperformers
1. Los Angeles	5. Seoul	15. Bangkok	16. Sydney
2. New York City	6. Rio De Janeiro	17. Mexico City	23. Melbourne
3. London	7. Dubai	18. Buenos Aires	28. Tokyo
4. Paris	11. Istanbul	19. Mumbai	23. Shanghai
		21. Mecca	38. Beijing

Top 4: As expected, Los Angeles, New York City, London, and Paris form the Top 4 (the yellow region in the graph) – leveraging their world famous attractions, infrastructure, and economic prosperity and cementing themselves as leading world cities.

Challengers: The cities Dubai, Seoul, Istanbul, and Rio de Janeiro have nearly caught up with the Top 4 (region in the graph). They are increasingly prosperous and entertaining; many of our most beloved brands and products originate from these cities and countries. Consumers and travellers alike know them increasingly well.

Barcelona, San Francisco, and Las Vegas are ranked 6th, 8th and 9th respectively, but we do not consider them as challengers because we believe they have reached a steady state and will no longer be able to gain a higher ranking.

However, Seoul, Rio de Janeiro, Dubai, and Istanbul are considered challengers even though they are ranked 5th, 7th, 10th and 11th respectively, because we believe they are yet to achieve their highest potential. In the near future, they will be

the cities that will eventually occupy the spots that currently consist of Barcelona, San Francisco, and Las Vegas, as they continue to increase their asset strength and consequently their brand strength.

Cities to Watch: The cities from South America and Asia such as Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Mumbai, Bangkok, and Mexico City are catching up with the Winners and the Top 4. How come Mecca is the world's 21st strongest city brand? The answer is hidden in the reputation score. Every year, 2 million Muslim people go to Mecca as pilgrims. Also a 1.5 billion Muslim audience is a buzz feed source for this sacred city.

Underperformers: Cities such as Sydney and Melbourne should be competing with the Top 4 but are falling behind quickly. They are now being overtaken by emerging cities from South America, Middle East, and Asia.

Tokyo, Beijing, and Shanghai are the stars of the Far East and have high assets scores yet they are falling behind most emerging cities and have the same reputation scores as Cape Town and Nairobi.

Although Singapore is not amongst our five “Underperformers,” it still underperforms in terms of brand reputation with respect to its asset strength. Singapore could be considered a reputable brand within the eastern part of the world but its global brand reputation may be questionable.

European cities are proud of high asset scores but under-perform when it comes to brand reputation.



11. Istanbul

A top destination in the world for visitors, Istanbul really is where east meets west. Full of history and culture, by 2016 Turkey's jewel will surpass Singapore, New York and Paris in terms of international visitor arrivals, according to Forbes.



1. Los Angeles

For cultural variety and sheer glitter, however, LA outshines them all. It has stunning weather that New York and London just can't compete with, the amazing beaches to show it off, world-class art, movie history, an endless parade of famous attractions, an improving crime rate and a certain well-known sign in the hills. After years of languishing, the City of Angels has top spot in the brand firmament.



7. Rio de Janeiro

With the World Cup and the Olympics back to back, the city is humming: massive new investments in infrastructure, tons to see and do, and everyone's talking about it. It still can't shake its reputation for crime, but for now you can't do much better than Rio.



2. New York City

Very similar in brand profile to London, New York's transit system doesn't have quite the same reputation for brilliance as the tube, but the weather's better, and perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the New York brand slightly edges London when considered on a global scale.



8. San Francisco

The City by the Bay has it all – shopping, jobs, great transport (there's a particularly nice bridge, we hear) and buzz. If only it didn't rain quite so much, San Francisco might be able to take on the really big gun.



3. London

Terrible weather, apparently. But London gets absolutely top marks for pretty much everything else, from transport to attractions to shopping to tourism – though the 2011 riots may have hurt it slightly on the crime-perception front.



9. Las Vegas

Safety and a struggling economy are big problems in Vegas, baby – but the Strip retains its freakish ability to drown out the city's problems in its alluring light. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas ... and the brand thrives as a result.



4. Paris

The weather may not be great, and it can be a little seedy, as anyone who has enjoyed a late arrival at Gare du Nord will know. But Paris is the premiere mainland European city. And the whole world knows it.



10. Dubai

Similar to Istanbul, Dubai will outrank Singapore and New York in 2016 and Paris in 2017 in the number of international visitors. With plenty of luxury shopping (second only to NYC), Dubai is doing a pretty good job attracting visitors, and its faintly ridiculous building boom has translated into a ton of buzz. There still isn't much to actually do there, but a place in the top 10 shows Dubai's brand has real strengt.



5. Seoul

A surprise: South Korea's capital comfortably beats Tokyo (which finished a lowly 28th). Seoul has a reputation for being much friendlier and easy to negotiate, has amazing infrastructure and is one of the safest cities in the world. As a gateway to the far east, is this the moment Korea gets the better of Japan?



12. Madrid

Spain's jewel has great shopping and attractions, and is emerging as one of the top cities in Europe, though it has yet to quite match the brand gloss of a certain French capital.



6. Barcelona

Everybody loves Barcelona: in technical terms, the brand is a bit like Rio without the crime, though of course without that city's upcoming high-profile world event.



13. Chicago

Full of attractions and history and everything that makes American cities great, the only problem with the Windy City might be just that – the wind and weather. (Though Chicago's patchy safety record isn't helping, either). Photograph: Carolyn Kaster/A.



14. Singapore

Asia's biggest citystate has great climate and infrastructure, a famously low crime rate, wonderful transport and shopping and a booming financial services industry. It's also a major stopover point, and has done a great job converting that into tourism. Now if only it could shake its reputation for being boring



20. Sao Paulo

It's hell to get around and can be very dangerous, but Brazil's largest city is full of attractions, is on everyone's lips and has a rising GDP that is the envy of many other cities.



15. Bangkok

Despite a sultry climate that means life can be a series of mad dashes between air-conditioning, Thailand's biggest city appears to be outgrowing its reputation as a backpackers' haven. In 2013 it was the world's top destination for overnight visitor



21. Mecca

The birthplace of Muhammad and main site of the Hajj pilgrimage is more popular than ever (Vegas of the east, anyone?) – though its average temperature of 31 degrees is a bit too hot to see Mecca crack the top 20



16. Sydney

Amazing transport, shopping, economic opportunity and climate. So why aren't more people talking about Sydney?



22. Atlanta

MARTA, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, is the hub of a thriving transportation system that gives Atlanta's brand a boost, and it has become the world capital of hip-hop. But it remains dangerous in places, and there just isn't enough for visitors to see to make the capital of Georgia competitive with the top tier of US cities.



17. Mexico City

Similar to Buenos Aires, Mexico City is booming, with great transport and tons of buzz – but the drug war remains a blot on the brand value of the whole country.



23. Melbourne

The capital of Victoria might be a little low-key, but it is thriving economically, particularly for tech startups, and has an enviably low crime rate that has burnished its reputation as a great city in which to live and work.



18. Buenos Aires

Argentina's capital is a must-see city in Latin America and one of the world's top destinations. Fix its safety record and it could soar.



24. Milan

A relatively strong economy (one of the few places in Italy to boast this), world-class shopping and fashion and a large number of attractions are Milan's strengths: a poor safety record and climate and disappointing lack of current buzz its weaknesses



19. Mumbai

Think of Indian economic success and Mumbai leaps to mind, though the climate and so-so infrastructure don't do much for its brand.



25. Berlin

Excellent infrastructure and attractions and a remarkable safety record put Berlin into the top 25, but the city gets poor marks for climate, and, perhaps surprisingly, lacks much international buzz. All photographs except Chicago:Alamy

Conclusion

When comparing cities by assets, no one city is inferior. All are inspiring and beautiful in their own way. But to become an enviable brand, cities must create a compelling story, a story that captures the essence of what makes them special – a story to tell the world. On the whole, the results do show a clear correlation between asset strength and brand reputation. Cities hoping to buy themselves a bit of buzz should take this to heart. As Saffron founder Wally Olins, who died last April, liked to say: “when it comes to brands, you can’t just talk the talk, you have to walk the walk.”⁵

Rank	City	Total Score
1	Los Angeles	18
2	New York City	17.7
3	London	17.3
4	Paris	17.2
5	Seoul	15.9
6	Barcelona	15.8
7	Rio de Janeiro	15.3
8	San Francisco	15.2
9	Las Vegas	15.2
10	Dubai	14.6
11	Istanbul	14.6
12	Madrid	14.4
13	Chicago	14.3
14	Singapore	14
15	Bangkok	13.6
16	Sydney	13.4
17	Mexico City	13.4
18	Buenos Aires	13.3
19	Mumbai	13.3
20	Sao Paulo	12.2
21	Mecca	12
22	Atlanta	11.8
23	Melbourne	11.7
24	Milan	11.4
25	Berlin	11.4
26	Rome	11
27	Bangalore	10.5
28	Tokyo	10.3
29	Riyadh	10

Rank	City	Total Score
30	Delhi	9.9
31	Kuala Lumpur	9.9
32	Santiago	9.8
33	Shanghai	9.7
34	Abu Dhabi	9.7
35	Hanoi	9.5
36	Lisbon	9.4
37	Washington DC	9.4
38	Beijing	8.8
39	Vienna	8.8
40	Seattle	8.7
41	Vancouver	8.6
42	Salvador	8.4
43	Lima	7.6
44	Venice	7.3
45	Doha	7.3
46	Macau	7.2
47	Marrakech	6.9
48	Copenhagen	6.8
49	Tel Aviv	6.7
50	Algiers	6.2
51	Sofia	6.1
52	Oslo	6
53	Lagos	5.6
54	Krakow	5.4
55	Chittagong	4.2
56	Cape Town	3.7
57	Nairobi	2.9

⁵ Chris Michael, “The world cities with the most powerful brands,” *The Guardian*, 6 May 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/cities/datablog/2014/may/06/world-cities-most-powerful-brands-get-the-data>