

City Marketing

Eugene McCann, Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, Canada

© 2020 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Glossary

Myths Narratives about the world that are not necessarily untrue. More importantly, they resonate with their audience and provide an agenda and legitimacy for action.

Revanchism A term generally referring to vengeful policies and used in the contemporary urban context to highlight the negative effects of zero-tolerance policing and related policies on the poor.

Classic city slogans like “I ♥ New York” and “Glasgow’s Miles Better” are so embedded in the popular consciousness as to have long outlasted their official use by their respective municipalities, Chambers of Commerce, and Convention and Visitors Bureaus. Cities and towns are increasingly associated with symbols, slogans, or taglines. These slogans are the most widely recognizable elements of an interconnected group of contemporary strategies known by a number of names including urban entrepreneurialism, city branding, and city marketing. They are intended to enhance a city’s competitive advantage over others in the context of zero-sum competition for resources, investment, jobs, and tourist revenue. While the ubiquity and persuasiveness of city marketing strategies often makes them appear to be natural and normal activities of city governments and business organizations, geographers and others have shown that city marketing is a social process with a history, a geography, and a political economy. Thus, through the empirical study of city marketing and through efforts to conceptualize the process in terms of its political, economic, and social contexts, geographers and others have identified how the character of city marketing has changed through time, how it refers to and reshapes certain aspects of urban society and urban built environments, and in whose interests it operates.

These themes highlight a number of myths, tactics, and intended audiences that characterize most city marketing strategies. Key myths that permeate city marketing schemes include: the city as welcoming and safe, vibrant and fun; tolerant and accepting of social and cultural difference; environmentally friendly, culturally rich, and/or business friendly; and strategically and conveniently located. Favorite tactics of city marketers, beyond sloganeering, include: the provision of packages of business incentives; (re) building, policing, and cleaning the urban built environment to keep its appearance in line with the city’s marketing image; and continual efforts to maintain coherence in the city’s marketing message by keeping disparate interest groups (often referred to as “stakeholders”) on the same page, “on message,” or, in some cases, out of the spotlight. Finally, many city marketing strategies are characterized by their attention to a range of audiences or niche markets: potential business investors; potential residents and workers; tourists and conventioners; the promoters of mega-events like the Olympics; grant-giving agencies; and local residents. In this regard, city marketing is not only strategic; it is also powerful and political. It involves struggles by different groups seeking to shape cities in ways that satisfy their interests.

City Marketing in Historical-Geographical Context

City marketing did not emerge fully formed from the heart of the Big Apple, nor was it a child of Mr. Happy, Glasgow’s cartoon symbol. Rather, the legendary New York and Glasgow campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s marked only the beginning of the contemporary phase of city marketing. While contemporary city marketing has important distinguishing contexts, features, and impacts, it is worth pointing briefly to earlier examples of the phenomenon. Place marketing has occurred in various forms since at least the middle of the 19th Century. In the United States at that time, the development and sale of railroad towns on the Anglo frontier was facilitated by advertising in the East and elsewhere. In the first half of the 20th Century, resorts and newly built suburbs became major foci of place marketing efforts in Britain and the US as mass tourism burgeoned. In these and other contexts marketing was driven largely by private actors.

By the last third of the 20th Century, a series of political-economic restructurings set the context for the contemporary era of city marketing. Geographers generally regard the economic crises of the early 1970s as marking a series of political and economic shifts that fundamentally changed the character of cities and urban governance. This was a time, in the western world, of deindustrialization, high rates of unemployment, and a growing turn to fiscal austerity at all levels of the state. These conditions paralleled and precipitated the growing popularity of a neoliberal ideology that advocated for the benefits of a market logic and for the “roll back” of the state through, for example, the privatization of nationalized industries. In the many industrialized cities that had enjoyed economic prosperity in the postwar period, local governments and Chambers of Commerce had largely managed the economy and social reproduction but had not engaged in the sort of boosterism characteristic of private actors in earlier years.

With the drying up of tax revenues and flows of funding from other levels of government, these actors found themselves compelled to act entrepreneurially in order to gain a competitive advantage as they sought to fix flows of resources, jobs, and capital in their city rather than see them stream into another.

Placing City Marketing: Geographical Approaches

Neoliberal urbanism, including the activities of coalitions of political and economic elites, sets a context for understanding contemporary city marketing. Indeed, this set of hegemonic power relations is the context even for efforts to brand cities in apparently more progressive or participatory ways.

Urban Entrepreneurialism, City Marketing, Growth Coalitions, and Other “Stakeholders”

Urban geographers’ conceptualization of contemporary city marketing is heavily influenced by David Harvey’s classic article, “From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism.” Harvey makes three related claims: first, that since the early 1970s, city governments had to take an entrepreneurial stance in relation to capital as a result of the changes described above. Second, this shift has entailed a relocation of control over, and risks emanating from urban economic development. Control of local governance is increasingly vested in private and unelected institutions. Local state agencies are thus left playing a facilitative role in urban policymaking while assuming more of the risks of development. It is the relocation of risk that Harvey sees as distinguishing contemporary entrepreneurial city marketing from earlier forms of civic boosterism. His third argument is that the entrepreneurial impulse has encouraged an initiatory or speculative ethos in entrepreneurial cities that led coalitions of private and public actors to focus more resources and attention on the construction of spectacular sites or built environments that will, it is hoped, prime the pump for further private investment. In this case, the geographical lens at work is one that focuses on specific scales of action (such as the global, national, and local), and on the ways in which processes generally seen to be operating at one scale are, in fact, thoroughly imbricated with the others. This perspective provides a great deal of insight into the structural conditions for and practices that constitute city marketing.

Who are the actors involved in contemporary city marketing and what are their key interests? Neoliberal entrepreneurial urbanism has not sidelined the types of business interests involved in 19th-Century marketing. In fact, these locally dependent place entrepreneurs, or rentiers, are crucial to the process because their economic interests are based in drawing rent from land and buildings in a specific city. Therefore, it is generally in their interests to advocate for policies that will increase land values and intensify land uses in their locality. In order to achieve this goal, rentiers (i.e., developers, construction companies, property financiers, the real estate industry, etc.) must bring local politicians—a group that is as much, or more, locally dependent than they are—into a growth-oriented coalition. The large-scale political-economic conditions that Harvey identifies in the post-1970 period make local policymakers increasingly likely to engage wholeheartedly in such a coalition, offering as it does an opportunity to increase tax revenues.

The geographical literature shows how these actors join with other institutions and groups who view their interests—economic or otherwise—as aligned with local economic growth. The other institutions include local media, utilities, local arts and entertainment organizations, and universities. As members of a private–public growth coalition, locally dependent actors propagate the myths and engage in the tactics of city marketing in order to attract and fix mobile capital and related resources in their place. A burgeoning literature on participatory city branding seeks to broaden the terms and possibilities of branding, however. This literature draws on and engages with the work of geographers, but stems from marketing and management disciplines. On an analytical level, this literature seeks to better understand how people associate with or “buy into” and therefore support particular representation of a place (i.e., a place brand). The literature provides examples of, and proposes models for, the co-creation of city brands by the “usual suspects” of city marketing (political and business elites) in conversation with a wider range of community stakeholders. Yet, how these approaches account for the entrenched power imbalances that channel and constrain access to decision-making arenas remains to be seen.

The Role of the Urban Built Environment in City Marketing

Geographers have also employed a second, not unrelated lens to the study of city marketing. It involves a concern with the mutually constitutive relationship between the built environment and social action. This approach seeks to understand the “rewriting” of the city through marketing strategies in (1) textual and representational terms, and (2) a physical sense.

City marketing frequently entails the writing and rewriting of a particular “script” or story about a city, particularly but not only for cities that are attempting to rebound from economic crisis and decline. The actors described above present what they see as the most attractive essence of their city to the world via an assemblage of tangible and intangible elements of its landscape, economy, society, and culture. This brand is not only captured in a slogan and a logo, but also involves the careful managing and presentation of specific images of the city through city web sites, marketing brochures, and, where possible, via stage-managed media events. Cities like Sydney, who have successfully competed for mega-events like the Olympics in the past, offer their iconic landscapes as stage sets for global media consumption during those events. More prosaic still, cities such as Barcelona use elements of their built environments, like unique styles of architecture, to convey specific meanings to particular audiences.

While the urban built environment can be used as part of a carefully constructed writing and rewriting of a city, geographers also note the ways in which the branding of cities can provoke the reshaping, policing, and managing of its physical spaces. This form of physical reworking involves: (1) the building or renovation of elements of the built environment to enhance or correspond to a marketing goal, such as the use of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao to represent and facilitate the city's postindustrial tourist economy, and (2) the policing, cleaning, and managing of urban public spaces with the express intention of making them correspond to a carefully constructed brand and, thus, to make them feel safe and welcoming for those who the growth coalition sees as its most valuable clients. The way that urban growth coalitions learn from and, to some extent, replicate successful marketing models from elsewhere led Harvey, in his classic article, to identify a problematic "serial reproduction" of sameness across urban landscapes which, by definition, crowds the marketplace and dilutes the competitive advantage that certain types of branding provide to the city.

Every brand—its slogan, its logo, its iconic landscape elements—has a shelf life and the expiration dates seem to arrive all the more quickly when marketplace crowding compels growth coalitions to innovate and find new marketing styles and strategies to distinguish their city from others. The production of an urban brand is, then, an ongoing process, not a one-off event; not only does it entail carefully monitoring the representational strategy (including which elements of the built environment to foreground), but it also involves constantly policing and managing the city itself, so that its public spaces and even its people—or at least those who are on public view in spaces likely to be traversed by tourists or business people—correspond to and enhance the city's brand. A number of related tactics are involved in this element of a branding strategy. At a general level, the city is frequently divided into "frontstage" and "backstage" areas. The former are tourist and/or business and shopping zones. The latter are areas seen as dangerous, unpalatable, or of little interest to highly valued visitors and residents. More or less subtle representational strategies can be used to channel valued populations in certain directions including, for example, the careful construction of tourist maps to focus the tourist gaze on specific sites/sights.

This channeling of people through the urban built environment is now frequently the purview of employees of Business Improvement Associations (BIAs), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), or their equivalents. These are private organizations, funded by special localized levies and taxes, which have, under conditions of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, assumed the formerly public functions of managing clearly delimited areas of the city (frequently the downtown). These private governance agencies not only offer tourists advice, but also frequently provide street-sweeping services in their area and contract with private security firms to enforce bylaws and guard against so-called "quality of life" crimes (e.g., panhandling, public intoxication, graffiti tagging, and sex work), which tend to have profound negative effects on low-income, marginally housed, racialized, and otherwise stigmatized and marginalized urban populations. BIDs, then, are inspired by and seek to reinforce some of the central myths of city marketing—the city as safe and friendly, fun, and without obstacles to commerce—by directly addressing the conditions of urban life that explicitly question the veracity of those myths.

The Sharp Edge of the Hard Sell: Managing and Policing the Branded City

Many have noted that the attempts by tourist agencies, Chambers of Commerce, and BIDs to manage the urban environment in correspondence with a particular marketing strategy are often armored with a hard edge of "zero-tolerance" policing, high-tech surveillance, and "defensive architecture" and strategies. These strategies involve the strict enforcement of laws for even the most minor infractions, the blanketing of city neighborhoods with closed-circuit television (CCTV), and, with the rise of so-called smart cities, various other sorts of sensors, and architectural features such as spikes embedded in alcoves and other places where people might sit or lie down. While many applaud the "cleaning up" of cities where these tactics are deployed, others argue that this sharp edge of image-conscious urban governance marks a new high (or low) point in a mean-spirited, "revanchist" (vengeful) war against the poor in contemporary cities.

Many of these strategies and the politics around them are epitomized by Times Square in New York. In the 1990s, under the guidance of Mayor Giuliani and a private-public development partnership, this neighborhood which was renowned as a "red-light" district but was also regarded by many as the vibrant heart of the city was transformed into what proponents see as the welcoming face of the new tourist- and business-friendly Manhattan and skeptics regard as a bland, and literally "Disneyfied" space of consumption (featuring a Disney store, Disney theatrical productions, and a studio of Disney-owned ABC Television). The Square has its own BID, whose street cleaners patrol constantly, a police substation, and is in Midtown Manhattan, a neighborhood where almost every square foot of public space is covered by at least one CCTV camera. Of course, the rewritten square is also the site of the annual, internationally televised street party to welcome the New Year—an event staged to convey the city's image as a friendly, safe, vibrant, and fun, if sometimes chilly, place.

Know Your Audience: Targets of and Participants in City Marketing and Branding

It is already evident from the discussion above that city marketers tend to have more than one audience in mind when they create a brand. Clearly tourists, potential residents, and business investors are in the sights of most urban growth coalitions when they charge marketing consultants with enhancing their city's image. Moreover, the recent urban branding literature suggests that a wider range of "stakeholders" can and should be involved. It is worth elaborating on the range of audiences and participants—and the audience-specific tactics—that has been identified in studies of city marketing.

Potential business investors are enticed with talk of a generally “business-friendly” environment, tax incentives, a willing and well-trained workforce, ongoing economic growth, an already existing cluster of similar businesses and suppliers, help with customized facilities, proximity or easy transportation to markets, and high quality of life for CEOs and valued workers. These themes were evident in the recent competitive frenzy among North American municipalities and regions to attract Amazon’s second headquarters (HQ2). Potential residents, who in many but not all cases would be workers in the city, are enticed with the promise of jobs and abundant career opportunities, a low cost of living, and high quality of life. The attractive features advertised to residents encompass everything from proximity to attractive natural environments and recreational opportunities adjacent to the city, to bike paths, high-quality recreational facilities and spectator sports, good schools and colleges, abundant cultural activities, and so on.

The combination of economic development and quality of life discourses has certainly been at the heart of many city marketing campaigns. Marketers seek to present their city as an economic boomtown and, simultaneously, an ideal hometown. Among potential residents and workers who have become particularly coveted since the turn of the millennium in North America has been the so-called creative class of young workers employed in the technology and design industries. Cities pursuing this market niche have sought to highlight their vibrant neighborhoods, coffee shops, active (rather than spectator) recreational opportunities, diversity, cosmopolitanism, and “cool.” Urban elites who market to tourists and conventioners are, for their part, likely to touch on some of the same quality of life and “quality of place” images outlined above, but are more likely to foreground the more immediate, visceral, and ephemeral experiences available in the city—from art galleries to night life. Yet, the tourist market is highly segmented and city marketers are careful to tend to a variety of niches within it.

Other important audiences require their own specific combinations of marketing tactics. Certain cities spend a great deal of resources on marketing themselves to the organizers of spectacular mega-events, such as the Olympic Games, the soccer World Cup, or to those, like the officials of the European Commission, who can bestow titles like “Capital of Culture.” These bids take a great deal of effort from a range of institutions and volunteers, and involve often quite detailed marketing strategies. The time, care, and money put into these bids indicate the substantial nature of expected returns and legacies from events like the Olympics, particularly as a result of the expected global media coverage. Clearly, city marketers use various print and electronic media, yet the marketers do not necessarily always control the ways their city will be portrayed. Thus, the media become not only agents of city marketing, but also a target audience as city marketers seek to persuade them to present their city favorably in feature stories, travel articles, and the increasingly ubiquitous rankings of the best cities for business, quality of life, young people, etc.

While cities’ relationships with funding streams from other levels of government have changed since the 1970s, this is not to say that central government, for example, is no longer important as a source of revenues and as a target for a certain type of city marketing. There is evidence of a focus by local elites on competitive bidding for grants from central government. Therefore, urban governments, private–public partnerships, etc. must present themselves in a particular way through the grant proposal process. The practice of what might be called “policy boosterism” is another example of the marketing relationship between political, bureaucratic, and business elites in one city and their peers elsewhere. It involves the promotion of locally developed policies, programs, or practices to broader communities of interested peers. Planners will “talk up” and share their zoning innovations with other planners elsewhere, for example.

It is worth noting that city marketing is not always externally focused. Marketing often targets the population of the city itself. Critical urban geographers have tended to see this internally oriented marketing as part of an effort to legitimize the policies and objectives of governing elites, to convince citizens that neoliberal growth strategies benefit everyone in the city equally. On the other hand, the burgeoning literature from marketing and management suggests that there may be progressive potential, beyond the narrow neoliberal frame, in participatory forms of city branding. They argue that it may be possible to utilize these methods of city brand development (involving consultants in designing city-wide focus groups and brand-visioning processes, for example) to identify common understandings and goals across the population, and therefore use the branding process to develop new policies and nurture “buy-in” to those policies in order to change the character of the city for the better. This is not a straightforward process, of course. Yet, proponents of “bottom up” or participatory branding argue that it can transform policy in ways that extend beyond a neoliberal frame. On the other hand, important concerns remain about the ability of ordinary citizens to be considered “stakeholders” in participatory branding processes. As Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015, 1378–79) note in the case of Bogotá, “participation in the thematic focus groups was achieved only for the educated middle class, thus neglecting a large section of the city’s residents,” and since these exclusions are common elsewhere too, there is a concern that city branding will largely remain a top-down, instrumental, exclusionary, and neoliberal practice, despite the efforts of a few consultants to do things differently.

Staying on Message: The Politics of City Marketing

As the above examples indicate, city marketing has a number of political motivations and implications. The importance that marketers place on creating and managing a coherent, singular brand for a city necessitates political activity intended to persuade or enroll a wide variety of interests in a broad growth coalition and efforts to stay “on message.” Growth coalitions comprise interests from a range of economic sectors as well as state actors, and representatives of other institutions and interests. Therefore, there can be different foci within a coalition. This “silo” effect can be exacerbated in larger cities—or in urban regions where numerous cities have combined their resources to construct a single marketing strategy—since even interests from the same sector might find themselves at odds over development strategy due to their embeddedness in different neighborhoods or municipalities. Thus, a continual politics of consensus building and persuasion within the coalition is necessary if a single brand is to be articulated

and maintained. While this pluralistic political context can produce successful long-term agreements on coherent marketing strategies, it can also produce difficulties in maintaining coherence under a single marketing banner.

The politics of persuasion and consensus building operates not only within growth coalitions, but also between the coalition and the larger population of a city. In order to present a unified and welcoming marketing image, marketers must find ways to dampen opposition to their particular branding and development vision. Thus, it is necessary to build what Cox and Mair call a “localist ideology” where most residents of a city are persuaded that they are worthy, deserving, and unified in relationship to the “outside world.” Not surprisingly this sort of hegemonic discourse is never complete or entirely convincing. Not all residents will be persuaded by a marketing strategy or a particular development agenda. The limits of top-down branding has been evident in the various recent refusals of local populations to accept the costs of Olympic games, including those in Calgary, Boston, and Hamburg, for example. Opposition to this sort of city marketing and its relationship to the demands of major corporations has also been clear in the case of Amazon’s search for its HQ2 site. Indeed, not only did cities short-listed by Amazon see opposition groups spring up to question the massive financial and other concessions that city governments were offering the company, but opposition has continued after Long Island City, New York, and the Northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, were chosen as joint winners of the competition.

Future Directions

The study of city marketing has been a vibrant element of urban geographical scholarship since the beginning of the 1990s. Yet, there are aspects of the phenomenon that have been less studied than others. Furthermore, there is a danger of the literature becoming rather uninspiring, with new studies, ironically, engaging in a “serial reproduction” of their own by producing new case studies of city marketing without furthering conceptual understandings.

On the other hand, worthwhile work is being done in the following areas and more of it is necessary. First, Lucarelli’s (2018) argument for a deeper conceptualization of the political in the politics of city branding as a regime of knowledge production, and Vanolo’s (2018) response point the way toward new avenues for critical investigation in the future. Second, research on affect in critical human geography might lead to new insights into the ways in which brands, symbols, and slogans move their audiences on a variety of levels, including the way in which images and visualizations are used in city branding, and how they mediate how people see and feel attached to places. Third, the ways in which urban policy professionals, such as city planners, engage in policy boosterism and how this practice shapes cities and the interurban networks in which they exist can both inform and be informed by the literature on policy mobilities. Fourth, more detailed analyses and evaluations of the effects of marketing strategies are necessary. Can campaigns intended to attract new workers or investment be measured in order to evaluate their direct and indirect consequences? Fifth, as city marketing becomes more common beyond the Western industrialized world, it seems reasonable to assume that analyses conducted in a variety of different historical, cultural, and political-economic contexts would benefit from and lead to further theorizations of postcoloniality and international development. Are standard theoretical perspectives tenable, for instance, if they are employed to study city marketing in Global South or settler colonial cities? These are open and interesting questions.

See Also: Urban Geography; Waterfront Development; Urban Growth Machine; Urban Policy.

Further Reading

- Colomb, C., 2012. Pushing the urban frontier: temporary uses of space, city marketing, and the creative city discourse in 2000s Berlin. *J. Urban Aff.* 34 (2), 131–152.
- Cox, K.R., Mair, A., 1988. Locality and community in the politics of local economic development. *Ann. Assoc. Am. Geogr.* 78, 307–325.
- Evans, G., 2003. Hard-branding the cultural city—from Prado to Prada. *Int. J. Urban Reg. Res.* 27 (2), 417–440.
- Green, A., Grace, D., Perkins, H., 2016. City branding research and practice: an integrative review. *J. Brand Manag.* 23 (3), 252–272.
- Hae, L., 2018. Traveling policy: place marketing and the neoliberal turn of urban studies in South Korea. *Crit. Sociol.* 44 (3), 533–546.
- Hall, T., Hubbard, P. (Eds.), 1998. *The Entrepreneurial City: Geographies of Politics, Regime, and Representation*. Wiley, New York.
- Harvey, D., 1989. From managerialism to entrepreneurialism: the transformation of urban governance in late capitalism. *Geogr. Ann.* 71 B, 3–17.
- Joo, Y.M., Seo, B., 2018. Transformative city branding for policy change: the case of Seoul’s participatory branding. *Environ. Plan. C Politics Space* 36 (2), 239–257.
- Kavaratzis, M., Kalandides, A., 2015. Rethinking the place brand: the interactive formation of place brands and the role of participatory place branding. *Environ. Plan.* 47 (6), 1368–1382.
- Lauermaann, J., Vogelpohl, A., 2017. Fragile growth coalitions or powerful contestations? Cancelled Olympic bids in Boston and Hamburg. *Environ. Plan.* 49 (8), 1887–1904.
- Lucarelli, A., 2018. Place branding as urban policy: the (im)political place branding. *Cities* 80, 12–21.
- Lucarelli, A., Olof Berg, P., 2011. City branding: a state-of-the-art review of the research domain. *J. Place Manag. Dev.* 4 (1), 9–27.
- MacLeod, G., 2002. From urban entrepreneurialism to a revanchist city? On the spatial injustices of Glasgow’s renaissance. *Antipode* 34 (3), 602–624.
- McCann, E., 2004. ‘Best places’: inter-urban competition, quality of life, and popular media discourse. *Urban Stud.* 41 (10), 1909–1929.
- McCann, E., 2013. Policy boosterism, policy mobilities, and the extrospective city. *Urban Geogr.* 34 (1), 5–29.
- Rose, G., Degen, M., Melhuish, C., 2016. Looking at digital visualizations of urban redevelopment projects: dimming the scintillating glow of unwork. In: Jordan, S., Lindner, C. (Eds.), *Cities Interrupted: Visual Culture and Urban Space*. Bloomsbury, London, pp. 105–120.
- Vanolo, A., 2008. The image of the creative city: some reflections on urban branding in Turin. *Cities* 25 (6), 370–382.

- Vanolo, A., 2017. *City Branding: The Ghostly Politics of Representation in Globalising Cities*. Routledge, London.
- Vanolo, A., 2018. Politicising city branding: some comments on Andrea Lucarelli's 'Place branding as urban policy'. *Cities* 80, 67–69.
- Ward, S., 1998. *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850–2000*. E & FN Spon, London.
- Ward, K.G., 2000. From rentiers to rantiers: 'Active entrepreneurs,' structural speculators,' and the 'politics' of marketing the city. *Urban Stud.* 37, 1093–1107.
- Ward, K., 2007. Business improvement districts: policy origins, mobile policies and urban liveability. *Geogr. Compass* 1 (3), 657–672.