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INTERVIEW: WILLEM WOUDENBERG

“Creating a distinct and individual brand identity for the city of Amsterdam was challenging”

Whether it's an obscure small town or a large metropolis, the branding of a location can give it a competitive edge. Positioning is important to attract business opportunities, and visitors. Location branding as a discipline has a long way to go in India where destination marketing is still finding its feet. **Willem Woudenberg**, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Brand Dialogue spoke to **Rashi Bisaria** of **Pitch** about location branding and its future in India.

How important is it for a place to create and sustain an identity of its own?
Places have long felt a need to differenti-

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ate themselves from each other, to assert their individuality and signify their unique existence. How would a city be able to convince the world that it exists and tad too 'differently', if it is not able to convince the others of its identity? Areas are not only divided by geographies, there is a lot more to them in terms of language, rituals, beliefs, culture and tradition.

Formulation or development of an identity creates awareness of the city's essence and builds a sense of pride. It's important for the cohesion in the place and a condition to build a strong image for the outside world. An effective assertion of identity for a city makes its characteristics stand out and ultimately attracts several tourists towards it. It is a powerful method for 'city tourism' and attracting industries. It sure goes a long way in building recall value in the minds of people.

How popular is Place or Location branding as a discipline?

Places are increasingly facing global competition in both their external and domestic markets: thereby the necessity of a distinct identity and strong marketing is gaining space. A holistic approach

of location or destination branding is now gaining frequency and is becoming more relevant and popular. Cities and governments have begun using more marketing and communication efforts to attract tourists and industries. Examples of this development are New York, Bilbao, Melbourne and Amsterdam which have shown positive outcomes of 'city branding'. A lot of research is being conducted in this space and I think it eventually will lead to the adoption of this interesting technique, where an entire city or area is treated like an individual brand.

How much has place branding evolved over the years?

Place branding has gone ahead from its initial stage but there is still a long way to go. It has evolved from developing a visual style for a region or city, to an organised branding and marketing effort focusing at defined target audiences like tourists and desired kind of companies. Cities have developed a stronger realisation that it is not only a marketing slo-

gan but also increasing the number of shops or hotels and improving the level of services for tourists that contribute. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam profits from the Amsterdam-brand, but at the same time the Rijksmuseum plays a crucial role in creating an attractive city for visitors, a city that has something special to offer to visitors. City branding is not only a city government activity but it is relevant for the whole city, including all the companies.

How much of a role do consumers play in the marketing and branding of destinations?

Consumers are an essential medium of conviction for city branding. The ones who live in a city contribute to its traditions, ideologies and cultures; they are the ones who make the city distinct. Also, when citizens of a place are proud, visitors are encouraged to find out the reason. On the other hand, there are tourists and travellers who spread the goodwill of the city, which further entices other consumers to visit the city.

Have cities and governments today recognised the power and importance of destination marketing?

City branding is a recognised concept in the western world but it is developing in

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India, you can call it a fairly 'new concept here. In several states of India though, branding and marketing is being used to attract tourists like Kerala, which took up the subject of state branding and successfully culled out a niche of 'God's own country'. India is a prosperous nation in every aspect, many elements of India's diverse cultures, such as festivities, mythology, yoga, architecture and the cuisines have had a profound impact globally but the world does not know clearly what Mumbai or Delhi or Chennai can be best at. This needs to be

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managed to successfully create an identity and image?

New York and Amsterdam both have created the desired image of a creative city and have converted many of their locations into creative destinations. New York city's 'I love New York' logo has done wonders for the city, it

example which extends as 'I am Amsterdam', it brings together the entire city as one. The position of Amsterdam as the national cultural capital and major international cultural centre has been refined by this slogan.

Both the above mentioned slogans are clear, short, powerful and memorable as they identify with the atmosphere of the cities.



How challenging was it to create the branding for Amsterdam?

Creating a distinct and individual brand identity for the city of Amsterdam was very challenging because the city was further divided into several autonomous parts that behaved like brands themselves. The center of the city was not capable of forcing them, so it was a real bottom up process in which all departments, institutes had to agree and participate. Another challenge was that many parties were involved with the Amsterdam branding like several companies including the city government. Several creative agencies worked on it together, taking care of marketing, advertising, visual identity, identification of target customers and the reach of internet. The Amsterdam branding as you see today is very much the result of this joint effort which required immense collaboration.

Developing a city brand is more complex than developing a product brand. It is a deeply evolved process and takes some years of implementation. In the case of Amsterdam, five to six different agencies contributed their best towards the effort. Eventually, it turned out to be a successful project and contributed to the image makeover of the city. It covered a span of three years when Amsterdam developed and implemented its brand identity on all channels. ■

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worked upon, and then of course there is 'Incredible India' but that's a marketing slogan and not a branding exercise, which in my view is not as successful as it can be.

Which cities according to you have

is seen as an inspiration for destination branding. It did not only unify the city but also gained recognition for the city across the globe. Even in India T-shirts with 'I love NY' are commonly sold and bought.

'I Amsterdam' is another interesting