
Destination Branding for Tourism in Southeast Asia: Extending and Integrating Internal Branding

(Summary, Excerpts)

Part 1: Existing Practices and Issues in Destination Branding

Part 2: New Frontiers of Service Orientation and Internal Branding

Part 3: The Extended and Integrated Model

2006

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report begins by explaining the need for destination branding and showing the benefits that improved tourism arrivals can bring to locations in Southeast Asia. Destination branding for tourism is defined and distinguished as the process to help build unique relationships with consumers that go beyond the mere exchange of services and the selling of commodity attributes.

Part One provides an overview of destination branding in Southeast Asia and presents two process models which estimate the traditional and contemporary approaches – tourism advertising and externally focused destination branding. A comparison of branding efforts in Thailand and The Philippines is made highlighting four important lessons: the need for a consistent strategy backed with long term investment, the power of innovation, the determination of and focus on a core essence, and the importance of customer service orientation. Challenges to destination branding efforts are then covered. Emphasis is placed on service orientation as it occurs in three different contexts: the international and “controlled” level, the local and “controlled” level, and the independent and “uncontrolled” level. This third area is where real, spontaneous interactions occur between independent service providers or common citizens and tourists. This rich, challenging area of exploration and potential impact is the focus of the remainder of the report.

Part Two explains this new frontier of service orientation and internal branding by first providing an expanded definition, then arguing that this will be the prime point of differentiation and interest in destination branding moving forward. It is presented as an economic driver for nations, a cultural support mechanism for its people, and as the means to deliver authentic experiences which engage consumers.

Differences in the level of service orientation among Southeast Asian nations are presented and the origins of these variances are sought. Examples of customer service improvement efforts in Asia are shared with a focus on the extended definition of internal branding which includes independent service providers and general citizens. These examples fall into one of four categories: awareness, training, reward, or punishment. The advantages and disadvantages of each of these internal branding tools is discussed in light of Southeast Asian cultural norms.

Part Three of the report proposes a third destination branding process model. It is an extended model which is unique in that it acknowledges and integrates the perceived negatives of a destination, seeks to measure these undesirable attributes, then emphasizes internal branding as the tool to adjust and alleviate these perceived negatives. The process model is a cycle which can continually measure and track consumer perceptions to guide both internal and external branding efforts.

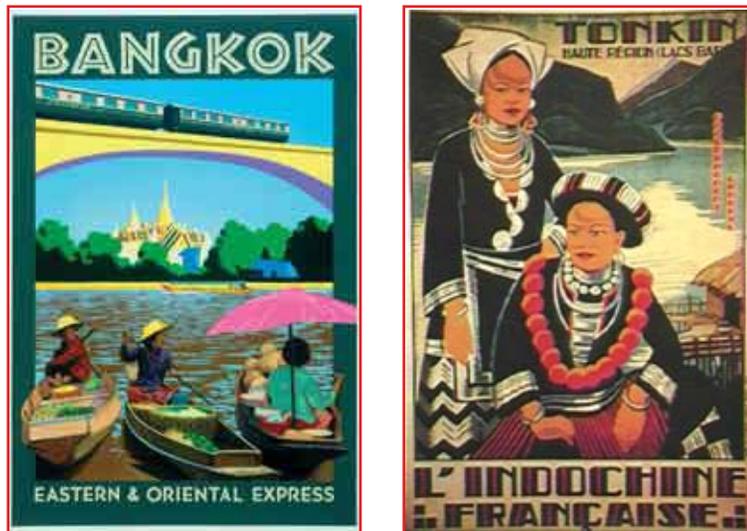
This model is applied to the nation of Vietnam in a brief exercise which brings the process to life. The unique and powerful model seeks to elevate the important issue of internal branding for service orientation in uncontrolled environments and provide a useful, tangible process for addressing this most challenging – and most promising – area of destination branding for tourism.

PART 1: EXISTING PRACTICES AND ISSUES IN DESTINATION BRANDING FOR TOURISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Tourism Advertising

It is important to distinguish between what might be called tourism focused advertising and a deeper destination branding process. The traditional advertising approach focuses on communications executions for an external mass market audience. Travel posters exemplify this approach as they seek to offer a broadly appealing and idyllic scene in one, isolated communication.

Graphic 5: Traditional Style Posters Promoting Southeast Asia



Sources: Eastern and Oriental Express, Cornell University Library / Echols Collection

One-off travel brochures, websites, and magazine advertisements continue this tradition today. Often, such campaigns emphasize a broad positioning using a variety of photographs, noncommittal tag lines, and ad copy promising all things to all people. An example of

this approach for Singapore from the 1980s:

“Where would you expect to enjoy the tranquility of a deserted island from the shade of a coconut palm?

And explore the sights of a bustling city from under a trishaw canopy?

To see cloth dragons flitter in the frenzy of a Chinese procession?

And an endless parade of exotic gems at duty-free prices?

Singapore.

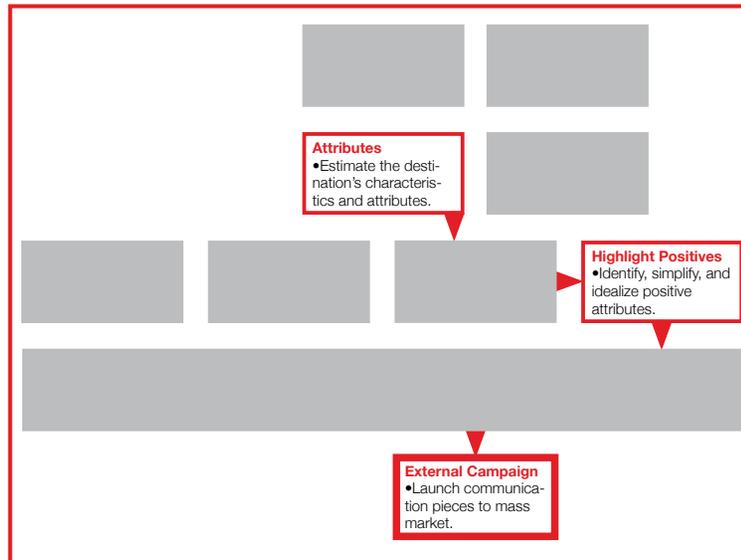
The most surprising tropical island on earth.” (Batey 147)

Another brochure uses the tag line:

“Island of many faces.” (Batey 156)

While this tactical approach to increasing tourism can have positive impact in terms of building general awareness where there is none, it has limitations. “[There is] a battle in Asia for tourism based on similar messages – bland and to a certain extent lacking in originality and credibility...the lack of differentiation in messaging is accompanied by similar endless shots of attractions. In fact, if one were to take the country names off the television commercials it would be impossible to say what nation was bidding for attention.” (Temporal 99-100) Further critiquing the shallow approach which often generates simplistic and idealistic advertising images, logos, and slogans, Temporal states “...logos do not change...behaviours.” (Temporal 56)

Not only does the isolated tourism ad have limited impact – it may propagate stereotypes or promote a narrow view of a destination. Simon Anholt summarizes: “When you haven’t got time to read a book, you judge it by its cover.” (Anholt 106)

Graphic 6: Tourism Advertising Process

- The advertising process may begin with an estimation of the destination's attributes by the client (a nation) and/or the agency. It may be decided, for example, that the place is characterized by hot weather, impenetrable rain forest interior, sandy beaches, lack of transportation infrastructure, friendly locals, and spicy food.
- From this list of surface attributes, the most universally positive – sandy beaches and friendly locals – will be selected. Other attributes may be “spun” towards the positive, with hot weather becoming “warm sunshine” and spicy food being described as “flavorful cuisine.”
- The process accelerates quickly to the end goal of an external communication which is likely to be a print or web ad featuring images of the chosen attributes followed by an optimistic, agreeable tag line.

Externally Focused Destination Branding

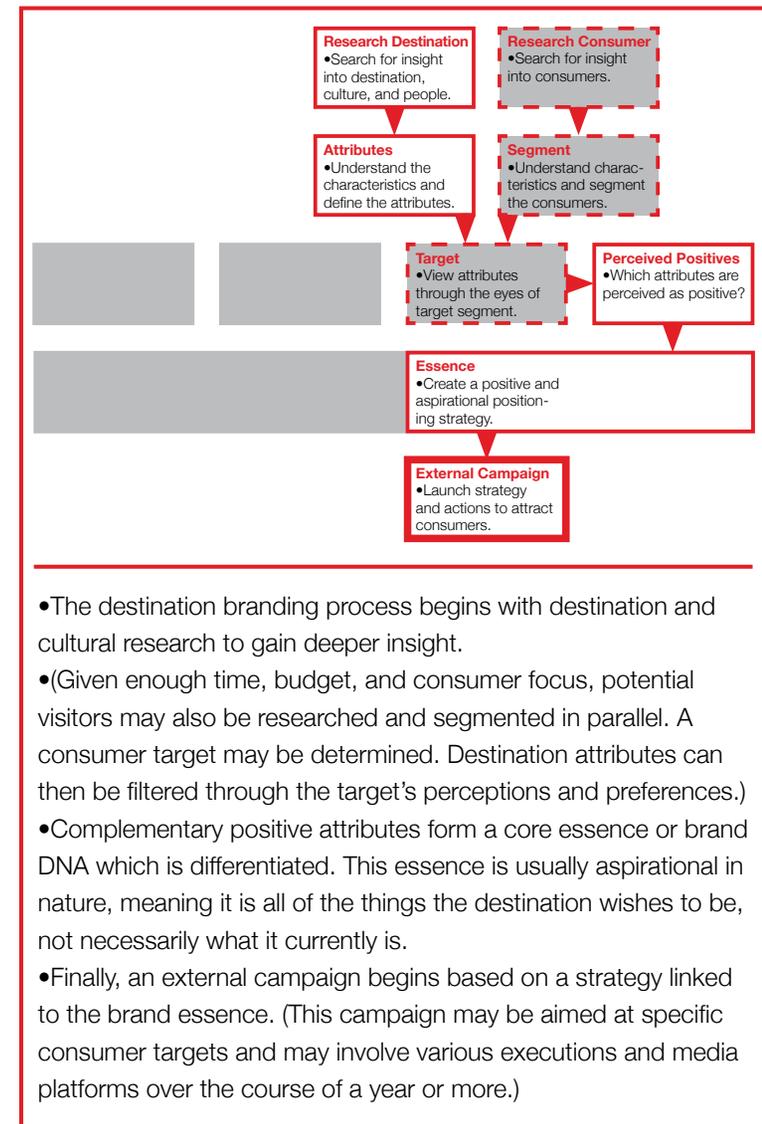
In contrast to these shallow, short term advertising efforts is the destination branding process. “The idea of branding a country in a disciplined way is relatively recent” according to Alice Tybout, Professor of Marketing and chair of the Kellogg Marketing Department at Northwestern University. (Lindell) While destination branding often results in print or web communications, the process includes re-researching the destination and potential tourists, then developing and positioning the destination based on the perceived unique, positive attributes. This brand strategy may then drive multiple messaging platforms including sponsored events, informational websites, and advertising via print, television, and web. The executions from such a brand campaign are often tied to an “invitation” which lasts throughout the year.

Graphic 7: Selected Annual Destination Brand Campaigns

Sources: Tourism Authority of Thailand, Malaysian Tourism

The externally focused destination branding process begins to emphasize the importance of consumer understanding and unique positioning, whereas the traditional advertising approach assumed a mass market would respond to a generally positive message. As explained by Temporal, “A nation undertaking a branding exercise has first of all to answer the question “What true, unique characteris-

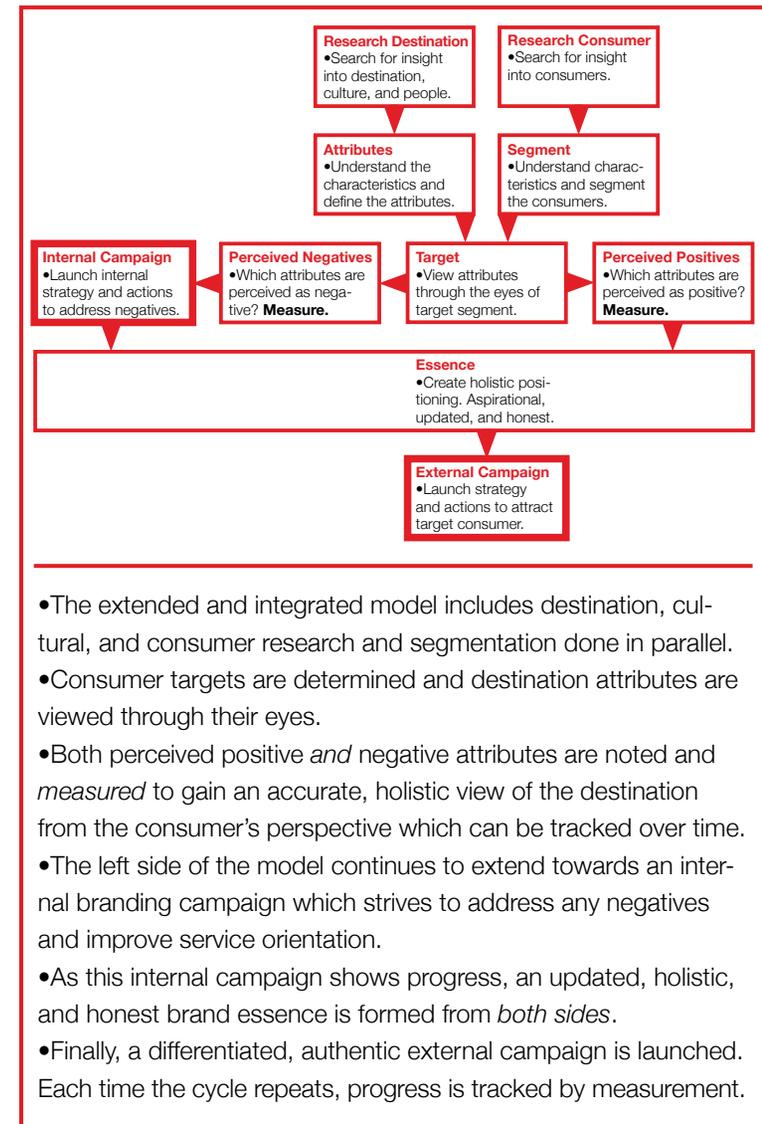
tics do we have that people in other countries will like?” “Why are we different? Why are we better?” (Temporal 50-51) Anholt continues, “...it is important for brand-owners in emerging markets to be quite clear about which aspects of their own story appear most exotic to people in other countries – no matter how banal they may seem back home.” (Anholt 86) He also supports the idea that it is useful to involve both locals and “outsiders” when conducting research and seeking understanding: “It often takes the objective view of an outsider to understand the essence of a nation’s image.” (Anholt 144)

Graphic 8: Externally Focused Destination Branding Process

PART 3: THE EXTENDED AND INTEGRATED MODEL

Earlier in this report, two destination branding models were discussed – one which covered the traditional advertising campaign approach, and a second which presented a contemporary externally focused process which introduced research and consumer understanding. Now that a more extensive definition of internal branding has been identified as the key to economy boosting differentiation, national and cultural pride, and building authentic, lasting relationships with consumers, how can this insight be integrated into a new destination branding model?

Graphic 17: Extended and Integrated Destination Branding Process Model/Cycle



CONCLUSION

This report has provided an overview of destination branding in Southeast Asia and traced the evolution of three process models that facilitate destination branding. It is hoped that the third model presented here – extended and integrated – will help raise awareness of the importance of internal branding for service orientation in uncontrolled environments. It is in the acknowledging and measuring of a destination's or peoples' perceived negatives, then seeking to adjust and alleviate them in the internal campaign portion that makes this model unique, extended, integrated, and powerful. Unfortunately, some destination branding experts have missed these steps. Even a respected leader in the field like Anholt has carelessly written "...all that the 'managers' of the nation brand can realistically hope to do is identify and isolate the positive existing perceptions of the country and calculate how to enhance whatever contributes to these in the country's external communications, while downplaying anything which doesn't." (Anholt 117) This represents the kind of shallow, short term thinking and missed opportunity that some destinations have bought into.

Far better is Temporal's comment: "...unless [a nation] becomes more consumer-centric it is destined to remain a well-known name and not a well-known brand....and as long as it fails to sort out the negatives, its desired brand image will never be attained..." (Temporal 59) Kotler similarly states: "The strategic challenge is to accentuate the positive image while simultaneously trying to change the realities that give rise to negative images." (Kotler 85, 2002) The extended and integrated model presented here puts these verbal ideas into a useful, tangible process.