



Branding for Success

A discussion document looking at the importance of branding for retail destinations.

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Overview

Abstract

The brand of a retail destination is a key asset management tool for owners and managers that can contribute to the continued success of a retail destination. This paper examines the importance of developing and implementing a brand story and the key issues to consider when doing so.

Introduction

The significance of a strong and consistent brand is often overlooked in many industries. However, more than in any other, companies in the leisure sector need to create brands that appeal to people so that they feel inclined to engage with them during their free time. Consequently, retail destinations need to have a brand that the audience of visitors and retailers can buy into.

Put simply, a brand is the delivery of a promise (Landor 2004). This promise and delivery is communicated using various means and is fundamental to all mall operations. As such, the building of a brand is a sensitive process that requires a thorough and all-encompassing approach.

The brand story

The basis of a brand is its story: what it does, what it provides, to whom and why it matters. Brand stories ‘drive our critical interactions with our customers and stakeholders’, therefore the more compelling the story, ‘the more it will power the success of your enterprise’ (Thomson 2004). They inform all company decisions and operations and are the foundation for the branding process.

For existing malls, the branding process should only be undertaken when the brand story is shifting. A change in strategy, ownership, offer or within the space would prompt this, but the consequent process would remain the same.



Process

The foundation

Primarily, it is essential to undertake a thorough period of research in the development of a successful brand. This phase is where the brand story is unearthed, understood and finalised.

The branding consultants will immerse themselves in the mall and its surroundings in order to learn as much about it as possible. All existing information should be collated; documents such as architectural plans, marketing strategies and presentations are invaluable in understanding the current positioning of the mall.

The mall location will be studied as a means of providing essential context. As part of this, competitors will be analysed to ensure the developed brand story is unique to the region and its audience. The culture of the local area and country it is situated in is also key. For example, our experience in China has shown that it is commonplace for malls to position themselves slightly higher than the local market, as there is a tradition of aspiration within that community.

Understanding the target audience is fundamental in the development of a successful brand story. For new mall developments, this includes tenants and visitors. Market research is clearly important for the mall owners and developers to know they have a substantial target market in the segments they desire. Without an audience, the brand story is irrelevant and void.

Interviews may be conducted with stakeholders and other colleagues to discover their perceptions and aspirations for the brand, as well as further in-depth information regarding the company and how it operates.

The findings from the research and interviews are used to develop a comprehensive brand strategy document; outlining the brand story and how it should be expressed. The brand values, aspirations and mission statement will be set out, all of which should be used as reference points throughout the consequent stages.

The name

Latour (2011) rightly claims that ‘you can’t build strong brands without good names’. In a mall environment, the task is more complex thanks to the host of brand names which will be housed inside – the mall name cannot be too similar to that of one of the tenants. Location words are often overused and may overlap with competitor malls, so should be approached with caution. Similarly, abbreviations can be confusing and are not easy to search for online (Samland 2011).

There are five golden rules to consider when developing name options (Latour 2011):

- Striking – it should be memorable and provoke an emotion or reaction where possible
- Original – the creativity of the name reflects the quality of the offer
- Open – the name must be open to development as the brand evolves
- Suggestive – rather than spell out, the name should imply the brand offer to allow room for visitor imagination
- Legally sound – for trademarking purposes, the name must be registered and not infringe upon third party copyright.

Often in mall development projects the name has already been decided before the branding begins. When this is the case, the chosen name must be considered when creating the brand story. However, in instances when the name has yet to be decided, the name generation often falls within the remit of the branding consultants.

The expression

The brand identity can only be developed once the foundation of strategy has been established. The story and name will inform how the brand communicates and the creative work which will subsequently bring this to life.

Initially, the consultants will design several sketch concepts of elements such as the logo, typography, colours and image style. After being presented to the client, the selected route(s) will be developed and refined based on feedback. Once this work has been agreed and finalised, a brand book will be created. This prescriptive document should be used as a reference point for designers and other creative agencies throughout the implementation phase and beyond to ensure consistency.

The implementation

Once the brand and identity have been finalised, it should inform all elements as it is applied throughout the mall. This is essential in creating a consistent brand experience that visitors can identify and engage with: 'A brand is a promise wrapped in an experience – a consistent promise wrapped in a consistent experience' (Hughes and Jeanes 2008).

Marketing materials

Primarily, the brand identity will be used in the design of marketing materials. These will often be the first point of contact visitors or retailers will have with the brand, and so should be obvious reflections of it, whether printed or digital. Printed items may include brochures, magazines, posters, flyers and packaging. Digital platforms are increasingly important in the retail sector, so aspects such as the mall website, e-newsletters and social marketing must be harnessed in order to successfully communicate the brand to its visitors.



Process

Environment

There are more subtle channels the brand should infiltrate too. In terms of mall design, the architecture is generally established before branding is even considered. However, this is of real importance to the retail experience being created for visitors – is it a modern, glass construction or a more traditional building with classic detailing? The essence of a brand should be visible from the environment.

In this way, the design of signage and interiors should also take the brand as its primary inspiration. In graphic terms, elements such as colours, type and pictograms are salient aspects to reference, but form, materials and finishes can convey the brand in much the same way. A mall with an upmarket positioning might have leather furniture and high gloss surfaces, whereas those with a more ‘for everyone’ approach could use rounded shapes and soft, homely textures. For example, at Novy Smichov in Prague, where the brand is focused on creating a welcoming space for local people, comfortable seating is used throughout the mall allowing visitors to rest their feet between shops.



Staff

This holistic approach runs much deeper than in the design and aesthetic of materials and the built environment though. Mall staff are ambassadors for the brand in the way in which they interact with visitors and retailers. They must be fully briefed on the brand and believe its values and expectations so that they can behave appropriately. For example, if the mall is service-led, staff should be proactive, attentive and helpful. Visually, their uniforms are also a reflection of the brand and should not be underestimated. Staff should be viewed as an extension of the brand rather than as a distinct entity.

Facilities

The facilities within a mall contribute to its overall offer and should therefore be considered as a fundamental part of the brand promise. For instance, at Corvin in Budapest, the owners and managers have built a brand on delivering exceptional service to visitors through various facilities. To mark it out from its competitors, Corvin offers free Wi-Fi, mother and baby rooms, shoe shine machines, bicycle repairs, a left luggage office and hostesses to arrange taxis. Fashion focused malls such as Westfield London offer personal shopper and style advice services. As such, the facilities and services offered greatly depend on the brand promise of the mall being created.

Tenant mix

The tenant mix is a primary consideration when developing the mall brand. Often when the branding work begins, the types of retailer that will be targeted have been established following extensive research and strategy work. The leasing team may have already signed up some retailers. However, whether the desired tenant mix has been decided or not, it must be recognised that for retail destinations, a large part of the brand promise to visitors relates to the shops they have to offer. If a luxury brand has been created, it would be anticipated that there would be international high-end stores within the mall, supported by the other elements discussed in this paper. For example, Via Bellagio in Las Vegas features all of the expected luxury stores in an opulent interior environment. The marketing materials support this with sophisticated typography, colours and photography.

Key issues

Engage

It is essential throughout the branding process that stakeholders and staff feel involved. These people will be the ones to implement and manage the brand as it enters the market, so their continued participation is key to its success. It has been said that ‘highly engaged employees... ultimately strengthen the overall company brand’ (OE Strategies 2009) and so should be seen as an extremely effective tool in sending a positive message about the mall.

During the research phase, staff should be mobilised to be able to take part in interviews. Their working knowledge of the existing brand will prove insightful in the development of a new or revitalised version. Of course, they may also have valuable ideas for the new vision of the brand. Once the positioning and story has been determined, it should be clearly explained to them so that they understand and agree with the direction being undertaken.

Own

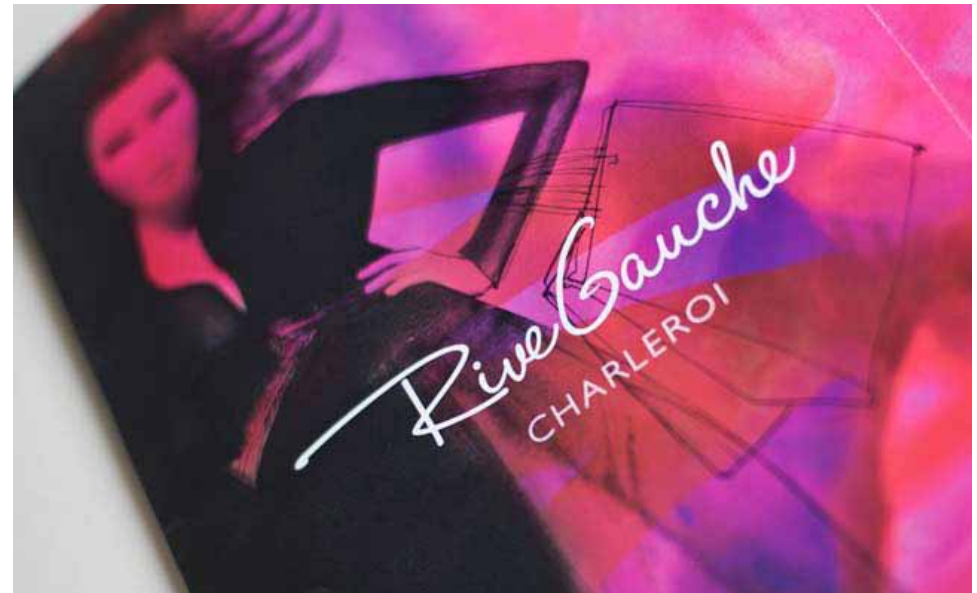
When it comes to the design of the brand identity, a small team should be chosen to liaise with the branding consultants. Ideally, this group will be comprised of stakeholders and marketing associates who will work on the brand once it has been established. Together, this team can work closely to finalise the identity of the brand before unveiling it and explaining it to the wider company. Although not all employees will have the opportunity to influence the design, they will value the way it is explained to them and the chance to have their questions answered.

Deliver

Throughout implementation, those with responsibility for rolling out the brand will need to ensure its consistency of application. As per the previous phases, other staff should be updated on project statuses, as they may be required to support in the hectic run up to launch. Moreover, it is important they feel an ownership of the brand and love it as it evolves and the reputation grows within the marketplace.

Future proofing

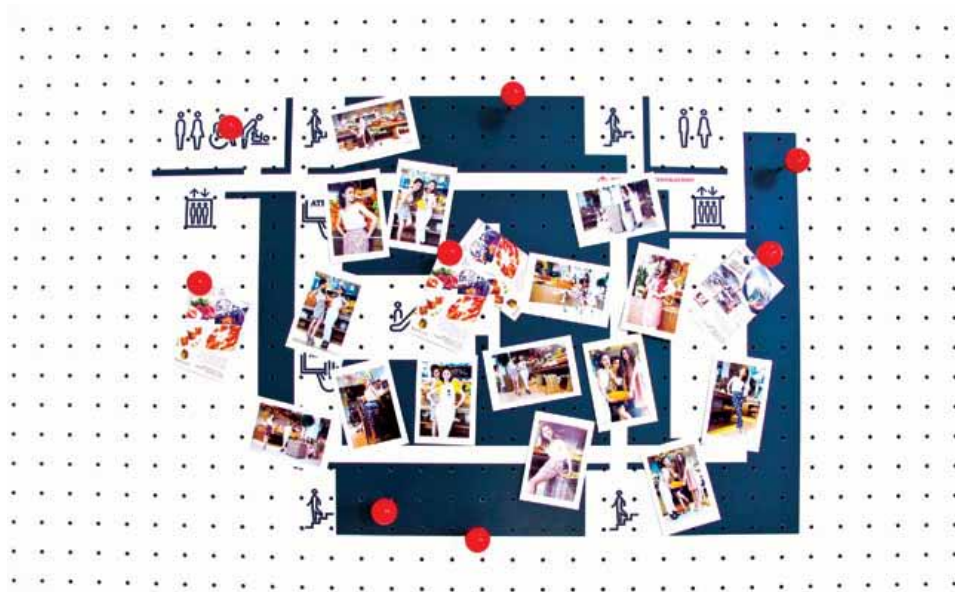
The most important means of ensuring the legacy of a brand is to keep its communications fresh and relevant. Content managers should be appointed to be responsible for communicating the brand story in whatever form appropriate, from digital promotion mail shots to managing the content of signs within the mall. The brand should be seen as needing constant nurture, much like the business itself, with regular strategy reviews to maintain performance. Branding consultants can help to provide this ongoing development framework.



Conclusion

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be seen that the fundamental aspect of a brand is its story. This must be engaging to ensure success, with a catchy name and attractive identity. As it influences and informs the whole retail experience, the brand story must ultimately be relevant and authentic. Otherwise, should the product or service set out in the brand story not be delivered, the brand is compromised and the audience may feel let down and confused, thus leading to a break down in trust between the two parties. When the importance of a strong brand is understood, its development and implementation is much simpler to undertake. Staff are engaged and the consequent solution will be much more effective, thus turning customers into advocates themselves.



Biography

Alan Robertson is CEO of Air Design, a design consultancy specialising in works for the retail destination sector. Based in London, the company also has offices in Moscow and Shanghai. For further information on Air or to contact Alan, please email alan@airdesign.co.uk or call +44 (0)845 450 6575.

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