COOPERATIVE BRANDING FOR RURAL DESTINATIONS

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Abstract: Destination image has been extensively studied, yet literature on the branding of it is sparse. This research delineated both concepts and proposed a conceptual model of destination branding. The model is founded on the spreading activation theory and extended from the image formation process framework, drawing on works of prominent branding scholars. Five hypotheses were developed through a case study and tested using two multidimensional scaling methods. The findings suggest that cooperative branding results in a consistent attributes-based image across multiple rural communities as perceived by tourists, but builds stronger linkages of the image to the brand identity and more favorable affective and attitudes-based brand associations for a region than for individual communities. **Keywords:** cooperative branding, rural destinations, image building. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Résumé: On a étudié à fond l'image des destinations, pourtant on a écrit peu sur les marques de destination. Cette recherche définit ces concepts et propose un modèle pour les marques de destination. Le modèle se fond sur la théorie de la diffusion de l'activation, incorpore la notion de la formation de l'image et utilise le travail de deux chercheurs proéminents des marques. On a développé cinq hypothèses à partir d'une étude de cas, et on les a testées avec deux méthodes d'échelle multidimensionnelle. On conclut que les marques coopératives produisent une image cohérente et qualitative qui comprend plusieurs communautés rurales dans la perception des touristes et que l'utilisation des marques forme des liens affectifs entre l'image et l'identité de marque qui sont plus forts pour les régions que pour les communautés individuelles. **Mots-clés:** marque coopérative, destination rurale, promotion de l'image de marque. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

Various aspects of branding are the subject of many academic studies, yet most of the literature focuses on consumer goods and grocery products (Morgan and Pritchard 1999:213). While brands are found in many categories of tourism goods and services and permeate almost all facets of tourist activities, the concept is not studied and practiced as vigorously in destination marketing as in the general field. In some

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specific areas such as rural tourism, little investigation has been undertaken into the processes of branding effort (Hall 1998).

The challenge of branding destinations lies with the complexity of the decision process on the part of tourists. As a bundle of goods and services, purchase of a destination mix has an inherent uncertainty and is usually expensive. Further, unlike other tangible products, tourists are not able to "test drive" and try the destinations before making a choice (Eby, Molnar and Cai 1999:55; Gartner 1989:16). Therefore, the decision involves greater risk and extensive information search, and depends on tourists' mental construct of what a potential destination has to offer relative to their needs. As a result, destination image is a critical stimulus in motivating the tourist. It is likely to be a critical element in destination choice process, irrespective of whether or not the image is truly representative of what a place has to offer (Um and Crompton 1990). Marketing agencies at all levels, thus, have a vested interest in building strong and positive images for their destinations. However, the extent to which image building benefits their targets can be greater if it takes place in the context of branding. The purpose of the research is to propose a destination-branding model, and to illustrate an application of it through a case study of cooperative branding across multiple rural communities.

DESTINATION IMAGE AND BRANDING

Although branding destinations is a relatively new development (Gnoth 1998) and academic investigation in the area is just beginning to emerge, studies on destination image are abundant and can be traced back to the early 70s when Hunt examined image as a development factor (1975). Despite criticism of extant work on destination image as atheoretical and lacking a conceptual framework (Baloglu and McCleary 1999a:869), significant progress has been made in advancing the understanding about image measurement (Driscoll, Lawson and Niven 1994; Echtner and Ritchie 1993; Gartner 1989; Goodrich 1978), its role in tourists' decision making process (Baloglu 1999; Crompton 1978; Fakeye and Crompton 1991; Goodall 1991; Milman and Pizam 1995; Moutinho 1987; Um and Crompton 1990; Woodside and Sherrell 1977), its components and formation (Baloglu and Brinberg 1997; Baloglu and McCleary 1999a; Baloglu and McCleary 1999b; Dann 1996; Gartner 1993; Gunn 2001; Phelps 1986), and the effects of mismatch between perceived and projected image on overall destination image and tourists' satisfaction (Andreu, Bigné and Cooper 2000; Chon 1990; Hu and Ritchie 1993; Ryan 1994). However, review of these studies reveals existing approaches to studying image are cocooned within a limited domain and have yet to be extended to the realm of destination branding in contemporary marketing terms. Although the words "brand" and "branding" appear or are alluded to in many of these studies, there are no apparent efforts to distinguish between formation of a destination image and the branding of it.

The two concepts are not clearly delineated even in the special issue of the *Journal of Vacation Marketing* (1999) dedicated to "Destination

Branding". For example, the authors of its lead paper define branding as "what images people have of the state and what kind of relationship they have with it" (Nickerson and Moisey 1999:217). In a separate paper, Hall cites the definition of a brand in general marketing terms but stops short of defining what destination branding is, only specifying its core objective as "producing a consistent, focused communication strategy" (1999:230). A number of other terms appear in Hall's study, but they are neither defined nor differentiated from each other, including image construction, image building, and brand development. Two other papers (Westwood et al 2001; Williams and Palmer 1999) make references to some key aspects of branding concept, but also in general marketing terms and without direct application in destination marketing. One non-academic paper (Crockett and Wood 1999) describes the process of developing a brand for Western Australia from practitioners' perspective. Although the paper fails to define destination branding and lacks a theoretical framework, the authors present the description along the lines of some basic, but important, branding principles. The paper clearly demonstrates that image formation plays only a partial role in branding a destination, and total practice should involve actively and methodologically building a consistent image by integrating a variety of marketing activities.

Image formation is not branding, albeit the former constitutes the core of the latter. Image building is one step closer, but there still remains a critical missing link: the brand identity. To advance destination image studies to the level of branding, this link needs to be established. Aaker defines this as "a unique set of brand associations that the brand strategist aspires to create or maintain" (1996:68). Keller emphasizes the importance of selecting brand elements to represent the identity and argues that its cohesiveness "depends on the extent to which the brand elements are consistent" (1998:166). Consistent brand elements reinforce each other and serve to unify the entire process of image formation and building, which in turn contributes to the strength and uniqueness of brand identity. Therefore, destination branding can be defined as selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish it through positive image building. A brand element comes in the form of a name, term, logo, sign, design, symbol, slogan, package, or a combination of these, of which the name is the first and foremost reference. However, unlike typical goods and services, the name of a destination brand is relatively fixed by the actual geographical name of the place. Because of its given nature and people's unconscious awareness that it cannot be changed, the name is typically absent in destination image studies. Some of those cited above mention other brand elements such as logos and slogans but none are examined as playing a unifying role in building image towards a consistent and strong destination identity.

Brand Equity and Image

Recognition of the difference between destination branding and forming or building an image is fundamental to the introduction of

branding to tourism marketing studies. Organizations and businesses in general embrace the concept of branding as a dominant strategy because a strong brand provides added value to both the seller and buyer, which is attributable to the concept of brand equity. Kotler and Armstrong believe that "brands have higher brand equity to the extent that they have higher brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived equity, strong brand associations, and other assets" (1999:246). Keller defines this equity as "the differential effect that brand knowledge has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand" (1998:45). He also identifies the sources of equity as comprising brand awareness and brand image: the two components that form a consumer's brand knowledge. A brand image is not a brand but a source of its equity, and a very important one when it comes to destination branding.

The concept emerged in marketing literature in the late 50s (Newman 1957; Herzog 1963). Keller reiterates its definition as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory" (1998:93). Set in tourism, the image of a destination brand can be defined as perceptions about the place as reflected by the associations held in tourist memory. This definition of image and its relationship to destination branding is rooted in the psychological theory of Adaptive Control of Thought introduced by Anderson (1983) in his seminal work "The Architecture of Cognition." The principal concept within this theory is spreading activation. To understand its relevance to branding, it is useful to think of one's knowledge structure or memory "as a simple network in which all elements or units are *nodes* and the connections among them are *links*" (Anderson 1983:25). The nodes represent various pieces of information stored in memory and links represent the strength of associations between them. An information node—which can be verbal, visual, or abstract—is activated in working memory when a stimulus in external environment is present (such as a word pronounced or picture presented) or when an internal production takes place (such as when the word is encoded and interpreted). But it is the external environment that effectively serves as a means for maintaining activation in the memory network (Anderson 1983:29). Anderson describes activation as the energy that runs the cognitive machinery (1993:86). Once a node is activated, this act spreads and brings information into working memory. Spreading activation identifies and favors the processing of information node(s) most related to the source of activation. How spread the activation is depends on the number and strength of links connected to the activated node. Keller applies the concept and conceptualizes a brand—represented by the name or other element(s)—as one node in memory, and associations as other linked informational nodes (1998:47, 48, 93). Building a brand image amounts to identifying the most relevant associations and strengthening their linkages to the brand.

Gartner's 1993 "Image Formation Process" is the most comprehensive to date in the literature, and closest towards a model of destination branding, albeit itself an image building framework. This can be seen as consisting of three major image building blocks: components, for-

mation agents, and characteristics. While a recent article by Baloglu and McCleary (1999a) describes the overall image of a place as formed by the two components of cognitive and affective evaluations, Gartner, by integrating previous studies, posits that a destination image is "formed by three distinctly different but *hierarchically interrelated* components: cognitive, affective and conative (1993:193; emphasis added)." This formulation mirrors three-type classification of brand associations as defined in literature represented by Keller (1998:93). Figure 1 illustrates the similarity.

In the second building block of Gartner's framework, he expands Gunn's well-known two-dimensional (organic vs. induced) model and proposes a continuum of eight image formation agents. They include overt induced I, overt induced II, covert induced I, covert induced II, autonomous, unsolicited organic, solicited organic, and organic. This typology focuses on the effect of different information sources on destination image formation. Although it partially overlays Keller's notion of the strength of brand associations (or effects of direct experience and various forms of communication), this second building block of Gartner's framework falls short of linking image formation and components of a destination to a brand identity. The strength of a component (or brand association) depends on how closely related the component is to the brand identity (the activated brand node). A weakness or absence of connection between image components and brand identity hinders spreading activation, and adversely affects the processes of encoding, retrieval, matching, and execution as in Anderson's theory. Further, unless focused and congruent, different image components as information nodes stay active conditional to constant maintenance, such as exposure to external stimulus.

The third building block of Gartner's image framework describes four characteristics of destination image. One, the larger the entity, the
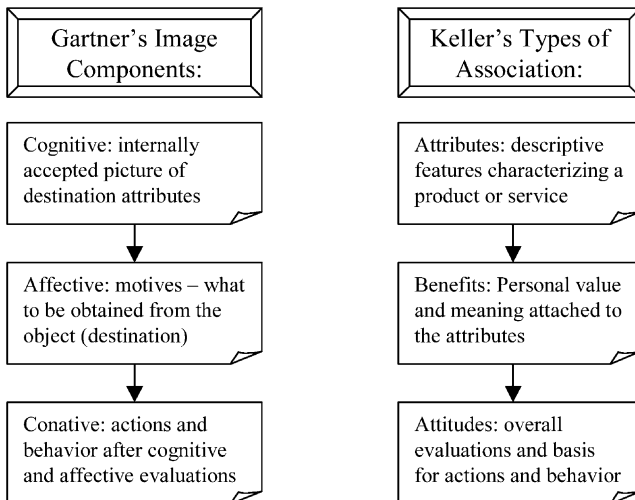

Figure 1. Two Paralleled Typologies

more slowly image changes. The speed of change is inversely related to the complexity of the destination system. Two, induced image formation attempts must be focused on specific destination images and budgeted for long-term exposure. Three, the smaller the entity in relation to the whole, the less of a chance to develop an independent image. Four, effective image change depends on an assessment of presently held tourism images.

Unlike the two other building blocks, this typology is unparalleled in general marketing and branding literature. It makes unique contributions to the current proposition of a destination-branding model as shown in Figure 2. Its core theoretical foundation is spreading activation as in Anderson's theory. The model considers destination branding as a recursive process that revolves around the central axis formed by brand element mix, brand identity, and brand image building. The process starts with carefully choosing one or more brand elements to serve as trademarkable devices. These, whether slogans or logos, distinctly identify the destination and begin the formation of strong and consistent brand associations that reflect the attributes, affective, and attitudes components of an image (or 3As on the right of Figure 2). These are drawn on the first building block of Gartner's image framework and Keller's concept of brand associations (Figure 1). Attributes are defined as perceptual tangible and intangible features characterizing the destination; affective as personal value and meaning attached to and benefits desired from the attributes; and attitudes as overall evaluations and basis for actions and behavior. The
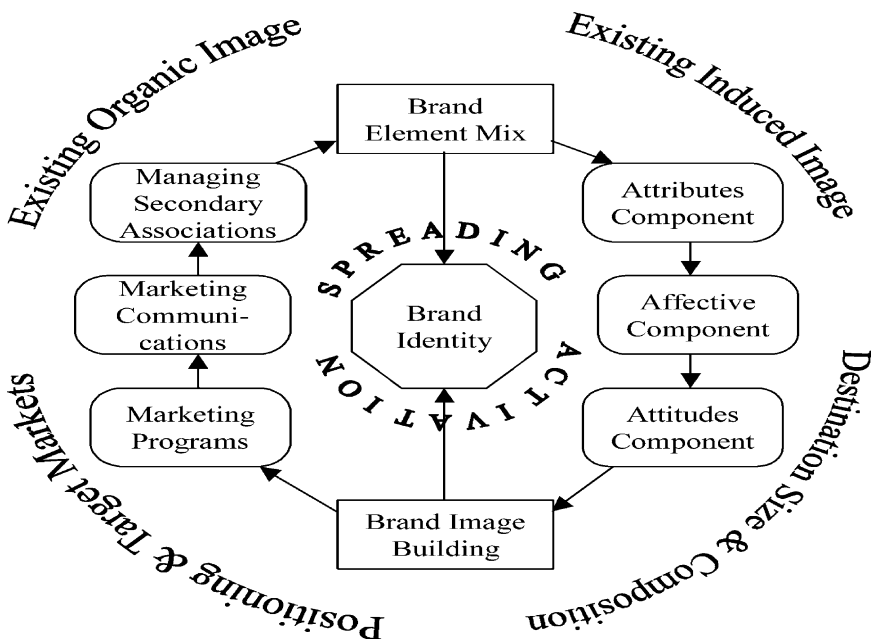

Figure 2. A Model of Destination Branding

hierarchical relationship among the three components in Gartner's framework is retained in the model.

Previous studies emphasize either how perceptions of a destination are formed on the part of tourists (Baloglu and McCleary 1999a) or what factors affect formation of a destination image (Gartner 1993). In this model, image formation goes beyond the tourist-oriented approach to encompass what image a destination marketing organization (DMO) wants to project through each of the 3As. This makes it possible to assess the gap between the perceived and the projected. The assessment then provides input in building the desired image that is consistent with brand identity and through marketing programs, marketing communications, and managing secondary associations (or the 3Ms on the left of Figure 2). These are incorporated from branding literature exemplified by works of Aaker (1991, 1992, 1996), Aaker and Biel (1993), Gregory and Wiechmann (1997), Ind (1997), Keller (1998), and Kotler and Armstrong (1999). In the context of destination branding, marketing programs such as tourist experience enhancement, attraction development, channel selection (for instance, push vs. pull channels of distribution), cooperative advertising, and value pricing are designed to enhance the brand identity through spreading activation. Marketing communications are concerned with selecting an optimal mix of media (including television and magazines) and other options (like direct response advertising, trade promotions, and event marketing and sponsorship) to support marketing programs and enhance brand identity through spreading activation. In supporting image building, Gunn's concept of induced image and Gartner's induced image formation agents can be modified to operationalize marketing communications.

Associations are considered secondary in destination branding when this relationship with a place as perceived by tourists do not result from a DMO's direct marketing programs and communications, and are usually beyond its direct control. In this sense, secondary associations resemble Gunn's concept of organic images and Gartner's organic and autonomous image formation agents, but differ from them with regard to leverage. While secondary associations are not controllable, they can be borrowed, leveraged, and managed to supplement the intended image building to the extent that they benefit spreading activation and consequently enhance the brand identity of the destination. An example is the media report that a ticketing agent of the Atlanta 1996 Olympic Games asked a New Mexico resident to apply for a game ticket through his own government. This and similar incidents of mistaking the state as a foreign country prompted its Department of Tourism to use the slogan "you do not need a passport to visit New Mexico" in one of its vacation guides.

The four components on the model's outer circle specify the contextual preconditions (or 4Cs) in which destination branding takes place. Gartner's typology of destination image characteristics forms the foundation for three of the 4Cs, except for that of positioning and target markets. These two are well-known concepts and have been investigated extensively by marketing and tourism scholars alike. Making

them the conditional part of the model stems from review of branding literature by Aaker (1991, 1992, 1996), Aaker and Biel (1993), Gregory and Wiechmann (1997), Ind (1997), Keller (1998), Kotler and Armstrong (1999), and tourism literature by Ahmed (1991), Botha, Crompton and Kim (1999), Court and Lupton (1997), Hassan (2000), Kim, Crompton and Botha (2000), Kotler, Bowen and Makens (1998), McKercher (1998), and Richardson and Cohen (1993). The latter also contributes significantly to the proposition of destination size and composition. The case of Old West Country presented in the remainder of the paper provides an illustration of the model's application. It is posited through the case that cooperative branding across multiple rural communities builds a stronger brand identity.

Following the literature review, appraisal of Old West Country promotional materials, and interviews with its officials and its affiliated convention and visitors bureau, five specific hypotheses were developed for testing. Hypothesis 1, cooperative branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity results in consistent perceptions of attributes associations for a regional entity and its member communities alike. Hypothesis 2, cooperative branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity results in consistent perceptions of affective associations for a regional entity and its member communities alike. Hypothesis 3, cooperative branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity results in consistent perceptions of attitudes associations for a regional entity and its member communities alike. Hypothesis 4, cooperative branding builds stronger attributes associations and linkages to brand identity for a regional entity than for its member communities. Hypothesis 5, cooperative branding builds greater favorability of affective and attitudes associations toward a regional entity than its member communities.

Rural Tourism and Old West Country

Rural tourism became a noticeable phenomenon in the United States in the early 80s. Many farming communities experienced a decline in such singular economic sectors as traditional agriculture, mining, timber, energy, and farm-based manufacturing (National Governor's Association 1988). When initial efforts at revitalizing rural America by focusing on another singular economic activity did not yield satisfactory results, attempts were made to look at alternative forms of economic development. There was a rapidly growing awareness that economic diversity through the utilization of existing resources would contribute to rural revitalization; and tourism development was identified as one of the viable alternatives (Honadle 1990). It was considered a clean and growing industry that was easy to establish (Frederick 1995). Tourism has since been embraced by an increasing number of rural communities as a means to offset losses in traditional agricultural industries and to diversify their economic bases.

In the State of New Mexico, tourism plays a significant role in its overall development. The state boasts most of its attractions in rural

setting. To encourage local initiatives and promote regional market-
ing, its Department of Tourism created six regions in 1997. Region 2
in Southwest New Mexico, which consists of seven counties and covers
a landmass of 16 million acres or one-fourth of the state, has been one
of the most active ones. Cooperation among communities within this
region is more formalized than in the other five regions due to the
presence of Old West Country organization.

   Old West Country (OWC) was initially formed in 1982 as a four-
county effort to capitalize on the many attractions and the common
image of Southwestern New Mexico (LeMay and Dry 1999). It was later
expanded to cover today's Region 2. Taking advantage of its geo-
graphic proximity and similarity in the rich history of Cowboys and
Indians and multicultural heritage, the organization has used its own
name to project a common image in all its advertising campaigns and
programs. The name has become a nucleus and guidepost for member
communities alike to enhance the common image with their market-
ing activities. Presently, OWC functions as a destination-marketing con-
sortium made up of convention and visitors bureaus or chambers of
commerce in seven counties. It has established itself as an umbrella
marketing organization, promoting member communities as one dis-
tinctive vacation destination under one brand name in a variety of
marketing activities, including conducting marketing research and
attending international travel trade shows. The consortium does not
replace the usual functions of visitors bureaus and has only one paid
professional position. The unique set-up of such a cooperation can be
best described as cooperative branding—a strategy that redefines the
size of a destination by bringing together two or more adjoining com-
munities of similar natural and cultural compositions of attractions.

   In 1997 OWC commissioned an advertising conversion study. In
addition to measuring the effectiveness of cooperative advertising pro-
grams, the study was also designed to gauge the perception of respon-
dents about the region as a vacation destination. In particular, the
organization wanted to find out how well the image components in its
advertising materials projected the overall representation of Old West
Country brand in the minds of actual or potential tourists. Through
the content analysis of OWC's print advertisements, interviews with
directors of visitors bureaus in the region, and a pilot study involving
134 respondents drawn randomly from an OWC database of inquirers,
a six-item scale was developed with a reliability coefficient of .87. These
six declarative statements described image components of Old West
Country brand. Respondents were asked to indicate on a 5–1 Likert
scale whether they strongly agreed (5), agreed (4), neither agreed nor
disagreed (3), disagreed (2), or strongly disagreed (1) with each of
the statements in terms of their perception of the region as a vacation
destination. These statements were: … is a unique travel destination;
… offers a mixture of historic charm and natural beauty; … provides a
contrast of the past and the future; … is a rich sampler of Southwestern
cultures; … is a great family vacation destination; and … is my favorite
year-round vacation place.

   The population of the OWC study was those people who made

inquiries and requested collateral materials after being exposed to its advertisements placed in magazines. The sample was drawn from those who made inquiries during a 12-month period in 1995–1996. Two similar studies were conducted for Las Cruces Convention and Visitors Bureau and Silver City/Grant County Chamber of Commerce in 1998. Both were members of OWC. The sample of the Las Cruces study was drawn from those who made inquiries about Las Cruces and its vicinity during a 14-month period in 1996–1997 after seeing the advertisements of visitors bureaus. The sample of Silver City study was from those who made inquiries about it during approximately a 12-month period in 1997–1998 after seeing the chamber's advertisements.

Following interviews and consultation with tourism leaders in the two communities, it was decided that the OWC six-item scale was applicable in their studies of the images the communities were trying to communicate to outsiders. Item 3 in Las Cruces study was slightly modified to "… provides a contrast of heritage and novelty." Item 5 in Silver City study was modified to "… is a good place to take children". These six items were referred to as image variables thereafter. The three datasets from these studies were combined to provide the sample for the current study, which was appropriate because of the comparable definition of population in these studies. The total number of observations in the sample was 1,833.

The principal statistical tool for the current study was multidimensional scaling. Its value for market research has been well documented and described by Churchill (1991). Its application in tourism destination studies has been numerous (Goodrich 1978; Gartner 1989; Haahti 1986; Mayo 1973; Moscardo, Morrison, Cai, Nadkarni and O'Leary 1996). The current study employed two procedures: classical multidimentional scaling and individual differences scaling. The former applies Euclidean distance metric to model (dis)similarity among stimuli (the six image variables). The distance δ_{ij} between variable i and variable j is defined as

$$\delta_{ij}^2 \approx \sum_{s=1..r} (x_{is} - x_{js})^2$$

where x_{is} is the location of variable i on dimension s. In this study, the distance was in the mental space of the respondents, measured in terms of their perception about OWC, Las Cruces, or Silver City. The input for the classical multidimentional scaling procedure was a (dis)similarity matrix of scores, which were computed from the original interval values of the six variables. The classical procedures modeling resulted in a graphical presentation that projected similarities or dissimilarities of the six image variables along two dimensions. Kruskal's stress measure and R^2 were used to test the procedure's goodness-of-fit.

Individual differences scaling procedure also employs Euclidean distance metric, but the distances are weighted in accordance to different degrees of importance attached to the dimensions of variables by different types of subjects (that is, OWC inquirers vs. Las Cruces

inquirers). In this procedure, the distance δ_{ijk} between variable i and variable j for subject k is defined as

$$\delta_{ijk}^2 \approx \sum_{s=1..r} w_{ks}(x_{is} - x_{js})^2$$

where w is the weight of subject k. The distinguishing feature of the individual differences scaling was its ability to converge multiple sets of matrix scores expressed by the three groups of inquirers. The two multidimentional scaling analyses were followed by ANOVA procedures on each of the six image variables.

Study Findings

Results of multidimentional scaling are represented in Figure 3. The testing statistic of Kruskal's stress was .054, .047, and .087, consecutively, for the three individual perceptual maps, indicating a good (<.05) or fair (<.10) goodness-of-fit (Johnson and Wichern 1992). R^2 goodness-of-fit statistic was .99, .99, and .98. The distances projected in the two-dimensional model accounted for nearly all the variance of the data.

In all three maps, the two image variables of "… providing a contrast of the past and future" and "… is a rich sampler of southwestern cultures" are found to be closest to each other and in the same quadrant, suggesting a tight and close association. The close association is also evident between the variables of "… offers a mixture of historic charm and natural beauty" and "… is a unique travel destination." In addition, both sets of image variables are also clustered together in the right two quadrants. Moreover, the relative location of the cluster is consistent across all three perceptual maps. In the proposed model (Figure 2), the cluster of the four variables constitutes the attributes component associated with the destination image, either as a region or individual community.

Hypothesis 1 is supported by the finding: cooperative branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity results in consistent perceptions of attributes image component for a regional entity and its member communities alike.

The image variable of "… is a great family vacation destination" is representative of the affective component in Figure 2. On all three maps, it strays away from the attribute component; and its location is inconsistent. Hypothesis 2 is not supported by the finding: cooperative branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity does not result in consistent perceptions of affective image component for a regional entity and its member communities alike.

The image variable of "… is my favorite year-round vacation place" is representative of the attitude component in Figure 2. On all three maps, it strays away from the attribute component; and its location is inconsistent. Hypothesis 3 is not supported by the finding: cooperative
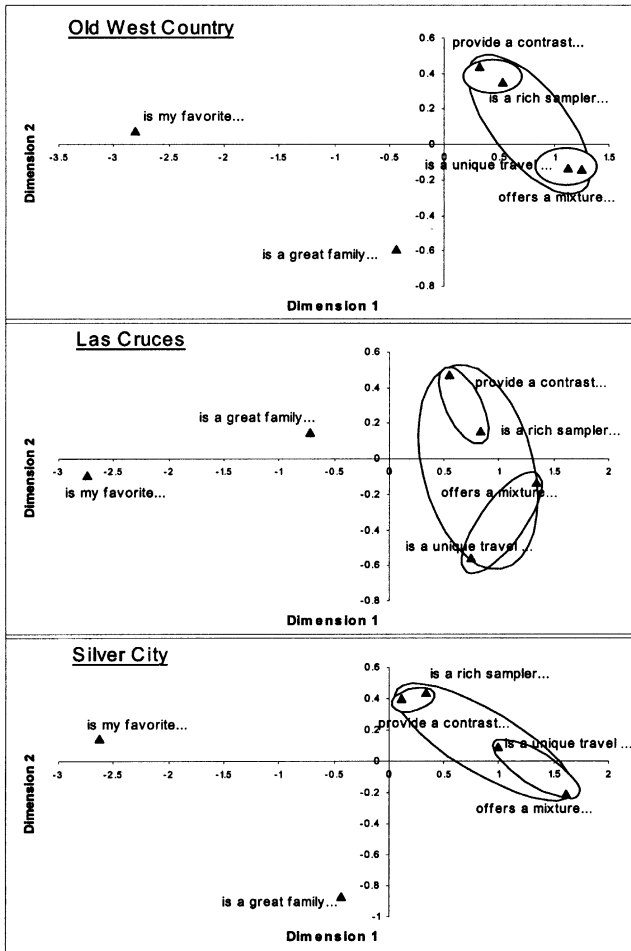
Figure 3. Individual Perceptual Maps

branding across multiple rural communities with geographic and cultural proximity does not result in consistent perceptions of attitudes image component for a regional entity and its member communities alike.

Similarities and differences of perceptions held by the three groups of respondents are better identified through the individual differences scaling procedure. Instead of three separate perceptual maps, this method generates one such map that projects the six image variables in the two-dimensional space as commonly perceived by all respondents combined. The differences among the three groups are represented by three vectors in a separate map, but along the same two dimensions. Overlaying the common perceptual map and the map of vectors results in Figure 4. The testing statistics of stress and R^2 are .096 and .97, respectively, indicating an excellent fit of the model.
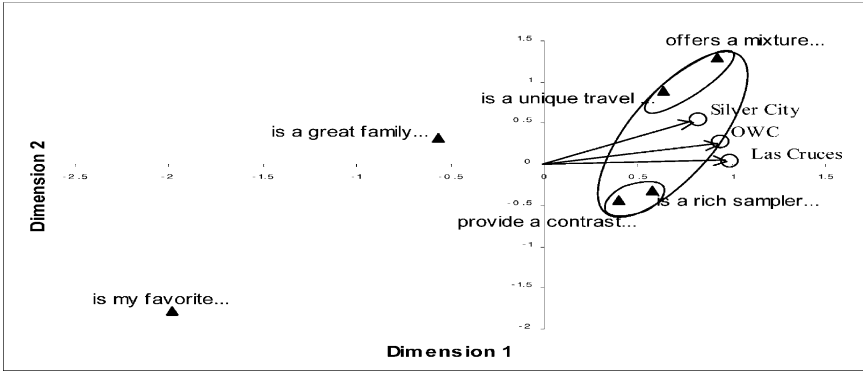
Figure 4. Common Perceptual Map

The locations of the six image variables are placed in the perceptual space according to the perception of an average or typical respondent in the entire sample, regardless of any affiliation. Yet, this common perceptual map appears to mirror the major finding from the earlier three multidimensional scaling applications. For example, the two variables of "... providing a contrast of the past and future" and "... is a rich sampler of Southwestern cultures" were found to be very close to each other, and clustered in the right two quadrants with the image variables of "... offers a mixture of historic charm and natural beauty" and "... is a unique travel destination"; and the two other variables are distantly away from the cluster. Therefore, it reconfirms the testing results of hypotheses 1–3.

To determine how the perception of each of the three groups of respondents is different from or close to that of an average or typical respondent, the individual differences scaling procedure provides a critical statistic called "weirdness index." The index varies from .00 to 1.00, with .00 being a perfect match. In this study, the index was .05, .85, or .44 for OWC, Las Cruces, or Silver City, respectively. This suggests that, relative to the perception of a typical respondent, these image variables are most descriptive of the overall region, and least descriptive of Las Cruces, with Silver City in between. Indeed, despite its ruralness and similarities to other communities in the region, Las Cruces is the second largest urban center in the State of New Mexico and is intersected by two major interstate highways. The information provided by the weirdness index is indirectly represented by the three vectors in the upper right quadrant of Figure 4.

The goodness-of-fit statistics indicate that the two-dimensional map appropriately describes the locations of the six variables in the minds of respondents, as it accounts for 97% of data variance (R^2). However, the importance of the two dimensions is not necessarily equal to a typical respondent; nor are they to each of the three groups of respondents. In fact, for a typical respondent dimension 1 (horizontal axis) is far more important than dimension 2 (vertical axis), with a ratio of 85%–12%, which is indicated by the flatness of Figure 4. The orien-

tation of each vector reflects the individual group's ratio of importance to the two dimensions. The Old West Country has a ratio of 94%–26%, Las Cruces 99%–3%, and Silver City 82%–54%. Importance attached to the two dimensions by the OWC respondents is apparently most reflective of that of a typical respondent. The common perceptual map is thus most descriptive of OWC, least of Las Cruces, with Silver City in between.

Hypothesis 4 is supported by the finding: cooperative branding builds stronger attributes-based brand associations and linkages to brand identity more for a regional entity than for its member communities.

The strength difference of brand identity and associations between OWC and its two member communities is also evident through the analysis of variance (ANOVA), whose results indicate that the OWC scores higher than Las Cruces and Silver City in each of the six image variables; and the differences are all significant at the <.01 level. On the scale of 1–5 points (with 5 being the maximum), the OWC achieves 4.10 or higher for five variables and 3.51 for the sixth; whereas all of the Las Cruces scores are below 4.00, and only one of the Silver City scores exceeds 4.00. This comparison is relative, though. The mean score of either Las Cruces or Silver City is far above the expected average for each of the four attributes-based image variables, suggesting that they are well descriptive of the image the two communities were trying to project, although they are not as strongly held by tourists as those of OWC as a region.

The strongest image variable held of OWC by tourists is its offering a mixture of historic charm and natural beauty (4.48), which is also strongest of the two member communities (3.93 and 4.10 for Las Cruces and Silver City, respectively). The two weakest variables are their being a great family vacation destination and a favorite year-round vacation place. However, OWC fares better than the two member communities in both instances. In the first instance, the scores are 4.10 for the OWC vs. 3.33 and 3.45 for Las Cruces and Silver City, respectively. In the second instance, the scores are 3.51 for the OWC vs. 2.78 and 2.74 for Las Cruces and Silver City, respectively. These two variables represent the affective and attitudes components, respectively. In branding terms they also measure the favorability of brand associations toward the brand, which is defined along the two dimensions of desirability and deliverability (Keller 1998:106).

Hypothesis 5 is supported by the finding: cooperative branding builds greater favorability of affective- and attitudes-based brand associations toward a regional entity than its member communities.

Destination Branding

The OWC case and the MDS results provide empirical evidence to support the destination-branding model proposed in this study. The illustration below begins with the 4Cs on the model's outer circle and moves inward to 3Ds, 3As, and 3Ms when appropriate. Interviews with the OWC officials suggest that in forming the consortium they were

fully aware of and decided to capitalize on a dominant autonomous element of the existing organic image about this part of the United States (that is, of Cowboys and Indians). In Gartner's typology, such image is promoted by autonomous media coverage and popular cultural forms such as movies, stories, and documentaries (1993:201–203). Persistent projection of the image by autonomous sources serves as a constant stimulus of spreading activation in the tourist memory. However, the organic image does not belong to the region alone. In fact, the towns and villages within the region are not featured in the Western movies as much as those elsewhere. Many other regions in the neighboring states could claim themselves as an old west country as well. Cooperative branding gives OWC the advantage.

Destination branding is to select a consistent mix of brand elements to identify and distinguish a destination through positive image building. Cooperative (destination) branding is to redefine the size of a destination by bringing together two or more adjoining communities of similar natural and cultural compositions of attractions. The choice of Old West Country as a brand name overcomes the inherent limitation of fixed geographical names of towns and villages. This is in and out of itself an advantage of cooperative branding. Indeed, almost each of the individual DMOs within the region has been and continues to promote its own community as an old west country. The difference between now and then is the drawing power of induced image. The existing picture of individual communities prior to the formation of OWC consortium was fragmented. Each community was too small and had too few attractions to create a critical mass that would be strong enough for a tourist to associate with the brand name. The formation of OWC brought seven communities together under one umbrella. A shared identity was born and has been enhanced through consistent image building by both OWC and its affiliated DMOs. They complement each other, but as the multidimensional scaling results indicate, the region as a whole fares better than each of the two member communities in each of the 3As.

Cooperative branding makes it more effective for a region to use brand element mix (including the name) to build a stronger brand image and to enhance its identity through 3Ms (in the OWC case, there is no documented evidence of Managing Secondary Associations). One of the brand elements in OWC advertising promotional materials is the tagline: "Where Fortunes Were Made, Hearts Were Broken and Dreams Fulfilled!" Neither Silver City, nor Las Cruces, nor any of other five communities could substantiate such a claim individually. OWC marketing programs and communications are funded by contributions from the affiliated DMOs. It is also eligible to receive competitive grants from the New Mexico Department of Tourism, but the actual size of its operating budget is smaller than an average DMO in the region. However, it is able to achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in its marketing activities. For example, according to the results of three conversion studies conducted for OWC, Silver City, and Las Cruces, the former incurred the lowest cost to induce an inquiry ($3.52 vs. $27.35 for Silver City and 12.78 for Las

Cruces) and to attract a visitation from among the inquirers ($8.57 vs. $42.47 for Silver City and $24.76 for Las Cruces), but it realized the highest return per one dollar spent on advertising in magazines and newspapers ($65.61 vs. $24.08 for Silver City and $10.28 for Las Cruces). It is evident that cooperative branding accounts for, at least partially, the differential effect that the OWC brand identity and image have on tourist response to the marketing of the brand. By Keller's definition (1998:45), OWC has achieved higher brand equity with added value to the destination, and also to the tourists as reflected in their greater favorability towards the region than each of the two member communities.

The extent to which the region is rewarded with cooperative branding is only relative, though. At both regional and individual community levels, cooperative branding has been successful in strengthening brand associations mainly in building the attributes component of image. The rejection of hypotheses 2 and 3 lends support to the suggestion that OWC and affiliated DMOs have yet to develop consistent strategies of positioning and target markets, one of the four conditions of destination branding. The strayed locations of the two affective and attitudes image components in Figures 3 and 4 are but one convincing indication that greater potential of OWC cooperative branding has yet to be realized. Demographically, the largest touring age group is 55–64. In fact, those age 55 and above account for more than 45% of the tourist population. It is no surprise then that the projected image of "a great family vacation destination," or " a good place to take children" in the case of Silver City, does not hold. The attempt to project an image of the region as "favorite year-round vacation place" is based on the assumption that the region's warm temperature in winter would attract senior tourists.

There are three fallacies with this image component and its underlying assumption. First, the assumption implies that senior tourists were a target market, whereas in practice they were not adequately portrayed in the promotional literature reviewed at the time of the study. Second, the assumption in essence positions OWC against other winter destinations for seniors without knowing if such competing choices exist in their minds. Third, while part of the region indeed enjoys pleasant climate all year-round, the image projection would be against the memory of those tourists who have driven through the region on the Interstates 10 or 25 in heated summer and along desert strips. Being a "favorite all year-round vacation place" seemed too ambitious a goal for the region.

Through cooperative branding OWC has achieved a unique selling position, although such position is stronger for the region as a whole than for its member communities. Insofar as the attributes component of image is concerned, there is a close match between what is projected by OWC and what is perceived by tourists. In their minds, the cognitive attributes of the region are consistently and strongly associated with the brand identity. However, OWC has yet to develop a unique selling proposition to tourists. The two affective and attitudes components not only stray away distantly from the attribute component in the mental

construct of the tourist (as on the multidimentional scaling maps), but are also least valued by the tourist when evaluated independently (as in ANOVA). In this instance, a mismatch or a gap exists between the perceived and projected. The effects of such gap on a destination's overall image and tourists' satisfaction have been examined in some of the above-cited works (including Andreu et al 2000; Chon 1990; Hu and Ritchie 1993; Ryan 1994). In the OWC case, since the mismatch takes place at the two upper levels of the image formation hierarchy in Gartner's typology and the tourist's evaluation typically focuses on the destination's attributes, its adverse effects may not be as severe as the mismatch at the level of the attribute component. However, should the model's condition of positioning and target markets have been as satisfied as other three conditions, the gap would be minimized; the internal linkages of 3Ds, 3As, and 3Ms in the model would be stronger and more congruent, resulting in greater spreading activation, more distinguished brand identity, and, by inference, higher brand equity.

CONCLUSION

The study proposed a conceptual model of destination branding. The proposal was founded on Anderson's (1983) psychological theory of adaptive control of thoughts, drawn on marketing and branding literature, and extended from Gartner's framework of destination image formation process. The model is recursive, centering on building destination identity through spreading activation, which results from dynamic linkages among brand element mix, image building, brand associations (3As), and marketing activities (3Ms). The model also specifies that spreading activation take place under the four conditions of existing organic image, existing induced image, destination size and composition, and positioning and target markets (4Cs). The model was illustrated through the case of Old West Country, a marketing consortium consisting of seven rural counties in the state of New Mexico, USA. It was posited that cooperative branding across multiple rural communities builds a stronger destination identity than an individual community. Five hypotheses were developed and then tested, three of which were supported in the results of multidimensional scaling perceptual mapping and ANOVA.

It was found that both the region and its member communities benefited from cooperative branding in projecting a consistent cognitive image based on shared destination attributes (hypothesis 1). Its support was considered critical for spreading activation, and was attributed to the OWC's making best use of the region's existing organic and induced image. However, it was also found that affective and attitudes components of OWC image as perceived by tourists were inconsistent between the region and its member communities (hypotheses 2 and 3). The rejection of hypotheses 2 and 3 was attributable to the unmet condition of positioning and target markets. Cooperative branding was found to strengthen attributes-based brand associations and their linkages to brand identity more for the region as whole than for its member communities (hypothesis 4). It also resulted in greater favorability

toward the region than its member communities (hypothesis 5). The strength and favorability of brand associations and their linkages to destination identity were considered key sources of spreading activation. The met condition of destination size and composition and good marketing programs and communications accounted for the support of hypotheses 4 and H5.

This study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it added to the existing knowledge of destination image by providing empirical evidence to and extending Gartner's typology of image characteristics. Specifically, the testing result of hypothesis 1 in this study reveals that a regional entity and smaller ones within can build a consistent cognitive image based on shared attributes, attesting to the validity of Gartner's statement that induced image formation attempts must be focused on specific destination images and budgeted for long-term exposure. Gartner posits that smaller the entity in relation to the whole, the less of a chance to develop an independent image. The testing results of hypotheses 4 and 5 not only support this position (albeit indirectly), but also point to a new dimension, that the relational characteristic can be examined along the two criteria of strength in attributes image component and favorability in affective and attitudes components. In addition, the study's findings suggest that a regional entity can capitalize on an organic image even though the latter is not exclusively tied in with the regional entity; and a region has a better chance than smaller areas in capitalizing on such organic image to build a stronger induced image. Further, failure to satisfy the condition of positioning and target markets can have an adverse impact on the effectiveness of building affective and attitudes image components. Previous studies reported the adverse relationship between the distance and the clarity of a destination's image (Crompton 1979; Hunt 1975). The model comfortably accommodates important findings such as theirs.

The study's unique contribution lies in the development of a conceptual model that closes the gap between an existing framework of destination image studies and the contemporary marketing concept of branding. Williams and Palmer reviewed some of the destination image studies and concluded, "There is a strong consensus among these authors that brand image is a pivotal aspect of a marketing strategy for a destination" (1999:265). They also pointed out that brand image is one of the key parts in the formation of a clear and recognizable brand identity in the marketplace. Drawing on the concept of spreading activation, the model explicates that a brand image, which consists of three hierarchical components, is indeed only one part of destination branding process. To brand a destination, an image must be built by choosing an optimal brand element mix and identifying the most relevant brand associations. Associations and their linkages to the brand identity must be consistent and strengthened by equally consistent and effective marketing activities. Further, destination branding must be preceded by taking into consideration the four conditions of existing organic image, existing induced image, destination size and composition, and positioning and target markets. The model facilitates

a comprehensive understanding of the role of destination image in the overall scheme of destination branding.

From a practical perspective, applications of the proposed model are expected to assist a DMO in aligning important marketing strategies with its image and identity building and vice versa. For example, the identification of the mismatch between the perceived and projected image at the affective and attitudes levels points directly to the weakness of OWC's strategies in positioning and target markets. An important practical contribution of the study is the proposition of cooperative branding. Richardson and Cohen (1993) analyze state tourism slogans in the United States and conclude that the slogans used in advertising by DMOs at state level fail to communicate unique selling propositions. They attribute such failure to the fact that most of the states are diverse entities both geographically and culturally. Although many state DMOs plan to develop and promote a statewide theme as a unifying coordinating and reinforcing mechanism or strive for an overall consistent image of the state (Hawe, Taylor and Hampe 1991, cited in Richardson and Cohen 1993:99), there are obstacles for successful implementation due to geographical heterogeneity. As a remedy, Richardson and Cohen suggest the strategy of breaking a state into smaller and geographically specific regions. However, the strategy will work only when "each region has, or has the potential to acquire, a unique and interesting" image of its own, and the image sells (1993:100). Cooperative branding is a step-up version of the strategy in that it goes beyond image building, and is case supported. For example, it emphasizes the importance of selecting a brand element or element mix to represent the brand identity. Cooperative branding removes the restriction of geographic names associated with individual cities and towns and provides a rare opportunity to give the newly defined regional destination a unique name and to build a unique identity as a result. Existing regions in many states are formed arbitrarily, and are numbered or named by their compass locations, such as southwest and north central. Cooperative branding seriously challenges such practice.

Rural communities can especially benefit from cooperative branding. A common challenge for tourism development in a single rural community is its limited drawing power. Coupled with the absence of a distinctive image, individual rural destinations are often too small to form a critical mass required of a primary destination. In order to make the most of rural tourism resources, communities must approach their marketing activities from a cooperative perspective. Rural tourism marketing through cooperative branding, as practiced by OWC, helps individual rural communities increase efficiency in the use of tourism resources and synergizing drawing power of their attractions. World Tourism Organization predicts significant rise of long-haul vacations; and international demand for leisure in rural and natural settings is expected to grow at a faster speed. Greater drawing power with an appealing brand name supported by consistent image building will allow communities to develop unique and distinct brand identities and

establish clear and competitive positions in the rural tourism market-place.

It is noted that while branding is a relatively new concept in desti-nation marketing, there is no lack of good practices such as that of Old West County. As early as in the early 90s, 11 towns and villages along the Des Moines River in Iowa joined to start marketing them-selves as the Villages of Van Buren. Tourists began to come in greater numbers, and frequently visited several of the villages on one trip. Its then Executive Director described the villages as a puzzle: "To be com-plete, all of the pieces have to be there. One town or community can-not survive on its own; and yet without one of them we would be miss-ing something" (Tourism Center 1991). Conceptualization and modeling of cooperative branding will help advance the field of desti-nation marketing and bring about efficient use of rural tourism resources and effective marketing practices.

Branding is the single most important objective of marketing today and "is the glue that holds the broad range of marketing functions together" (Ries and Ries 1998:2). Yet, in destination branding "there remains considerable scope for further studies which evaluate how its principles are translated into practical marketing activity, which further conceptualize the challenges of branding intangible bundles of ser-vices and which provide detailed empirical analysis of the application of branding to tourism products" (Morgan and Pritchard 1999:214). Additional empirical studies are needed to substantiate the conceptual model proposed in this study. Future research should also consider refining and modifying the model beyond the rural setting, such as by evaluating its applicability in the presence of a prevailing image of a nearby urban center, a state, or a country. ∎

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