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Branding Colombo: An Interdisciplinary Case Study to Inspire Sri Lanka Tourism

Preamble

Sri Lanka (SL), known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean earns some of its foreign exchange from tourism (US\$ 1.2 billion in 2014, Central Bank Annual Report) by attracting about 1.5 million tourists by the end of year 2014. The Ministry of Economic Development plans to achieve the objective of receiving 2.5 million tourists per annum by year 2016. This is the set goal for a five year period which started from year 2011. This article based on an interdisciplinary case analysis will inform the reader of the methodology of branding the

city of Colombo to support the above objective, while explaining how important it is for the entire tourism sector and for economic development, especially of SL.

Importance of Branding

Tourism being the main source of income of the service sector, the way forward for developing it is a major concern. The prospect of reaching the above mentioned objective of 2.5 million tourists by the year 2016 seems to be far from reality, particularly as SL does not seem to have

evolved and announced a specific approach to realize it and maximize its earning potential. This is in contrast to the spectacular performance of destinations such as Singapore and Dubai; the former has achieved tourist arrivals of 12.5 million and the latter has registered arrivals of 12 million in 2014 and earnings of US\$ 14 billion and US\$ 11 billion respectively (Master Card Global Destination Index, 2014). These figures also indicate the massive earning potential of the destination/ sector in SL. The specific effort required should be not only to realize the full potential of the destination but also

making it unique to avoid competition by branding it effectively.

As a whole the destination is currently branded as **‘Sri Lanka – Wonder of Asia’**. Even though it has an area of 65,610 km² in total, the diversity within the island is amazingly and perfectly sculptured for tourism. The great 13th century explorer Marco Polo from the Republic of Venice, who travelled along the Asian Silk Route to Sri Lanka described it as **‘The finest Island of its size in all the world’** (Harve & Rawson, 2005). Though the government was desirous of building the city of Colombo to be one of the main commercial hubs in Asia, while pursuing the intension of improving tourism to the country, it still has not taken any initiatives to brand the city.

Place branding has helped nations and cities to be competitive. A city has never been branded for tourism before in Sri Lanka. Recognizing the success of global tourism activities, this is a strategy Sri Lanka tourism could have paid attention to. Neglecting such an opportunity may affect urban and economic development unfavourably.

The Relevant Literature

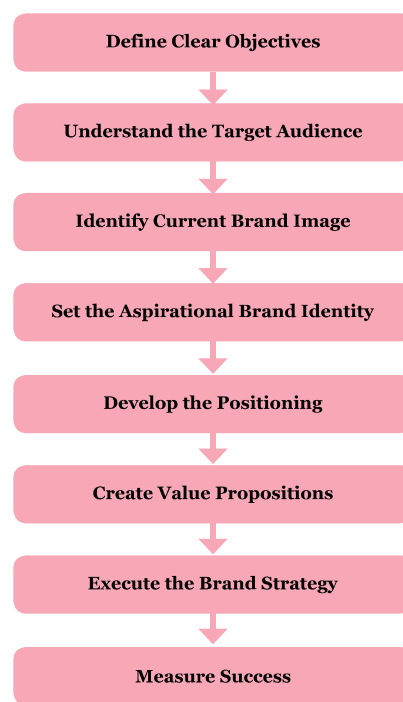
With the advent of globalization, every place is compelled to compete with other places to gain or secure its clientele of tourists, capital, business, investments, respect and attention. Places in today’s world are similar to companies. Places with very strong brand names find it easy to market their products and services and also fascinate people. Some of the best examples of resilient branded cities in the globe are of course Paris which is renowned for romance, London for business and finance, Barcelona known for its

rich culture, Washington for power and Rio as a fun city. Such cities are even better known by tourists than some countries in the globe. This explains how strongly they are branded. Branding is considered as a tool which a city can use to differentiate itself within the international community. Eventually it directly influences and creates optimistic perceptions towards a place (Glaeser, 2006). Thus place branding is known as a strategic procedure to develop an image of a place.

See also the quote below which encapsulates the essence of differentiation of any product or service,

“Differentiation strategies involving high product quality, advanced features, high level of service and a stream of product innovations are usually more sustainable than cost based strategies; (these capabilities) depend on possessing advanced human resources and internal technical capability. Sustaining competitive advantage demands that a firm practice a form of what Schumpeter called ‘creative destruction’ on itself. It must destroy its old advantages by creating new ones. If not, some competitor will do so. (A company’s leader or the institution concerned in addition) must create an atmosphere that highlights the need for upgrading and demands that it takes place. Also such a strategy requires a global approach, (which) supplements home-base advantages and helps nullify home-base disadvantages” Michael E Porter, Competitive Advantage of Nations.

When considering a model to initiate place branding or differentiation, the literature offers a vast range of models. One of them the ‘Eight Step



Source: Adopted from Glaeser, 2006.

Process to develop a brand’ is as follows:

Still another is the Strategic Place Brand Management Model (The SPBM) encompassing many aspects of other models proposed by Hanna & Rowley (2011)

According to the SPBM, *brand leadership, infrastructure and relationships* are considered the main part of the model because of complex associations amongst diverse stakeholders, interests, engagements that are exposed and driven through.

Methodology of Survey and Results

For this case study the **in-depth interview** method was selected covering all the components in the SPBM model as this will help collect rich information regarding seventeen respondents who are top personalities in the industry; their personal thoughts and beliefs are listed below:

Remarks of Respondents

Criteria	Respondents' remarks
Brand evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Branding something has to have a foundational basis because it is the brand that drives the whole. ▪ <i>A recent finding is that Colombo is the fastest growing clean, green city in the world today.</i> Unfortunately Sri Lanka Tourism is not capitalizing on this market finding. ▪ Colombo is regarded as the '<i>city in the jungle</i>' or '<i>city in a clean environment</i>'. ▪ Plenty of opportunities within the city by way of heritage, modern buildings and a clean sea. ▪ May help to change the perception that some foreign journalists hold that Colombo is more like Chennai or Trichy in India. ▪ Colombo is good value for money and it has better flight connections to many parts of the world. ▪ Clients from our neighbouring country India like to visit Colombo as a '<i>weekend get-away package</i>' as most clients love shopping.
Stakeholders' engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>"Branding a city should be a collective effort for which government should give leadership"</i>. ▪ It would have definitely made an impact on demand, if an investor like the Australian casino baron James Packer, had been invited. ▪ Common comments made by many stakeholders regarding the governing bodies were, <i>a) needs a lot more improvement, b) they are doing a good job, but not good enough.</i> ▪ Setting up of a number of organizations such as, <ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau (SLTPB) II. Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA) III. Sri Lanka Convention Bureau (SLCB) IV. Sri Lanka Institute of Tourism and Hotel Management (SLITHM) is a smart move for Sri Lanka tourism to achieve different targets.
Infrastructure (regeneration)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Infrastructure involving entertainment, cuisine and beach tourism are gradually being built. ▪ The development of infrastructure must take place targeting the high end tourists as well as the middle and lower class tourists. ▪ A MICE tourism country needs bigger conference facilities, more state of the art facilities, better roads with good signing techniques, improved rail transport and night life. ▪ Physical infrastructure is definitely an attraction but when it comes to human infrastructure their soft skills will play a much more important role. ▪ The service qualities such as politeness, curtesy, smiles, hospitality and integrity are admired by foreign travelers. ▪ Even though this is the case for leisure tourists, this was simply different when it comes to the business travelers. Some of the business travelers may choose to stay in some very basic 3 star properties, but their expectations of infrastructure standards are always high as they need to move about quickly due to their busy schedules. ▪ The concept behind projects like the Colombo port city with multiple facilities is correct. ▪ If a city does not offer opportunities for high end tourists to spend their money over here, there is no point inviting them.

Criteria	Respondents' remarks
Brand Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cannot brand everything in tourism. In Branding Colombo you should either focus on one aspect or consider the essence of everything. ▪ Sri Lanka Tourism failed two times in the recent past in branding the country with tags like 'Land Like No Other' and 'Small Miracle'. ▪ Two incredible tag lines were proposed to us by <i>Philip Kotler</i> to carry out with a visual image for the destination, but they were neglected. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. "So Much In So Little" II. "Lovely Sri Lanka" ▪ Looking at a unique identity for Colombo or SL, is that it is the country in which you could spot the two of the biggest mammals in just a matter of hours: the sperm whale in Mirissa, Puttalam, or Trincomalee and elephants in Yala, Minneriya or Udawalawe national parks. This unique feature itself can be used when branding.
Brand Architecture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brand architecture could attain much through creativity and fantasy when trying to penetrate a customer's purchasing intentions. ▪ If a city fails to include its specific policies, cultural and other real life aspects of the city, it will create an abnormal image of the city in the visitors mind. ▪ When the city brand is promoted by many stakeholders, this collective effort will increase the demand for tourism to the city. As tourism is very diverse, a single tourist will not come only for one product as they will require the services of many stakeholders. ▪ In branding Colombo if the management takes all sub-brands into consideration they will willingly promote the city brand throughout their network as exemplified by some of the leading hotels in Colombo such as the Hilton, Shangri-La and Hyatt that have a massive loyal customer base.
Brand articulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Our brand articulation done by the governing bodies was heavily criticized by many of the respondents. The criticisms leveled against the various taglines were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 'Land like no other' - SL is not a land but an island. b) 'Small Miracle'- there are many other smaller islands; there are physically no miracles as such. c) 'Wonder of Asia' - SL does not have any 'wonders' inside the country. ▪ Expressed that brand articulation should sustain for more than 15 – 20 years for it to strengthen itself and sustain in the people's minds. ▪ The branding of Malaysia as 'Malaysia Truly Asia', was done so effectively that their it was kept constant for more than 20 years. ▪ Emphasized the absence of an icon for Colombo. They took a few examples like, a) Beijing – Great Wall, b) Paris - Eiffel tower, c) London – The Big Ben, d) New York –The Statue of Liberty, e) Rio – Statue of Jesus, f) But in Colombo what do we have as a monument or an icon?
Brand communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Current marketing communication needs to be improved with immediate effect. ▪ Online marketing is the most efficient and effective way of communicating the brand Colombo. ▪ The user comments and ratings of the destination or its properties have become a very reliable tool in the recent past. ▪ If Colombo was not already branded, there would not have been better moments to promote the brand as the various visits of great personalities like Pope Francis and Commonwealth Heads of Government carried tremendous publicity in the international media such as the New York Times, CNN, BBC and many more.
Word of Mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ WOM is undoubtedly the most reliable communication method. WOM currently has taken a different angle as people communicate their experiences online. ▪ A tourist may not have positive thoughts about an unseen destination. This is why a tourist who has not visited Colombo may have a negative or somewhat neutral perception about Colombo. This is where WOM carried by the tourists who have visited Colombo is useful. ▪ If we are to brand Colombo, a separate web page is needed for Colombo with all its activities, road and rail maps, hotels and restaurants, experiences, emergency contact numbers including a space for WOM.

Criteria	Respondents' remarks
Brand Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Customer satisfaction is the measurement of a tourist's real experience.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training, attitude and discipline are the most important requirements to enhance the brand experience of tourists.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MICE travellers who visited Colombo return to Colombo the next time with their families due to any positive travelling experiences they have had.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Colorful events such as musical events, food festivals, fashion shows, exhibitions, carnivals and outdoor movie nights are very attractive events that tourists would love to participate in.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Keep doing what we are good at such as our sincere feelings of hospitality, genuine smiles for the tourists and the rich bio diversified tourism activities. This will create the best brand experience for the tourists who visit Colombo.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SLTPB is planning to bring cruise tourism to Colombo; this may help attract the top end tourists.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural shows are important as a business or leisure tourist who visits Colombo may not have the time to visit the cultural cities such as Kandy, Dambulla, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa.

The Findings

- As Sri Lanka tourism has been divided into four separate institutions now each body is run by different administrations. However, this approach may have its weaknesses such as the absence of overall leadership, duplication and poor monitoring of performance.
- An icon unique to the city would be a great object that can be used to back the marketing campaign.
- The city should have a face lift to improve its infrastructure especially to attract the up-market tourists
- To realize success the stakeholders should attract a good mix of local and foreign investments.
- An approach for the high-end cruise operators may be essential.
- Colombo needs a good transportation system that suits all tourist transportation requirements.
- Cleanliness, integrity, efficiency, friendliness, peacefulness as well as the absence of lawlessness and harassment of tourists

or their security should be promoted robustly by the stakeholders/authorities as they are basic characteristics that help form a positive 'image'.

- Analyzing the research data, it is clear that Colombo is a 'commodity area' as the city does not have any special uniqueness; if in addition the price is higher tourists may select the next alternative destination. Colombo should, therefore, to be branded to create a uniqueness to realize a loyal customer base.

Conclusions

Sri Lanka has not yet looked at branding its commercial capital and the country to inspire tourism. It is, therefore, suggested that a specific Strategy be formulated for this purpose.

Goal and Objectives

The first step proposed in this connection is to clearly identify the goal of the effort, which undoubtedly would be the enhancement of the well-being of the people of the

entire country. The objective would be the number of tourists i.e. 2.5 million tourists by 2016. There could be other objectives like the earnings expected. But this needs the identification of the segments of the market to be developed/promoted as inviting all and sundry may not yield the earnings expected, besides causing harm to Sri Lankan society if criminals and other undesirables were to visit the country freely.

Strategies and Action Plans

The next step recommended is examining the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) as identified by the stakeholders, impelling or impeding the achievement of the goal and objectives, in order to formulate the strategies for development and promotion of the market segment or segments. The strategies in turn could be converted to action plans indicating each action, the persons or institutions responsible, the investment required and the time frame of completing the action; this format could also be used for monitoring the performance.

Branding

One of the major strategies that would emerge from such a process would definitely deal with branding or differentiation required to establish a uniqueness of the destination (the city of Colombo and the country) to avoid competition and of course for meeting the desired goal and objectives especially in the market segments selected .

Seventeen recognized individuals who are directly related to Sri Lankan tourism activities were interviewed to understand where the image of the city stands presently and what needs to be done. According to them a brand consisting of a blend of the essence of the whole country and the modern concept of the city of Colombo with an eye catching tagline and an icon, is the ideal way to present it to the world.

Investment

Another strategy to emerge would deal with investment. All tourists may not investigate the standard of infrastructure before arrival, but as a commercial city that attracts many business tourists, it would be wise to attract investment, particularly reputable FDI to bring the current in-



frastructure to top level. It would be very important to identify the kind of enabling environment, consisting of elements like efficient and effective public institutions, protection of property rights, socio-political and macroeconomic stability, law and order etc., that have to be established in the country to attract the investors to the country, as in the case of export development.

Therefore, the establishment of a unique image for Colombo along with a striking tagline and perhaps an icon, as well as superior architectural facilities targeted at specific up-market segments of the market consistently by adopting a well planned strategy without delay seems to be essential in the development and promotion of the city of Colombo, and this beautiful island for realizing rich returns.

