Why do most city branding campaigns fail?

Actions mean more than words

So 86% is a pretty high failure rate, right? Why would you even attempt a project with such shocking odds? And if it was a costly undertaking, with a price tag that can run into the millions – why bother?

And yet, according to a study by brand consulting firm k629, many cities around the world face exactly these odds in their attempts to rebrand themselves. Such campaigns can revitalise a city, and secure it a more prominent place on the map. Yet more often than not, mayors find that their hopes were misplaced. The average branding campaign is just an expensive damp squib.

Take Adelaide, for example. In 2013, the South Australian city spent over A$1 million on a new logo. Most people hated it. Comedian and TV branding show host, Will Anderson, in [an interview](#) with the Adelaide Advertiser, likened the jagged red logo to an 'origami Pope hat', describing it as 'particularly crap'.

From an international perspective, a great brand is certainly a valuable asset. It can help a city to attract everything from tourists to investors to talent. It can help promote exports. It can boost residents' pride.

And it's not just for famous cities, either, says José Torres, of Bloom Consulting: "There's something special about every city. City branding isn't about inventing something; it's about discovering what's already there."

The key is to examine a city's characteristics and policies, and then align them to a single big idea. "If a city's big idea is to brand itself as a party town, a law forcing bars to close early would contradict that. The resulting confusion weakens the overall brand."

It's perhaps also worth spelling out what city branding isn't. Contrary to popular belief, it isn't just a logo or a tagline. It's not a promotional campaign. And it's definitely not advertising.

Brand strategist Günter Soydanbay rejects the word campaign altogether, preferring "journey" or "transformation". The word 'campaign' smacks of ad-speak, he says: that's problematic because advertising only offers quick-fix solutions to perceived problems.

But for cities, it's actions, not words, that really affect reputation. An effective city brand strategy gets all stakeholders – from investors to officials to residents – together to define a common vision, and then agree on a plan to reach it. This forms a key stage of the consultation process, undertaken at the beginning of the project.

"A city always speaks through the behaviour of its stakeholders," Soydanbay adds. "Campaigns just focus on words and images. And that's why they fail, because they don't change the behaviour." In other words, there are no quick-fixes.

There's another reason why regular marketing campaigns don't measure up: cities are simply too complex. Any campaign that amounts to advertising inevitably ignores all the subtle nuances that have helped shape the city's overall identity. Prime exam-

ples include Edinburgh's ongoing 'Capital City' campaign, the 2005 Leeds 'Live it Love it' campaign, or the 'Just Add Zero' branding of Buenos Aires. They all try to distil the city down into a single tagline and logo.

One solution is to make greater use of 'place-making': an emerging discipline combining town planning, urbanism and architecture. Its goal is to understand how shared space actually gets used, and improve it: that could mean pedestrianisation, slowing down traffic, or creating entire new public spaces.

Malcolm Allan, of consulting firm PlaceMatters, suggests that successful rebranding requires marketing agencies and place makers to join forces to create an overall strategy. "Marketing is useful in a long-term brand strategy, but it's not sufficient for place makers, town planners or marketers to handle the strategy on their own," he says. "A combined approach is needed, with a holistic view of the process."

By taking the right approach, then, any city can improve its reputation. But how can cities build a truly global brand? And should this be even be every city's goal?

Not necessarily, argues Günter Soydanbay. Not every city is New York, London, or Paris; nor should it try to be. Most cities operate within their own 'ecosystems'. Take Montreal, which has a good reputation among the French-speaking creative circles around the world. That's a small proportion of the world's population, but there are more than enough of them for Montreal to prosper. By taking a long-term and practical approach to improving their reputation, and not mistaking branding for advertising, other cities can find their own niche, too.