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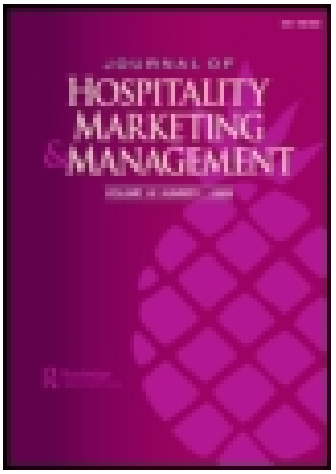

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Branding Smaller Destinations with Limited Budgets: The Example of Athens, Georgia

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Branding Smaller Destinations with Limited Budgets: The Example of Athens, Georgia

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Branding has emerged as a major factor when marketing a destination. This factor is very important for smaller destinations which must usually work within the restriction of a limited budget. This article presents many ideas on how smaller destinations can develop a brand while keeping costs down, and includes a detailed, 17-point branding process that can be used by smaller destinations.

KEYWORDS Branding, destination branding, branding process

Destination branding has emerged as an important element of the promotional and marketing efforts of many destinations. Various destinations have spent relatively large sums of money to research and develop successful brands. Longtree, Texas, spent $90,000 developing their new brand (Koonce & Ferguson, 2007). To further illustrate the point, some other destination branding and cost examples include Pittsburgh at $200,000 (Steigerwald, 2003), Troy, New York, at $135,000 (Crowe, 2007), and St. Paul, Minnesota at $75,000 (Yeun, 2006). It should be noted that these are second and third-tier cities. Larger destinations have spent even more to conceptualize and implement new branding and marketing efforts.

These costs often include extensive pretesting of various markets, extensive posttesting of proposed brands, focus groups, interviews, actual brand creation (creative), and myriad other costs. Numerous destinations are

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hiring outside professionals to assist in these branding efforts for considerable sums.

These destination branding expenses are often covered by large overall budgets and/or by underwriting from or co-oping with various community organizations. Larger corporate sponsors have also contributed money in larger destinations. The branding environment in the destination industry has become very competitive, driving up branding costs.

The dilemma, then, is for smaller, less well-financed destination marketing organizations (DMOs). How do these organizations successfully develop new brands with much more limited budgets? This was the challenge faced by the Athens (Georgia) Convention and Visitors Bureau beginning in the summer of 2006. Could their old brand be assessed, and if necessary, a new brand developed and implemented on a very limited budget?

In the end, the old Athens brand was assessed and a new brand developed and implemented. This entire process cost approximately $16,000. What follows is the process that Athens used to work through their branding project. This is followed by a section that offers some suggested tactics for keeping branding costs low. The intent is to demonstrate that relatively successful branding can be accomplished by smaller DMOs with more limited funding sources. Of particular value to other DMOs are the cost-saving tactics outlined at the end of the study and the 17-point branding process and vision that was ultimately used during this project.

ATHENS AND THE "PRE-REBRAND" SITUATION

Athens, Georgia is a community with many facets. Home to the University of Georgia (UGA), it boasts an outstanding collection of antebellum homes and serves as the shopping and trade center of Northeast Georgia. A number of museums, including the Georgia Museum of Art, are located there. For generations, Athens has been considered an island of formal culture (also "liberal" culture) throughout the South. Only 60 miles from Atlanta, several interstates are within easy driving distance.

Starting in the 1970s, Athens became an incubator of modern music producing acts like the B-52's, T. Graham Brown, John Berry, R.E.M., and others. At night, downtown Athens is vibrant with multiple music outlets, restaurants, and bars. This is a town that has become well-known as a place for bohemians of all ages. Tailgating at University of Georgia home football games is a legendary experience. It has always been a place where people came to "experience" and experiment. It has been a place where multiple cultures didn't clash so much as they were tolerated and even encouraged. It is a community with an eclectic soul.

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The Athens Convention and Visitors Bureau (ACVB) is charged with marketing the community to both leisure travelers and those who would use the convention facility called The Classic Center (Athens has been known for years as "The Classic City."). As part of this effort, a tagline and campaign had been developed in the past ("Make the 'A' List"). It was felt by many in the community that this campaign was not an accurate representation of the destination. A branding committee was formed by the ACVB to address the question of branding or rebranding Athens.

GETTING STARTED: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

At this stage, two academic associates (both taught in the area of hospitality management and both were very familiar with the travel industry in Athens) were engaged to assist in the project. After a number of discussions, a variety of parameters became very clear:

- There was a very limited budget to work with. Originally, the goal was to accomplish the entire project for about $12,000.
- There was a time limitation: It was hoped the project could be completed in six months.
- There were many Athens brands (Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Development, etc.). The committee hoped for some brand consolidation as part of the process.
- There was a genuine feeling of risk and a fear of failure as this would be a very public offering. Athens is an artistic town with many stakeholders. The ACVB had already experienced a number of false starts when it came to branding, adding to the feeling of uncertainty.
- "Group-think" (Certo, 2003) was a common enemy. Many of the team had perceived that group-think had severely damaged branding efforts in other communities.
- Embracing UGA? For years the city of Athens had tried to create a separate identity from the UGA. This paradigm would be reconsidered in detail.

At the start of the process, a variety of sources were consulted for philosophical background as well as ideas for a branding process. Blain, Levy, and Ritchie's (2005) research indicates that destinations have seven broad rationales for branding: image, recognition, differentiation, consistency, brand messages, emotional response, and creating expectations. The authors considered a variety of destination branding definitions in formulating an updated definition that describes destination branding as:

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> The marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that both identifies and differentiates a destination; (2) that convey the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; and (3) that serve to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience, all with the intent and purpose of creating an image that influences consumers' decisions to visit the destination in question, as opposed to an alternative one. (p. 331–332)

Pike (2005) discussed that branding a destination is more complex and challenging than other services and goods and provided six reasons why, from funding to multidimensionality. Bill Baker of Total Destination Management produced a series of articles on destination branding including: "Eleven Essentials for a Successful Destination Brand" (2006a); "Eighteen Reasons Why You Need a Destination Brand" (2006b); "Eighteen Common Destination Branding Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them" (2006c); "Eleven Myths That Weaken Destination Brands" (2006d); and "Insights for Branding Places" (2006e).

A series of articles on destination branding were produced as part of a DMO branding master class. These articles discussed the "Essence of Branding," which includes "Four Precepts for Developing Powerful Brands" (Whitfield, 2006), "Differentiating the Brand Promise" (Anon, 2006), and the "Customer Relationship" in branding (Whitfield, 2005). Kaplanidou and Vogt (2003) examined the components of branding as well as a wide variety of issues from leveraging to measuring of effectiveness. Morgan, Pritchard, and Piggott (2003) looked at the role of stakeholders in branding including the impact of politics. Post (2004) defined destination branding with four components and then discussed how committees can kill great ideas and the necessity of concentrating a destination brand on a single strength. A study in Caldwell County, North Carolina demonstrated the use of "clusters" and "pillars" when constructing a destination brand (McCann, 2006). Knapp and Sherwin (2005) have, perhaps, written the definitive work on destination branding. The authors suggest a five-point "destination brand doctrine" when developing a "genuine brand."

Brand personality as it pertained to destinations was explored by Ekinci and Hosany (2006). Both qualitative and quantitative approaches to the development of a destination brand logo was examined by Hem and Iversen (2004). Brand equity was delved into from the perspective of customer base by Konecnik and Gartner (2007). Ryan and Cave (2005) took a quantitative approach in looking at destination image and measurement. What emerged from their study was a complex image in the minds of various publics about a destination on a number of continua. Finally, a model of destination image formation was presented by Baloglu and McCleary (1999) that provided insights into how publics arrived at their mental images of specific places.

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BRANDING PROCESSES AND VISION

After much research and reflection, the branding committee laid out an initial process for branding Athens. As the project went along, a few elements were added. In the end, the process contained 17 elements. This 17-step process is outlined in Table 1. The outline served as the map that was used as the branding committee assessed the old brand and eventually developed a new one.

Early in this work, the committee agreed on a common vision of what was desired from a brand for Athens. The brand should define Athens' essence as a destination, become distinctive in the visitor's mind apart from other destinations, and optimize economic impact and create a sustainable competitive advantage through wide community support and participation (Knapp & Sherwin, 2005). This design process and vision served as the philosophical base for the rest of the project.

METHODOLOGY

After much discussion, a mix of qualitative and quantitative research techniques were ultimately used in the process. The goals of the process at this point were to assess the existing brand, assess the need for a new brand, and define the essence of Athens to serve as the base for a brand.

TABLE 1 The Branding Process

Step No.	Description
Step 1	Form a branding committee
Step 2	Assess the need for a new brand
Step 3	Literature reviews and consideration of various branding processes, definitions, and concepts
Step 4	Outline a branding process for Athens
Step 5	Conceive a vision: Determine what Athens wants brand to do
Step 6	Local interviews
Step 7	Focus group: Diverse local representatives
Step 8	Two focus groups: Meeting planners
Step 9	Focus group: Leisure travel
Step 10	Questionnaire development/prebrand survey work
Step 11	Brand survey
Step 12	Reduce information to common themes: Define the "essence" of Athens
Step 13	Brand promise concept: Determine what is desired from brand promise
Step 14	Write a brand promise
Step 15	Develop tagline and logo (if new brand is needed)—should reflect the brand promise and the identified themes
Step 16	Test the new brand and tagline
Step 17	Execute the brand

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Interviews

It was decided to begin the process with a series of local interviews. McCracken (1988) suggested a four-step method of inquiry when doing interviews. This model was followed from a "review of analytic categories and interview design" to "interview analysis and the discovery of analytical categories."

Local interviews were conducted at the start for a variety of reasons. One reason is that many stakeholders feel strong ownership of Athens and would be offended if their opinion was not solicited. Other reasons were to gain valuable input from a knowledgeable group; to get "buy-in" from important stakeholders; and to inform an important group of stakeholders about what was going on with the branding effort thus avoiding surprises.

A 12-question interview was designed and reviewed by the branding committee. Approximately two dozen interviews were arranged. Questions ranged from what respondents thought distinguished Athens from other communities and what colors and sounds were associated with Athens to a review of the current brand and how the current brand was currently being used. Those interviewed included community leaders, elected officials, representatives from the UGA, hospitality representatives, and other important stakeholders. Interviews were conducted in the late fall and early winter of 2006/2007 and were approximately an hour and a half in length. The interviews were conducted by the consultants in the offices of the interviewees (a few were conducted by phone). Extensive notes were gathered and recorded.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative research technique that may be used when the intent is to solicit a variety of responses and when interaction may be a plus for the study (Ritchie & Goeldner, 1994). Ritchie and Geolder suggest a variety of points when performing focus groups from the selection of a moderator to the comfort of the focus group.

Four focus groups were performed. Essentially, the questionnaire and materials from the interviews served as the questions asked in the focus groups. The focus groups were conducted in the winter and spring of 2007.

The first focus group was for a diverse local group of individuals, who had not been individually interviewed, that offered a wide range of perspectives. The intent was to solicit opinions and to attempt to include as many Athens citizen-elements as possible in the process.

There were two focus groups for meeting planners. One group of planners was in Athens for a familiarization trip and a focus group was added to their itinerary. Another focus group for meeting planners was conducted in Atlanta, a prime feeder-market for Athens. There were approximately 10 participants in each focus group.

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A focus group aimed at the leisure market was conducted in Athens in the spring of 2007. Included in this panel were state travel representatives, people associated with DMOs, travel publications representatives, and other local and area stakeholders. There were extensive results from all four focus groups. The data was recorded and analyzed.

Prebrand Statistical Surveys

Visitor Information Surveys

A short survey was designed to get at the heart of what general travelers thought about Athens. A nine-question survey was designed based on the literature review and what had been learned to date. Two surveys were conducted in visitor information centers in Augusta, Georgia (mid-December, 2006) and Lavonia, Georgia (mid-January, 2007). There were a total of 116 usable surveys filled out. A number of these surveys were conducted in person by the Athens CVB staff. This enabled the CVB staff to test the survey and to begin to get a general feeling from the public about their thoughts on Athens.

Using what had been learned in the visitor information survey process, and from the focus groups and interviews a short 23-question survey was compiled. Surveys were designed and evaluated using Survey Monkey, a web-based survey-building and research analysis tool. After the language of the survey was finalized, the questions and response options were entered into Survey Monkey, which allows for a variety of types of closed- and open-ended responses. Activating the survey establishes a live URL that provides ready access to survey respondents. To comply with established survey practices, once the survey is live and responses have been received, survey questions cannot be changed (this ensures that all responses are standardized). Survey Monkey offers real-time results and a variety of analysis tools and report options. Questions covered topics including what respondents thought about when considering Athens in terms of sight, color, sound, image, symbols, differentiating factors, etc. Other questions covered basic demographics, information sources, etc.

The ACVB sent an invitation to participate in the survey via e-mail to established customer databases (this list contained approximately 2,000 names and addresses). A total of 215 usable surveys were returned and tabulated.

Defining the Essence of Athens

Once the focus groups and surveys were completed, there was a good deal of information. One of the goals of the process was to identify the essence of Athens and many of the questions asked dealt with that question. Many

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of the questions asked were designed to help the committee gain insight into that perceived essence.

The results of the study to this point were provided to the two consultants and four members of the ACVB staff. At this point the Delphi technique was used (Certo, 2003) (Ritchie & Goeldner, 1994) to analyze the information.

The first step was identifying the problem which, in this case, was finding the common themes throughout all of the research when it came to identifying Athens. Each member of this group was asked to look for themes. The information was gathered and then all the thoughts were resent to the group. It took three iterations to agree on the themes (12 themes were ultimately identified).

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RESULTS

The interviews, focus groups, and surveys revealed common opinions about the existing brand:

- The colors were wrong;
- It was aging;
- It did not do a good job of identifying or differentiating Athens; and
- It did not do a good job of selling Athens on the various sales and marketing pieces Athens was using.

These opinions were so universal that it was clear at this point that a new brand was needed.

Survey, Focus Group, and Interview Results

The interviews and focus groups revealed much of what various stakeholders thought about when considering Athens. While the statistical survey process was limited in size and scope (largely because of financial limitations), the results generally agreed with what the qualitative work had shown. This entire process led the branding committee to the general conclusions that when people thought of Athens, they thought of UGA, UGA sporting activities, the downtown music scene, and dining.

The colors most associated with Athens were red and black (again, the colors of UGA). What made Athens "different" from other places were cultural activities, higher education and all that goes with having institutions of higher education, and the nightlife and downtown music scene.

Overwhelmingly, people thought Athens "looked" like a university town. Symbols that people thought of when thinking of Athens included

the UGA arch, UGA VI/Hairy Dog—UGA mascots and bands playing in downtown Athens. Athens "sounds like" students, youth, and music.

Athens' Essence

All of the research results were considered, in detail. Using the Delphi technique as described previously, the branding team worked through three iterations to discover the common themes that best described the essence of Athens. These 12 themes or descriptive words are presented in Table 2. These themes were considered when writing the brand promise.

Brand Promise Conception: Writing a Brand Promise

Knapp and Sherwin (p. 43) suggest that a "brand promise" is fundamental to the creation of a brand. The brand promise should communicate three attributes: (a) something will be done; (b) an expressed assurance; and (c) a perception of future excellence. The brand promise serves as the philosophical base for the actual brand. In addition, based on research and defining terms, the brand committee wanted the Athens brand promise to identify Athens, differentiate Athens, embrace what Athens is, and emotionally bond Athens to key markets.

Writing the actual brand promise took two sessions and a month of consideration. The 12 themes and the other information learned from the research process were carefully considered and reconsidered. In the end, the newly developed Athens brand promise stated: "Athens is a vibrant, eclectic college town that inspires creative energy. With traditional heritage and trend-setting Southern culture, Athens provides an escape for wanderers of all ages."

TABLE 2 Athens Themes

Theme	Name
1	Young
2	Energized
3	Nostalgic
4	Alive
5	Liberated
6	Creative
7	Hip/Cool
8	Savvy
9	Inspired
10	Eclectic
11	Vibrant
12	Dynamic

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Creating a New Brand

At this point, the philosophical bases for a brand were considered and developed. The Bright Ideas Group, an advertising agency out of Macon, Georgia, was brought in for the actual brand and tagline development (creative). The committee reviewed the entire process with the agency. The themes that emerged along with the other information that was gathered were covered in great detail. The brand promise was reviewed with the agency along with the vision the committee had for the brand.

The agency took the various ideas and thoughts and, through their creative processes, developed a new brand for Athens (see Figure 1 for logo and tagline).

This brand encompasses a number of thoughts. It embraces UGA in a number of subtle ways: color—the colors of the brand are red and black. These are the colors of the UGA. Unleashed—this word implies, to some extent, a dog. The mascot of the UGA is a (the) bulldog. Further, it represents the unleashing of the creative spirit and drive of the college years. The "Athens" font represents the creative side of Athens. The "Life Unleashed" font represents the more institutional side of Athens.

The new brand is meant to imply creative energy and to have an eclectic feel that was thought to be such an integral part of the Athens identity.

Testing the New Brand

The new brand was tested in a number of ways. The new brand was taken to many of the original group of interviewees. This was done to solicit their opinions and to make them aware of the outcome of the branding process. Responses to the new brand were favorable.

The brand was also shown to some representatives of the local hospitality community for their input and awareness. Again, responses to the new brand were favorable. A short, 15-question survey was sent to approximately 2,000 people who were on the ACVB inquiry list (the same list that was used for the prebrand survey). The survey included the new brand and included questions about the appeal of the new logo, its fit for Athens, its ability to communicate the uniqueness of Athens, etc. There were a total

FIGURE 1 Logo and tagline for the proposed Athens brand.

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of 319 responses to the survey. The results were once again tabulated by Survey Monkey. There was good general agreement that the new brand did communicate the eclectic nature of the community and did differentiate Athens from other cities. The responses to questions about the new brand were very favorable.

Culturalization: Executing the Brand

Once the new brand was developed and tested, it needed to be executed. Knapp and Sherwin go into great detail in the area of brand culturalization (pp. 53–64). The ACVB took the following steps:

- A press release introducing the new brand was sent to the media;
- The brand with potential advertising sample ads was presented to local partners and stakeholders;
- A branding process presentation was delivered to local partners and stakeholders;
- All paper support for Athens included the new brand (letterhead, business cards, envelopes, etc.);
- A new marketing and advertising campaign incorporating the new brand was developed and implemented;
- An internal style guide was developed by the ACVB staff to talk about how to incorporate the new brand into everything (from how to answer the phone to how to dress in tradeshow booths and even how to format e-mail signatures); and
- A logo usage guide was developed to encourage and enable use of the logo by partner entities and for events and initiatives sponsored by the Athens CVB.

Tactics Used to Reduce Destination Branding Costs

In the end, a wide variety of tactics were used to keep expenses down. These tactics are listed below. While some tactics saved more than others, collectively they helped to make this destination branding effort more affordable.

- Don't hire a branding firm: These types of firms can do everything from "turn-key" to advising but they do tend to be relatively expensive.
- Make academic alliances: There are academics at most universities and community colleges with backgrounds in branding, marketing, qualitative research, quantitative research, data analysis, etc. Getting several academics to work with the DMO for little or no cost is vital to a low-cost branding project.

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- Use volunteers: Qualified volunteers can do interviews, conduct focus groups, help in survey design, input data, conduct brand-testing, and help to set up computer programs, etc. Volunteers can also be found through universities and technical colleges.
- DMO knowledge commitment: The leadership of the local DMO will have to be willing to immerse itself, to a certain extent, in the theory of branding. This may entail reading articles and cases, going to branding workshops, talking extensively with industry peers, etc.
- DMO staff designation: It is important that at least one, knowledgeable staff member be designated as the process leader. This person will need to take ownership of the branding project and should be energetic, diplomatic and motivated. This person must also keep the process moving. If there is not a DMO staff person who can do this, a volunteer should be considered.
- Outline a plan and then follow it: It is vital that a project outline be conceived at the beginning of the process. This "road-map" tends to keep the branding group focused. It is also important that this process be kept somewhat flexible so as to include steps that may not have been foreseen.
- Include only the vital steps: There are multistepped branding models for destinations that have been referred to previously. While it might be good to include all the steps they suggest, economic realities may entail cutting some steps that, depending upon a given situation, may not be as vital.
- Have a small but effective branding team: Too often, DMO branding committees are huge and unwieldy. It is important that the DMO allow input and access, but a small, motivated team that provides a modicum of transparency will be more nimble and creative.
- Have a culture of excellence: The branding team should be driven by good ideas and concepts and not by egos. Excellence should be the determining factor throughout the process.
- Hire the creative: There have been cases where DMOs have had branding "contests." The desire was to have local talent design the brand, tagline and/or slogan for free or very little cost. While a good idea, the results usually aren't competitive and the DMO may feel obligated to go with the "winner" even if they aren't enthusiastic about the result. A professional creative team is a must. They may be brought in once a community is "defined" and a brand promise written. This is one of the most expensive elements of the process, but one of the most important.
- Hire "outside" creative: Few things are more controversial. There are usually local firms who want to do the creative (insisting they "know" the destination better than any outside firm could). They may be members of the DMO/Chamber and will be upset if they aren't given the assignment of doing the creative for their hometown. What is needed here is a true, customer perspective of a destination. This is a difficult perspective for a local firm, however talented, to really appreciate. This isn't to say that

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local firms haven't done good creative, local-destination work. However, in general, an outside perspective is usually vital to good creative destination branding. An outside firm with a good track record of working with DMOs is often the ideal.

- Forgo a brand manual: These manuals are good for outlining all the actual specifics of a brand. They may also give a brief history of how the brand was developed. In this case, it simply was too expensive to develop. A detailed press release can accomplish some of the same goals as a brand manual.
- Use technology for surveying: Using Survey Monkey cut down on mailing, coding, and formulating costs. Using e-mail addresses for various customer bases cut down on typing costs, etc.
- Use existing e-mail lists: Solicitation of opinions can be done with free, existing e-mail lists. These lists may have been compiled at the DMO or by DMO members or friends.
- Use free locations for focus groups: Hotels provided free space for two of the focus groups in this example.
- Sponsors: Try to get sponsors for various aspects of the project (and/or money from branding committee members who represent organizations).
- Co-ops: Try to make a branding project a cooperative effort between the DMO and other organizations that could use and adopt the brand.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

This study has a variety of limitations. The limited budget prevented as much pre- and poststatistical testing as the brand team might have desired. Further, the time limitations prevented the surveying of some groups that might have been able to provide more insight. While the focus groups provided good thought, the information was limited by the knowledge of the people in the room. Further, it would have been helpful to have done a number of tourism focus groups in major feeder-markets.

Using an out-of-town creative firm was somewhat controversial. The firm of record, from Macon, had a "customer's" perspective (none of the creative team was from Athens and none of their team had lived in Athens) and a record of successfully working with brand development for destinations. Still, there were some hurt feelings from local creative houses who felt they knew Athens better than an outside firm, especially given the fact that the brand itself extolled the community's creative talent. Further, it could be argued that ACVB money was going out of the community to develop promotion in the community.

For a variety of reasons, little was done to bring the local media into the branding process. Once the new brand was released, there were some mumblings in the press over the cost of the project and final outcome. In

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hindsight, there should have been a better strategy for bringing the local media into the project and outcome.

While there was very general testing of the new brand, it would have been very helpful to test the brand more extensively with identified target markets. Time and budget constraints made this impossible in this case. It would also have been helpful if time had allowed the development of a number of new brand ideas rather than just one or two. It would have been helpful to test two or three new brand ideas to better insure that Athens was "on target" with the new brand. Finally, it would have been insightful to do some focus group work with the new brand.

Contributions of the Study

The intent of this article was to demonstrate how a successful brand was formulated for a second-tier city with a limited budget. This study presented the 17-point process that was eventually used in the process. The study outlined how various qualitative and computer-based quantitative techniques were used to gain the information needed to develop a brand while keeping costs under control. Finally, there was a detailed section presented including tactics to reduce branding costs.

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