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AN INDISPENSABLE EVOLUTION FOR SUSTAINABLE CORPORATES**

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THEORETICAL CONCEPTS OF STRATEGIC POSITIONING FOR PLACE BRANDING: A CASE STUDY OF DONG THAP PROVINCE

Phan Bao Giang

Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance

giangpb@uef.edu.vn

Abstract:

The research tries to assist Dong Thap in developing in-depth strategies based on scientific foundations, contributing to its sustainable growth and improved socio-economic conditions. It also aims to determine the positioning of the place's image associated with six core values of development in the province, thereby contributing to the establishment of a consistent image of Dong Thap and building the Dong Thap brand with a clear, appealing, and unique positioning based on distinct economic conditions, cultural values, history, people, and natural resources.

Key words: place, brand, branding, brand's equity, positioning

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

Dong Thap is one of the provinces that has made significant efforts in constructing and promoting its place brand. The province has developed and implemented the project "Strategy for the place image of Dong Thap Province, period of 2015-2020." The implementation of the project has achieved certain outcomes. Firstly, it has initially positioned the local image clearly in the perception of the political system, the business community, and residents through the establishment of a friendly government. Secondly, it has positively influenced public interest, tourists, the business community, investors, and others towards Dong Thap. Thirdly, it has established a visual identity for Dong Thap, wherein the symbol and logo of "Bé Sen" (the mascot of Dong Thap which was presented in previous project) have become the distinguishing features of the "Pink Lotus Land" brand. Fourthly, information and promotion activities have created a positive and effective image, focusing on the pillars, and highlighting the mission of the locality: "Dong Thap - Our potential, your opportunity."

In parallel, Dong Thap Province has also implemented the project "Tourism Development in Dong Thap Province, period of 2015-2020." Through the implementation of this project, Dong Thap's tourism has defined its position in the Mekong Delta region and the country as a whole. The tourism slogan "Dong Thap - As Pure as Lotus" has created a beautiful impression on tourists and attracted the attention of the media and investors. The characteristic tourism products for each tourism area and key tourist attractions in the province have been planned and designed to align with the overall positioning. Some infrastructure investment projects for tourism areas and key tourist attractions, as per the project's plan, have been completed and put into operation to serve visitors for sightseeing and relaxation.

However, during the implementation of these two projects, there has been a lack of coherence in building the image among different localities and departments. The utilization of resources has not been fully optimized, and the tourism products have not been refined enough. The allocation of resources remains limited and not entirely suitable. Moreover, some localities have struggled in implementing the projects, especially in finding their unique features to establish their own image and brand. The communication and promotion activities have sometimes outpaced reality, creating a discrepancy between the communicated

image and the actual image. The full potential of the Vietnamese media channels, both domestic and international, has not been fully exploited. Although the specific tourism products have been identified and developed according to the project's requirements, the implementation progress has been slow. The tourism in the province is still rudimentary and not truly attractive. Several tourism projects, including resort tourism, spiritual tourism, and experiential agriculture, have had approved plans for many years but have been slow in implementation.

For the 2021-2025 period, Dong Thap Province has set new development orientations, visions, and strategies, particularly in integrating tourism development with the strategy of building the place's brand image and determining the vision towards 2030. Therefore, it is necessary to review and evaluate the projects "Building the local image of Dong Thap Province during the period 2015-2020" and "Tourism Development in Dong Thap Province, period of 2015-2020." From there, it can reaffirm the commitment to align the tourism development direction of the province with the establishment of the local image, which is suitable for the provincial and national development context, as well as the global context. Moreover, it can fully exploit the tourism potential and comparative advantages in terms of residents, local authorities, and more.

Based on the aforementioned practical context, the construction of the project "Strategic Positioning For Place Branding Of Dong Thap Province" is necessary. It aims to establish a consistent image of Dong Thap and build a distinctive and attractive Dong Thap brand with a clear positioning based on distinct economic conditions, cultural values, history, people, and unique natural resources.

1.2. Research's objective

First and foremost, this research endeavor focuses on the meticulous construction and interconnectedness of robust theoretical concepts. The aim is to facilitate the systematic and persuasive implementation of the proposed plan. By establishing a well-structured theoretical foundation, this research aims to provide comprehensive guidance for the successful execution of the plan, ensuring its coherence, effectiveness, and high level of persuasiveness.

Secondly, this study aims to present and recommend a range of appropriate solutions that align with the emerging context. These solutions are formulated based on a synthesis of the accomplishments from previous plan implementations and future projections. By leveraging the insights gained from past experiences and anticipating future developments, this research seeks to propose feasible and adaptive strategies that address the evolving needs and challenges of the present and future. The proposed solutions aim to optimize the outcomes of the plan and facilitate its successful implementation, ultimately contributing to the long-term development and growth of the subject area.

Thirdly, this research endeavor actively contributes to the exploration and examination of various issues pertaining to the establishment of a place branding, a relatively nascent and promising field in Vietnam. By delving into this novel domain, the study aims to deepen the understanding of the intricacies and dynamics involved in building a robust local brand. Through rigorous investigation, analysis, and theoretical synthesis, this research strives to shed light on the key factors, challenges, and strategies related to the development of a distinctive and influential local brand. By providing insights into this emerging field, the research contributes to the advancement of knowledge and practices in place brand building in Vietnam, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and informed approach to this crucial aspect of regional and national development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of brand and branding

One of the very first definitions of brand is from American Marketing Association (1960), in which mentioned “A name, term, design, symbol, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from competitors.” The statement wanted to emphasize the differentiation of a product to its competitors.

U. K. Maurya and P. Mishra (2012) tried to figure out aspects of brand's definitions. They classified statements related to brand into twelve categories: logo, legal instrument, company, shorthand, risk reducer, identity system, image in consumer's mind, value system, personality, relationship, adding value and evolving entity. Each aspect was synthetic of many previous researches of various experts. From those, the concepts were continuously divided into 2 groups of perspective: customer's and corporation's.

Brands are a corporation's conditioned, intangible, and legally binding assets. They serve as a signal of perceived worth for all stakeholders involved. Benefits that people consider to be valuable might have both functional and psychological implications. Through numerous points of contact and exchanges, the interactions between the corporation's many stakeholders (and even amongst stakeholders) have an impact on this signal.

K. L. Keller (2013) had a big effort to build up strategy for brands. The process of developing and maintaining a distinctive and recognizable identity for a product, service, business, or person is called branding. It involves deliberate choices and activities with the goal of influencing consumer perceptions, feelings, and connections. A brand may stand out from rivals, develop a distinctive value proposition, and forge enduring connections with customers with the aid of effective branding. It includes a number of components, such as brand equity, brand positioning, brand identity, and brand communication. Strong brand perception, brand loyalty, and ultimately business development and success are all fueled by effective branding.

The power and intangible worth of a brand are referred to as brand equity. It reflects the totality of consumer views, experiences, and associations with the brand. Strong brand equity has a number of advantages, such as improved financial performance, better customer loyalty, stronger brand preference, and premium pricing power. A good product or service delivered consistently, effective marketing and advertising, positive brand experiences, and strong brand connections are all ways to build brand equity. Brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty are all evaluated while determining brand equity. Maintaining brand consistency, investing regularly in brand-building initiatives, and consistently providing value to customers are necessary for managing and developing brand equity (K. L. Keller, 1993).

2.2. Concepts of place branding

A land, a city, a province, or even a nation could be considered as a place that still needs to build a brand strategy. Zenker and Braun's (2017) defined a place brand as a network of associations in customers' minds about a place that is built on how a location and its stakeholders are represented visually, verbally, and behaviorally. These associations are different in terms of their network effect and how significant a role they play in influencing customers' attitudes and behavior.

In the 1990s, concepts related to place branding began to emerge within the academic community. During that time, articles were presented in a simplistic manner, analyzing prominent cases from the perspective of constructing a basic brand, suggesting that cities, regions, or countries could implement brand promotion strategies. In the early 20th century, research on place branding began transitioning from qualitative to quantitative approaches, with the involvement of numerous scholars from different countries, contributing to the diversification of this field. From 2009 onwards, studies on place branding gradually

became more prevalent and sparked lively discussions in various conferences and forums. (Gertner, D., 2011).

The practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing strategies to the economic, sociopolitical, and cultural evolution of cities, regions, and nations is described by Anholt in 2004. There are many different contact points in such places, and they are made up of hedonic and symbolic elements that are both functional and sensory, and they all contribute to the places' essential identity.

Anholt, S., 2004 suggested steps for a place brand positioning, which included: research and analysis, define brand identity, create brand assets.

3. Methodology

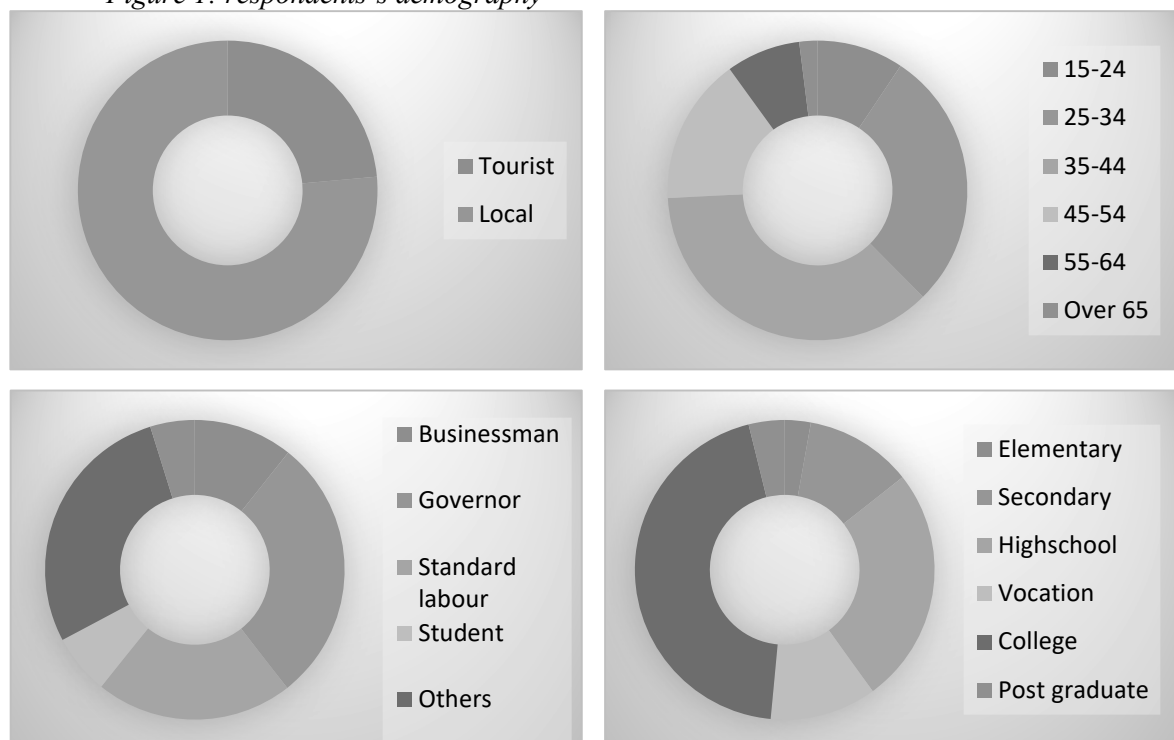
3.1. Method

Data collection is conducted through questionnaires, statistical data, and on-site observations to gather information. Surveys of Residents and Tourists: A total of 3,744 questionnaires were distributed, comprising 881 questionnaires from tourists and 2,863 questionnaires from residents (20% of which were from residents outside Dong Thap Province, and 80% from residents within Dong Thap Province).

In-depth Interviews: Five relevant departments are interviewed, including the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism; the Department of Industry and Trade; the Department of Transport; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; and the Department of Planning and Investment; ten businesses from various sectors, including industrial and handicrafts, agriculture, and trade and services; experts in the field of tourism development and destination branding to identify optimal approaches.

3.2. Respondents

Figure 1: respondents's demography



3.3. Result

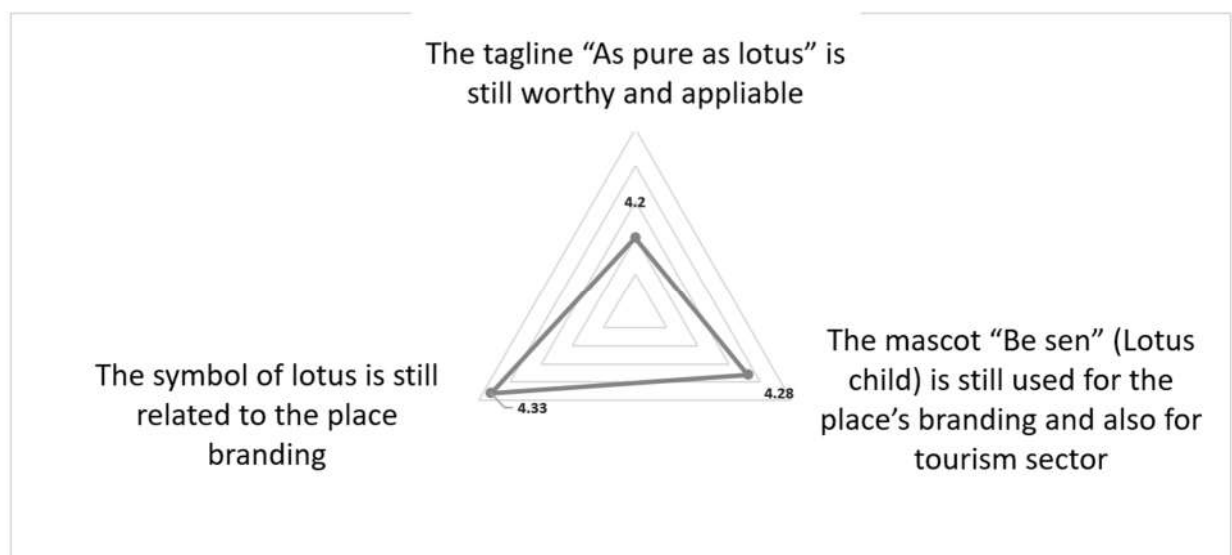


Figure 2: the current positioning

Based on the survey conducted, in which over 85% of the population, 95% of departments, committees, and sectors, and more than 90% of businesses in various, all affirm that the overall image positioning of Dong Thap province as "As pure as lotus" still holds value to the present time and remains suitable for continued selection as the comprehensive positioning for Dong Thap province for the period 2023 - 2025 and towards 2030. Alongside this, there are numerous proposed suggestions to create distinctiveness, simultaneously establishing characteristic images for each sector, leading to separate positioning for each sector while still adhering to the overarching positioning of "As pure as lotus".

4. Positioning strategy for Dong Thap's place branding, phase 2023 - 2025

4.1. Research and analysis

The province of Dong Thap has clearly defined six main pillars for its economic and social development: Governance, Tourism, Agriculture, Investment Opportunities, Community Population, and Business Community. Based on these six pillars, the target audience is identified as follows:

Firstly, tourists are individuals who participate in leisure and recreational activities and attend meetings at the local destination. Secondly, businesses which include commercial enterprises (Importers); investment enterprises: These are individuals who bring capital to invest in projects within the local area; manufacturing enterprises: These are businesses engaged in producing goods and services within the local area and headquarters of big corporations. Thirdly, local includes residents: These are individuals who were born and raised in Dong Thap and have close ties to the local economic and social landscape. And immigrants in this context refer to individuals with high qualifications and expertise in fields that Dong Thap aims to attract, including skilled professionals and successful entrepreneurs.

4.2. Defining identity and creating assets for the brand

The image positioning of Dong Thap for the 2023-2025 period, with an outlook towards 2030, will continue to be identified as "As pure lotus" with the following expected images:

Firstly, establishing an attractive, safe, and ideal investment destination for projects in industries such as industrial, high-tech agriculture, tourism, telecommunications, finance, etc., with the image of "Transparency - Efficiency - Cooperation."

Secondly, building a government that is constructive, friendly, receptive, transparent, and dedicated to serving the people, always accompanying businesses with the motto "3 close": "Close to the people,

Close to businesses, Close to reality." Establishing cultural standards in leadership and management, promoting the role model of officials and party members, especially key leaders at all levels, leaders in education, healthcare, literature, and arts.

Thirdly, developing the community of Dong Thap's population, especially the young generation, in a comprehensive manner with the fine qualities of Vietnamese people, rooted in the viewpoint of building a cultural foundation. The people of Dong Thap are known for their loyalty, dynamism, creativity, adaptability to change, cooperative spirit, civilized public behavior, law-abiding consciousness, pride, and love for the homeland.

Fourthly, establishing an agricultural image that is eco-friendly, modern, and sustainable, contributing to the restructuring of the economy, associated with the model of growth innovation. Developing commodity agriculture on a large scale with modernization, adaptability to climate change, and environmental protection. Continuing to develop key products (rice, mango, ornamental flowers, tra fish, lotus) and potential sectors in localities (lychee, red grapefruit, pigs, cattle, etc.). Establishing specialized areas for high-quality commodity agricultural products, large-scale, meeting widespread food safety standards, linked between production and consumption. Developing large-scale, concentrated, modern agricultural production, oriented towards export. Making the connection between production and consumption the center of the agricultural restructuring process with the spirit of "Green value from green potentials."

Fifthly, Creating a community of Dong Thap's businesses and startups based on the viewpoint of building a cultural foundation, dynamic, creative Dong Thap people with a business culture, a cooperative spirit in production, social responsibility, aiming for healthy, sustainable development, building and developing reputable product brands with cultural characteristics of Dong Thap people, accompanying the government in promoting the economic and social development of the locality.

Finally, positioning tourism until 2030 needs to continue developing and promoting the tourism brand associated with the core values of lotus, people, and cuisine. Simultaneously, developing unique tourism products associated with the province's advantages and potentials in agriculture, culture, ecology, and spirituality with the slogan "Dong Thap – as pure as lotus."

5. Conclusion

Even while place branding initiatives are thriving across the board, in Vietnam they haven't yet attracted much attention. The concept is still largely understudied and underemphasized in the context of Vietnam, despite the momentum and acknowledgment of place branding as a strategic instrument for economic growth, tourism promotion, and luring investments on a worldwide scale. Vietnam, particularly Dong Thap Province, is still in the early stages of fully realizing the potential of place branding while other nations and areas have embraced the idea and actively adopted branding strategies to increase their global competitiveness.

When examining particular operations in Dong Thap and other places in Vietnam, it is clear that they frequently carry out place branding initiatives using conventional and traditional methods that may not completely benefit from the intricacies of strategic place branding. The efficacy and impact of these programs may be constrained by a lack of a thorough, organized, and professionally led place branding approach, which would impede the province's and other areas' overall progress.

The ideas of strategic place branding serve as the foundation for this research's academic analytical approach. The study intends to offer insight into the underlying difficulties and potential possibilities for Dong Thap and other Vietnamese towns to implement a more deliberate and organized place branding

strategy by using a scholarly perspective. The study aims to offer perceptions and suggestions that might assist Dong Thap raise its branding initiatives and harmonize them with global best practices.

In addition to emphasizing the theoretical parts of place branding, an academic approach concentrates on real-world applications and quantifiable results. A well-defined brand and reputation may be established for the location with the help of such a strategy, allowing it to stand out in a cutthroat international market. Additionally, a methodical approach to place branding may develop a consistent narrative that connects with a variety of stakeholders, including locals, companies, investors, and tourists, instilling a feeling of pride and allegiance to the location.

Last but not least, it is difficult to completely discuss every subject pertaining to place branding within the confines of a short research paper. However, the goal of this study is to establish the groundwork for more in-depth investigation, promoting more organized and meticulous studies on place branding in Vietnam. Provinces may make substantial progress toward developing strong and effective place branding strategies that have a beneficial influence on their economic, social, and cultural development by adopting scholarly approaches and incorporating practical insights.

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HO CHI MINH CITY UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS AND FINANCE

141 - 145 Dien Bien Phu, Ward 15, Binh Thanh District, HCM City

Website: uef.edu.vn - Hotline: (028) 5422 6666 * (028) 5422 5555