Ambassador networks and place branding

Marcus Andersson and Per Ekman

Geobrands, Kalmar, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – The use of brand ambassadors is a quite recent phenomenon, even in the business world. This paper aims to explore the employment of ambassador networks as a place marketing and place development tool. This is done by identifying various kinds of networks, understanding how networks are governed, and pinning down the motivations and expectations of network members.

Design/methodology/approach – The study used interviews and a survey to collect empirical material. The research process employed an approach with many inductive elements, deemed appropriate given that research into the topic is scant.

Findings – The study identified four main dimensions of networks and, on this basis, we outline a typology with four main categories of networks. One major finding is that ambassador networks are seen not only as a communication channel, but also as a development resource. That means they are seen as enhancing the general competitiveness of the place involved. The networks are also seen as a resource for mobilising local citizen pride. Another finding was that ambassadors value getting access to first-hand information about the place much more than the opportunity of taking part in meetings and events and forming new relationships.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are in line with the perspective of the place brand as a "relational brand network", extending place branding beyond a matter of just one-way communication. It is somewhat surprising that ambassadors value getting access to information more than interaction, given that other research puts such a high value on interaction and dialogue as value-creating factors.

Practical implications – Based on the observations in the study, it is argued that ambassador networks have the potential to constitute an integral component of place brand management.

Originality/value – Research on the application of ambassador networks in place marketing seems to be scant, not to say non-existent. The present study relates to the implementation of place branding, and can hopefully contribute to a more efficient practice as well as a better theoretical understanding.

Keywords Social networks, Brands, Brand image, Brand management, Relationship marketing, Sweden

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Efforts to create and communicate favourable brand images constitute a considerable part of contemporary development strategies for places. The use of various marketing practices has become a popular way to promote a place's attractiveness for business, tourists, residents and students. The use of brand ambassadors, however, is a quite recent phenomenon, even in the business world. Consumer brands like Sony, Jet Blue and Microsoft have been pioneers in using brand ambassadors or so-called brand evangelists to promote their products or services. Although still quite rare, this practice, the authors observe, is being increasingly employed in the branding of places.

As such, this development can be seen as a part of a wider tendency in which methods and techniques of marketing from the business world are being applied to places – a trend noted by many observers (Gold and Ward, 1994; Kotler *et al.*, 1999; Kavaratzis, 2004). Research on the application of ambassador networks in marketing, however, is scant, not to say non-existent. This applies with regard to their application in both the private sector and the public sector.

In this paper, we explore the employment of ambassador networks as a place marketing and place development tool. The study aims at conceptualising and understanding the application of ambassador networks in a place branding context. The main objectives of the study are to identify various kinds of networks, their effects, focus and structure; to understand how networks are governed and to pin down the motivations and expectations of network members. Where applicable, we have also tried to formulate hypotheses and recommendations.

The present study relates to the implementation of place branding, and can hopefully contribute to more efficient practice as well as a better theoretical understanding. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the study is conducted by and primarily for practitioners. Nevertheless, by discussing the results of the study in the light of academic research – both empirical and more theoretical – it is our hope that the findings can have a wider application and also add to the academic debate.

Method and theoretical framework

The empirical material used stems from interviews and a survey. The interview process included interviews with 23 localities that run ambassador networks – cities, municipalities and regions/counties – in Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark and the UK. In addition, one country network, Globalscot of Scotland, was included. These localities range in size from Bjurholm, which with its 2,550 inhabitants is the smallest municipality in Sweden, to Scotland with its 5,144,200 inhabitants. They had networks ranging from six members in the case of the municipality of Ekenäs in Finland to between 7,000 and 8,000 members in the case of the City of Liverpool in the UK. Despite these fundamental differences, these localities share as a common denominator the fact that they all run ambassador networks aimed at developing the place image and/or promoting the attractiveness of the place.

For the purpose of this research, we have defined a brand ambassador network as a network having as one of its main aims to promote a place's image and attractiveness, and which consists of people with a real or perceived connection with the location running the network. Another criterion was that the network has been initiated and is being run in a somewhat planned and intentional manner.

A pre-study phase identified that these localities are the ones in the chosen countries that employ ambassador networks. The pre-study was done by interviewing key civil servants in political administrations at the national and regional levels in the five chosen countries and asking them to pinpoint ambassador networks within their location that met our criteria. We also conducted complementary Internet research to identify networks. We do not, however, claim that this is a completely exhaustive study in terms of selection; given that the phenomenon is quite new and has received little attention in media and research, there is likelihood that we have overlooked some networks, especially smaller ones.

In addition, we conducted a web-based survey with present members of ambassador networks of five Swedish cities and towns, which had 501 respondents in total. These five networks were chosen because they were seemingly different in size, structure and purpose. The survey was preceded by and based on a number of unstructured telephone interviews with a random selection of 20 respondents out of the total selection of 1,123 respondents, of which 501 participated in the survey (44.6 per cent).

The present study was part of a research project conducted for 11 Swedish municipalities – who run or plan to launch ambassador networks – as well as the Swedish Institute, one of the public agencies in charge of branding Sweden. As a part of this project, the authors organized dialogue meetings, in which the project participants currently running networks were included. By observing discussions at the meetings, we could further nuance and validate the research findings.

The literature research phase concluded that research into the topic is scant, at best. The research approach therefore bears traits of an inductive method, where the aim has been to formulate assumptions, hypotheses and suggest areas for future research. We have, however, compared and validated the research results with theorizing and empirical observations from disciplines such as place branding and public diplomacy, complemented with research done within the disciplines of general marketing and network and relationship marketing.

Ambassador networks in context and their effects

An ambassador is seen by coordinators as constituting a credible testimony of the distinctive character of the place and its attractiveness, and can through the word-of-mouth effect influence others through their networks and relationships. Communication through the word-of mouth effect is not only perceived as cost-effective relative to other promotion tools such as advertising, but is also a much more effective tool when it comes to building a positive image and influencing target groups ("place buyers"). Ambassadors can also, through both their social and occupational roles, get access to target groups that the coordinator otherwise would not reach. The effectiveness of word-of-mouth is highly uncontested in marketing research (Kotler, 1999; Silverman, 2001). Consumers have far more confidence in the views of friends and acquaintances than in a message that emanates from advertising or corporate spokespeople.

Another result is that the networks are seen not only as a channel of communication but also, at least to the same extent, as a development resource, implying that they can assist in enhancing the general competitiveness of the place. Many respondents say that human networks are of great importance to their municipality or region and its development. Networks are considered an invaluable resource for meeting and adapting to changes. This "dual" view of the ambassador networks' purpose can be summarized in the information found on UK county Northamptonshire's Ambassadors' web site:

> The aim of the county Ambassador programme is to promote Northamptonshire as a destination for investment, tourism, learning and living. Our Ambassadors are influential, innovative and strategic thinkers who are recognised as leaders in their field, they are pivotal in the *promotion* and *development* of the county. Involvement into the programme is by invitation only (Northamptonshire Enterprise, 2008, emphasis added).

In this context, there seems to be a tendency among coordinators to put an emphasis on the communication aspect in the early phases of a network's life. However, the potential effect of the network as a development resource seems to become more

important as the network consolidates and matures. The communicative effects mentioned by the interviewees involve promotion, i.e. establishing new contacts as well as influencing potential place buyers, and image-building, i.e. creating attention and boosting the image *vis-à-vis* target groups.

Among the developmental effects we found that the members of the network can be a source of expertise, knowledge and creativity. This view is illustrated by a CEO of one local authority:

> The ambassadors inform others and provide us with suggestions and ideas, and give feedback on our ideas. Their expert knowledge is in some cases invaluable. Without this, it's easy to become too inward-looking in the development efforts of the municipality (interview with M Johansson, CEO, municipality of Ekenäs, Finland).

One example of a method for place development, which was utilized by some of the coordinating organisations interviewed, is to set up a reference group among the ambassadors – or simply use the whole network as a reference group if it is a smaller one – to access the ambassadors' knowledge and receive their ideas on creative solutions for development. Several coordinators organized meetings with the ambassadors with the aim of discussing specific issues of interest to the location's development.

Another effect, which, we argue, can be considered both a communicative and a developmental effect that was mentioned by many respondents among the coordinators has to do with local pride and commitment of the citizens. The networks are seen as a resource for mobilizing local pride and boosting self-confidence by making the citizens of the location more aware of what values and achievements the place might stand for and be connected with. This effect could help also alleviate the problem that citizens of the place do not understand or support place branding efforts. As noted by Szondi (2007, p. 19), "the citizens, as brand ambassadors, should be first explained the context and relevance of the project, well before launching any [place branding] campaigns".

The interviewees also brought up the negative effects of having an ambassador network. One of the most common was negative publicity in the local media and public discontent stemming from a perceived high cost of meetings and social activities associated with maintaining the network. Even though it is beyond the scope of this study, it might be interesting to note that this negative effect was mentioned exclusively by coordinators in the Scandinavian countries, which are said to employ comparatively strict rules governing the use of tax money in organizing leisure or entertainment activities in official contexts. There have also been cases where local media portrayed the networks as being temporary "gimmicks" with no value for the locality. Another negative effect is, in those cases where the network employed a by-invitation-only selection procedure, that there have been cases of publicly shown jealousy on the part of people who had not been selected as ambassadors. This was seen as creating bad will for the network.

To sum this section up, these findings are in line with the place brand as a "relational brand network" perspective favored by, among others, Hankinson (2003). This conceptualization, drawing on a relational exchange and network marketing paradigm, describes exchange as a process focused on value creation through relationships with stakeholders. As such, it views place brands as relationships between the place and all its stakeholders, including residents, employees of local organizations, key community stakeholders, consumers and the media.

This is relevant not only because the – maybe self-evident – reason that building relationships between the place brand and its stakeholders lies at the very core of the nature of ambassador networks, but also because this perspective recognises the importance of extending place branding beyond communications to include behaviors and putting emphasis on reality rather than image. As a network consists of humans who interact, it is obviously, to a great extent, a matter of behaviours. And developing the place, in essence, involves a focus on reality rather than image. In sum, this rhymes well with the finding that ambassador networks are seen both as a communication and development resource.

The relational exchange paradigm puts branding at the centre of marketing activity (Hankinson, 2003). Based on the observations in our study, we go as far as to claim that developing networks of communicators and development resources, such as ambassador networks, could with advantage be seen as an integrated, if not central, part of Place Brand Management.

The structure, purpose and focus of ambassador networks
In all cases except one, the network consisted of individuals rather than organizations or professional positions. We found four main dimensions of networks. They can be:

(1) Local (includes people who currently live in the location) or external (contains people who live elsewhere). The purpose of the local network is typically to promote local commitment and pride and the main purpose of the external one is to benefit from the communicative power that lies in interfaces with people and networks elsewhere and the knowledge that the network members possess about trends and events in the outside world.

(2) Inclusive (includes private persons) or exclusive (includes people chosen or invited because of their profession, position or recognition value). The purpose of the inclusive networks tends to be to reach out to as many as possible and take advantage of the potentially exponentially increasing number of interfaces with the surrounding world. The main purpose of an exclusive network is typically to create a feeling of intimacy, reach a high level of interaction and also to economize scarce resources.

(3) One-dimensional (include only one of each of the above-mentioned dichotomous dimensions) or multi-dimensional (include elements of both of the above-mentioned dimensions).

(4) Limited or unlimited in terms of number of participants. The larger the network is, the more potential interfaces one gets, but it also becomes more difficult and expensive to govern and it is more challenging to promote interaction between the participants.

In terms of participants, purpose and selection, it is possible to formulate a typology with four main categories of networks:

(1) The citizen-focused network is a local network mainly including people who live in the location. These networks are inclusive and the main method of selection of new members is that people interested in becoming ambassadors usually express their interest or simply sign up for it. They tend to be large in terms of size. The main purpose of these networks is usually to create proud and committed citizens. For example, the city of Liverpool has a network of

volunteers who are interested in assisting in welcoming and taking care of tourists arriving to the city in conjunction with the European City of Culture year in 2008. Everyone who wants to can sign up to be a member of the network.

(2) The business-oriented networks include business people, often from the top management of companies located at the place or people having a connection with the place. The Northamptonshire network is an example of the former, having approximately 90 CEOs and other executives of companies in the region as members; and Globalscot, the network of Scotland, an example of the latter. Globalscot includes 950 business people who are Scottish or have some connection to Scotland, but who all live elsewhere[1]. In the business type of networks, the main method of selection of ambassadors is by invitation from the coordinator or – in a few cases – through an "ambassador's council", or by letting present network members invite people they would like to see as members. The overall purpose of the business networks is mainly to attract investment and entrepreneurs and create new business opportunities.

(3) A network with a fame focus is an exclusive network mainly aimed at attracting famous or well-known people from sports, media, the arts, business and politics, etc. These networks can be both local and external. In these types of networks, the main method of selection of ambassadors is by invitation from the coordinator. The purpose is typically to create awareness and promote the image. An example is the network of Norwegian municipality Halden, which includes 26 ambassadors of three types: media personalities with national recognition, musicians and key business executives.

(4) And, lastly, there are specialized or niche networks in terms of participants. The city of Manchester runs a network of "high-profile" academics from the universities in the city. The purpose of the network is to build a positive image nationally and abroad and to attract academic conferences and events.

It is worth pointing out that these categories are by no means mutually exclusive. There are examples of networks encompassing several elements of the observed categories and dimensions. For example, the municipality of Karlskoga in Sweden runs a local network with approximately 130 members which includes both "ordinary" citizens, key business and civil society people recruited both by invitation and through open registration and whose main purpose it us to spread a "positive feeling" about the municipality.

It is also worth pointing out that one there is one, more universal, functional selection criterion, which networks from all categories seem to have employed to a varying degree; to find and select people with large personal networks. In this regard, it has been argued that people with large networks made up of acquaintances rather than close friends are best suited to be "influencers" who spread ideas and information (Gladwell, 2000).

The coordinator and its role
The coordinator is defined here as the organization that has the overall responsibility for initiating and running an ambassador network. In some instances the coordinator had appointed a moderator of the ambassador network, defined here as an individual charged with moderating the communication with and the interaction within the network. Coordinators of ambassador networks were in all cases local government

administrations (most commonly used in the Scandinavian countries and Finland) or public or semi-public agencies (most common in the UK). Public agencies could be the regional tourism organization (e.g. Visit Manchester) or an organization charged with regional development and/or the export or investment promotion agency (e.g. Scottish Enterprise). In some cases, private organizations were partly responsible for setting up and maintaining the networks. For example, in the Norwegian municipality of Halden, a private association equivalent to a chamber of commerce played an important role in appointing and electing network members. However, the municipality administrations were in these cases responsible for the overall coordination.

Research has indicated that public institutions tend to be the most appropriate coordinator of place branding and image-building efforts (Wells and Wint, 2006). Even so, there are examples of the private sector having successfully initiated place branding or image-building efforts, e.g. in the case of New Zeeland (Morgan *et al.*, 2003) and Sri Lanka (Andersson, 2008). It has been argued that in cases where there is a lack of initiative on the part of public institutions, the private sector can compensate for this to some extent and act as a facilitator in initiating place branding processes. However, if a place wants to broaden these and include various parts of society, the public sector would need to take a coordinating or mediating role (Andersson, 2008).

In two cases, we encountered the use of ambassador councils, which was a group of ambassadors selected to serve as a sort of advisory board of the network and also as an intermediary interface between the coordinator and the network. These councils had no formal mandate though to act as a board or management team of the network. In one case, Karlskoga in Sweden, the coordinator had set up a supervisory group consisting of committed ambassadors who had been network members from the inception of the network. This committee, meeting more frequently than the whole network, served in cooperation with a moderator from the coordinating organization as a sort of management team of the network. However, according to our observations, there should be scope for a more formalized structure, either in the form of advisory board or a supervisory group. In this context, so-called "planning groups" devised for place marketing initiatives by Kotler *et al.* (1999) could provide inspiration.

Our research suggests that the coordinators put value on having a clear purpose with the networks. Several interviewees – both coordinators and ambassadors – ascribe the perceived lack of success of their networks to an unclear or too broad purpose. In those cases where the purpose has not been clear or too broad, the network has been difficult to govern and it has been difficult to maintain the participants' commitment over time. Without a clear purpose the network is seen as "just" a social activity and becomes a "gimmick", at best. Another aspect mentioned by many respondents, touched upon above, is that a clear and concise purpose is essential when it comes to expressing sound expectations on the role of the ambassadors. It should, we assume, be beneficial that especially the more multi-dimensional networks, encompassing several categories of members and with broad purposes, are segmented into sub-networks with different characteristics and purposes. Each sub-network can then be governed separately and interaction between the sub-networks can be planned for.

Several coordinators mentioned that support from the top leadership – the administrative and/or political management of the location – is an essential criterion for success. The management needs to provide the people in charge of coordinating the network with the required legitimacy and credibility by underscoring that the work with

the network is important and by empowering the coordinators with the needed mandate. It is also seen as important to have a sound and clear estimate of which investments are needed into manpower, events and meetings and IT tools in order to run the network. This assertion has been emphasized in other place branding research. Morgan *et al.* (2003), for instance, asserts that any campaign in place branding is doomed to fail without strong leadership and Rainisto (2005) has identified leadership as a key success factor for place branding. It is also important, we argue, to integrate – or at least closely coordinate – the work with ambassador networks with the overall place branding process and other place marketing activities.

Many of the interviewees mentioned that the coordinator cannot only be an administrator of the network. There was an expectation among the interviewed ambassadors that the coordinator takes an active role in circulating information, suggesting themes for discussion and promoting interaction between the members. Based on our observations, we conclude that the necessary skills of the coordinator can be divided into four main categories:

(1) Networking competency, i.e. an understanding of the nature of human networks in order to promote a network focused culture.

(2) Place branding knowledge.

(3) IT competency – to be able to facilitate information exchange and "virtual" interaction.

(4) Editorial skills – to make sure that the information is packaged in a way so that network members will want to use it.

The ambassador's perspective – motivation and expectations

The motivations of the ambassador tend to vary with the way they were selected for the assignment. Those who are selected or appointed tend to see the assignment as being an honorary task, a mark of honor and a sign that the person has done good deeds for the locality in the past. Those who sign up for the more inclusive type of networks mention that the primary motivation is that they want to help out in creating a positive momentum for the place and that they were curious of what it would entail to be an ambassador.

After joining the network, ambassadors put a high value on getting access to first-hand information and quick updates about the place and what is happening in it. This factor was mentioned as important by 69 per cent of respondents. The opportunity of being involved in the marketing of the place was mentioned as important by 55 per cent. The opportunity of going to meetings and events was valued by 43 per cent of the respondents. Meeting new contacts and interesting people and forming new relationships were seen as important by 39 per cent of respondents. Other advantages mentioned were the opportunity of getting some insight into the work of the local administration.

It is somewhat surprising that the possibility of receiving information about the place – a one-way communication in essence – is seen as the main value of being an ambassador. Seen in the light of relationship marketing and public diplomacy research, in which interaction and dialog sometimes are considered value-creating factors for the parties involved (Hankinson, 2003; Wang, 2006), one would expect that the possibility of meeting new people and forming new relationships would be seen as more important.

Based on this, one can assume that interaction within the network has no purpose in itself. It is only interesting when there is direct reward linked to it. This is in line with research in industrial network marketing, in which it has been argued that interaction in supplier-customer relationships is only deemed necessary when there is a purpose for it and there are concrete things to discuss (Axelsson, 1996).

We also observed that there can be a kind of symbiotic co-branding situation between the network and its members. This would especially hold true for the more fame-focused networks. In this situation, the network benefits from the brand equity of a network member's positive reputation and, conversely, the network members will strengthen their image by showing commitment to the location. This self-expressive factor we call the "good citizenship effect".

In terms of concrete activities, the following were mentioned as being important incentives for their level of commitment as ambassadors: meetings and events, access to information, access to promotional material, training and discounts and other offers. One aspect that was mentioned by both coordinators and ambassadors is the difficulty in maintaining the level of commitment over time. Continuity of meetings and information and the fact that coordinators try to make the tasks of the ambassadors, and expectations on them, concrete, are mentioned as important measures to uphold the commitment. Many ambassadors assert that they would become more engaged if they were given concrete tasks to do and that they would be interested in working together with other network members.

Conclusions

Ambassadors are seen by coordinators as credible testimony about the place and its attractiveness, able to influence others by word of mouth. The word-of-mouth effect is not only perceived as cost-effective, but also a much more effective tool than advertising, for example. Another major result is that the ambassador networks are seen not only as a communication channel, but also and perhaps even more as a development resource.

The communicative effects involved both promotion and image-building, and the developmental effects observed were that the members of the network can be a source of expertise, knowledge and creativity. Another effect was that networks are seen as resource for mobilizing local pride and boosting self-confidence of local citizens. We argue that these findings are in line with the perspective of a place brand as a "relational brand network", extending place branding beyond being just communication to include behaviour and putting an emphasis on reality rather than image. Based on the observations in the study, we argue that networks with communication and development resources, such as ambassador networks, have the potential to constitute an integral component of place brand management.

We identified four main dimensions of networks and, on this basis, we tried to formulate a typology with four main categories of networks: the citizen-focused network, the business-oriented network, the fame-focused network, and the specialized or niche network.

The network coordinators were in all cases local government administrations or public or semi-public agencies. In some cases, private organizations were partly responsible for setting up and maintaining the networks. In a few cases we encountered the use of ambassador councils or steering groups aimed at helping to coordinate the network in various ways. It is argued here that in many cases there should be scope for a

more formalized structure inspired by the idea of "planning groups", as suggested in the place marketing literature.

Our research suggests that respondents – both coordinators and ambassadors – value the network having a clear purpose, something seen as essential to make it possible to govern them, maintain participants' commitment over time, and express sound expectations on the role of the ambassadors. Support from the administrative and/or political management of the location is seen as another essential criterion for success. It is also argued here that it is important to integrate or closely coordinate the work of building ambassador networks with the overall place branding process. A lot of ambassadors said that the coordinator must be not only an administrator of the network, but also actively circulate information and facilitate discussion and interaction between the members. Based on our observations, we conclude that the skills necessary in a coordinator can be divided into four main categories: networking skills, place branding knowledge, IT skills and editorial skills.

We found that ambassador motivations tend to vary with the way they were selected for the assignment: those selected or appointed tend to see the assignment as being an honorary task and those who sign up for the more inclusive type of network say that their primary motivation is that they want to help create a positive momentum for the place and that they were curious about what it would entail to be an ambassador.

After joining the network, ambassadors put a high value on getting access to first-hand information about the place and being involved in the marketing of the place. The opportunity of going to meetings and events and meeting new contacts and forming new relationships was seen as important, but to a lesser degree. We argue here that it is somewhat surprising that the opportunity of receiving information about the place is valued so highly. Seen in the light of research in relationship marketing and public diplomacy, in which interaction and dialogue are seen as a value-creating factor as such, one might expect that the opportunity of meeting new people and forming new relationships would be seen as more important. This leads us to conclude that interaction within the network has no purpose in itself; it is only interesting when there is direct reward linked to it, which is in line with research in industrial network marketing. Finally, we have also observed that there can a kind of symbiotic co-branding situation between the network and its members. This would especially hold true for the more fame-focused networks.

Note

1. According to Irene Johnstone of Scottish Enterprise, approximately 50 per cent of network members live in the US, 30 per cent in other parts of the UK and the rest in other parts of the world (interview).

References

Andersson, M. (2008), "Political and organisational factors and challenges of nation branding: the case of Sri Lanka", unpublished master's thesis, Uppsala University, Uppsala, available at: www.mfs.nu (accessed 8 October).

Axelsson, B. (1996), *Professionell Marknadsföring*, Studentlitteratur, Lund.

Gladwell, M. (2000), *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Little Brown, Boston, MA.

Gold, J.R. and Ward, S.V. (Eds) (1994), *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.

Hankinson, G. (2003), "Relational network brands: towards a conceptual model of place brands", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 109-21.

Kavaratzis, M. (2004), "From city marketing to city branding: towards a theoretical framework for developing city brands", *Place Branding*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 36-49.

Kotler, P. (1999), *Kotlers Marknadsföring*, Liber, Malmö.

Kotler, P., Asplund, C., Rein, I. and Heider, D. (1999), *Marketing Places Europe: Attracting Investments, Industries, Residents and Visitors to European Cities, Communities, Regions and Nations*, Financial Times/Prentice-Hall, Harlow.

Morgan, N.J., Pritchard, A. and Pigott, R. (2003), "Destination branding and the role of the stakeholders: the case of New Zealand", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, Vol. 9 No. 3, pp. 285-99.

Northamptonshire Enterprise (2008), "Local and vocal: the Northamptonshire Ambassadors Programme", available at: http://ambassadors.northamptonshireenterprise.ltd.uk (accessed 28 October 2008).

Rainisto, S. (2005), "Successful place branding: a study of place marketing practices in Northern Europe and the United States", *Structural Change in Europe: Entrepreneurial Spirit in Cities and Regions*, Vol. 4, pp. 80-4.

Silverman, G. (2001), *The Secrets of Word of Mouth Marketing: How to Trigger Exponential Sales Through Runaway Word of Mouth*, Amacom, New York, NY.

Szondi, G. (2007), "The role and challenges of country branding in transition countries: the Central and Eastern European experience", *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 8-20.

Wang, J. (2006), "Localising public diplomacy: the role of sub-national actors in nation branding", *Place Branding*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 32-42.

Wells, L.T. Jr and Wint, A.G. (2006), "Marketing a country: promotion as a tool for attracting foreign investment", occasional paper 13, Foreign Investment Advisory Service, Washington, DC, March, available at: www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContent Server/WDSP/IB/2000/05/25/000094946_00051005302185/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf (accessed 8 December).

Corresponding author
Marcus Andersson can be contacted at: marcus.andersson@geobrands.se