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Name that Brand

How do you turn a neighborhood into a destination?

Rarely are neighborhoods thought of as brands. Place names are neither tangible assets that can be owned nor intellectual property that can be trademarked. A neighborhood name, like any brand, is an ever-changing bundle of perceptions in a consumer's mind. Yet, place brands can influence decisions that affect the bottom line: Are consumers aware of the neighborhood, or do they need to be educated about it? Does the neighborhood provide commodity housing, or does it have a distinct identity? Is this a desirable identity? Does this identity command a premium that adds to market value, or is a negative perception of it depressing real estate values?

Real estate is typically the single-largest purchase consumers make in their lives—and by dollar amount alone, it could be considered the ultimate luxury (or the most expensive necessity). And just as with luxury brands, a desirable neighborhood brand reinforces how consumers see themselves and how they would like to be perceived by others. Are people living in the neighborhood because they have to, or because they want to? To what extent do prospective residents identify with other "users" of the brand?

Repositioning a neighborhood brand goes hand in glove with gentrification. While developers, speculators, and homeowners can improve individual buildings or blocks, these improvements typically are not enough to change the public perception of an entire area. With emerging neighborhoods, managing the place brand can create allure for prospective buyers and tenants in two ways: by generating awareness of a place's good qualities, and by dissociating the neighborhood from its former negative identity. If successful, these efforts result in a positive place brand that can generate increased sales, higher prices, and a shorter sales cycle because consumers are more informed, thus creating greater profits for stakeholders.

Rebranding or repositioning a neighborhood may fail if it creates expectations that a place cannot fulfill, or that can generate a backlash if it is not based in how residents perceive themselves. As with any brand, a neighborhood identity is an implied promise. Gentrification occurs in stages, and there are many stories of disgruntled residents who feel "betrayed" when a place's amenities have been hyped beyond the stage of gentrification.

Brands are about relationships and trust, and are reinforced by word of mouth. Buzz can boost awareness of a neighborhood's good qualities and desirability, but can just as easily reinforce negative stereotypes about an emerging neighborhood.

Typically, initial perceptions of gentrifying neighborhoods range from dangerous ("If I run out of gas there, will I get shot?") to dull ("Nothing going on there."). These perceptions typically emerge from years of news coverage focused on crimes, or from "conventional wisdom" passed through word of mouth, but rarely from firsthand experience. Negative perceptions of an area often outlast the reasons for those associations. Usually, there is a lag in coverage between a gradual reduction in crime and the start of gentrification. Boston's Savin Hill is now known primarily for its Victorian homes, but it took years to shake the "Stab-and-kill" nickname. Similarly, development activity and an active nightlife in Somerville's Davis Square helped the town shake the "Slumberville" nickname.

The Hotel Gansevoort is a centerpiece of Manhattan's revitalized Meatpacking District, which has become a model of how an urban neighborhood can reposition its identity without changing its name.

In the early stages of gentrification, people other than immediate residents tend to avoid these neighborhoods. Many Bostonians don't realize that a gentrifying Roxbury neighborhood is only a block from the Museum of Fine Arts and abuts Brookline, one of the wealthiest towns in Massachusetts. Many of today's poorest urban neighborhoods are some of a city's oldest;

these original neighborhoods typically are close to the waterfront, the center of town, or both.

Initially, these neighborhoods tend to have few, if any, destination bars, clubs, or shops to attract outside visitors. Frequently, this is why early-stage gentrification begins with a commercial outpost that draws outsiders and becomes the center for a "scene" or community. For New York's East Village in the 1980s, it was the Life Café. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, it is Lillie's Bar. And in Philadelphia's Fishtown, it is the Rocket Cat Café.

It is no coincidence that many music scenes have emerged from neighborhoods that have since gentrified—Chicago's Wicker Park (Liz Phair, Urge Overkill) and Seattle's Capitol Hill. Press coverage of the artists who succeed tends to focus on their beginnings, and inadvertently "mythologizes" the neighborhood where they began. This is especially true if an entire cultural movement begins there—for example, San Francisco in the 1960s or Seattle and the grunge scene in the 1990s. In Boston's funky Allston neighborhood, one apartment building still advertises itself as the place where singer Steven Tyler of Aerosmith stayed in the 1970s.

Repositioning a place creates a new set of associations for the existing name. Rebranding may be as narrowly focused as promoting a new name for a microneighborhood, or as broadly focused as changing the name of an entire town.

Even if a new name does not stick (and many do not), the attempt to create a new name can generate press—and discussion—about how the neighborhood is actively changing the way it is perceived. Speculators and buyers may take note of this effort and decide that the neighborhood is a place worthy of identification, reconsideration, and investment.

In Manhattan, real estate agents, developers, and residents have been renaming communities for these reasons since at least the Civil War. Neighborhoods such as Harsonville, Striker's Bay, or San Juan Hill do not appear on maps today—they have all been assimilated into Manhattan's Upper West Side. The Upper West Side itself was supposed to be called "The West End" to echo the glamour of London's district.

In the 1980s, real estate developers and agents began promoting the name "East Village" to create a distinct identity for a neighborhood that had long been regarded as part of the Lower East Side, then an immigrant ghetto. The rebranding was a successful attempt to imply a geographic connection with nearby Greenwich Village and its positive bohemian qualities. The area's distinct identity later reached the general public through the musical *Rent* and television shows such as *Tompkins Square*. To become a cultural reference point is a level few place brands will likely achieve.

Ever since clever agents began marketing the Manhattan neighborhood south of Houston Street as SoHo, other places have used acronyms and medial capitals to connote some of SoHo's hip urban cachet. Besides the obvious NoHo (north of Houston Street), this has been applied to southern Harlem (SoHa), and to an arts district—NoDa, for north of Davidson, as far away as Charlotte, North Carolina. One California neighborhood even began calling itself NoWal—a contraction for "north of Wal-Mart."

With microneighborhoods, a single street or block can develop

an identity separate from or earlier than the rest of the neighborhood. These can be applied either to early-stage gentrification areas where only a small parcel is controlled or being developed, or to hypergentrified places. In the former case, the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston is one of the largest neighborhoods of the city; gentrification is naturally uneven and concentrated in certain areas. Microneighborhoods such as Savin Hill, Melville Park, and Upham's Corner have emerged and are branded as distinct from the neighborhood at large, and as different from each other. The identities of these microneighborhoods can be built around common characteristics such as type of building, age of building, or natural or manmade boundaries.

Typically, the names of these neighborhoods are unofficial, as are their exact boundaries. The neighborhoods may overlay several census tracts; one example is Boston's Chestnut Hill, which is not a town, but rather a zip code overlay of several towns. Legally changing the name of an entire town is more involved than simply repositioning the perception of an area. North Andover, Massachusetts, actually was founded before neighboring Andover was founded. Several years ago, historian Karen Kline tried to have its name changed to Olde Andover to reflect the cachet of being there "first," but the proposal failed to receive sufficient votes at the town meeting. Manchester, Massachusetts (founded in 1629 as Jeffrey's Creek), became Manchester-by-the-Sea in 1990 following a town meeting vote and an act of the legislature, and the new name is now used on all town documents and the city seal. Hyphenated town names have a certain cachet (Croton-on-Hudson, Annandale-on-Hudson, Stratford-on-Avon), but neighborhood rebrandings have not yet used hyphens.

How do new place names come into use? Real estate agents can be the catalyst for a repositioning or rebranding effort, by listing a property for sale or rent under a new neighborhood name. To use a Boston example, rather than listing a property in Dorchester, agents may list it by a microneighborhood name such as Upham's Corner.

A Victorian house in Upham's Corner, a microneighborhood in Boston, demonstrates the gradual gentrification of both a building and a neighborhood. The perception of a neighborhood often lags behind the revitalization efforts of developers and real estate professionals.

Because real estate markets are localized, the best way to reach the desired audience is through advertising and public relations in the regional dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and broadcast media. On the public relations side, creative condominium or loft conversions (or those designed by a name architect) serve as ideal hooks for coverage in a newspaper's real estate section, and a roundup of trendy restaurants and club nights can be featured in a lifestyle or weekend write-up. Local publications and alternative weeklies may begin to cover the regular evenings at a bar, or host events that generate coverage. Such articles typically include language urging people to reconsider their perceptions of the neighborhood. Inevitably, the regional paper-of-record does the "next hot neighborhood" story. Within a few years after the neighborhood is gentrified, there is the followup story, "Well if you missed out on this neighborhood, here's another one to consider."

Advertising also works indirectly to promote and improve the neighborhood's brand. Bars, clubs, and music venues that advertise regularly in alternative weeklies draw attention to the neighborhood and may attract cutting-edge gay and hipster populations that are a source of excellent and credible buzz. These pioneers in turn bring their friends to the neighborhood, which helps dispel perceptions that it is far away, and that nothing is going on there.

In the meantime, community groups, local universities, and cultural centers (museums, etc.) can serve as the catalyst for all manner of made-for-press events: author signings, block parties, community gardens, farmers markets, film festivals, historic house tours, movie nights, neighborhood cleanups, parades, public performances, road races, and walking history tours. To market these events, it is key to provide a press kit with photos that depict the event and neighborhood in the best light, and to depict the demographics that you are trying to attract in prospective buyers.

Lastly, blogs and Web sites dedicated to the neighborhood provide additional ways of creating a virtual community, promoting activism, and collecting or linking to favorable press in a single source for prospective residents and developers.

Neighborhood brands are as vulnerable as conventional brands to the multiple messages and conflicting identities that may be promoted constantly. There are often many stakeholders in a neighborhood who have different views of how a neighborhood ought to evolve, or whether it ought to evolve at all. Backlash against gentrification can also translate into backlash against repositioning or rebranding efforts.

There are times when the stakeholders' efforts and goals may be aligned—when money from a community development corporation (CDC) and a business improvement district (BID), nonprofit money from foundations, and private funds may be combined for public relations efforts. Local business owners in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn recently pooled $150,000 for a public relations campaign built around the slogan "Bed-Stuy and Proud of It," aimed at countering the traditional rallying cry of "Bed-Stuy, Do or Die." However, observers have noted that slogans tend to be associated with particularly impoverished or dull cities. In particular, any city's slogan that touts "a brighter future" might dissuade potential investors who imply from this that the city has a dim present.

In short, gentrification is a process by which a neighborhood's intrinsic values (proximity to downtown, architecturally significant housing stock, walkable community, parks and amenities) are recognized, the physical fabric of the neighborhood is improved or restored, and value is created for homeowners, speculators, and real estate agents. The city benefits from a higher tax base and the return of abandoned properties to the tax rolls. **UL**

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