

„Theme Strategy“ to align identity creation, positioning and economic development for metropolitan regions

[Short Paper]

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores and explains an approach that aligns the creation of an identity and a positioning of a metropolitan region with its economic (and cultural) development. This approach is called „Theme Strategy“ and it has the potential to replace conventional branding for metropolitan regions in their global competition for talents and investment. The main aspect of this strategy lies in its integrated approach that involves all relevant stakeholders of a particular metropolitan region. It is open for co-authorship and has an evolutionary character. „Theme Strategy“ was used for the Greater Zurich Area: This case study gives insights into the strengths and weaknesses of this new (?) approach.

1. CONTEXT

Today, metropolitan regions are merged in a fierce global competition for talents, investments and corporate headquarters. This competition is a key driver for regional development strategies in order to create competitive advantages.

Competitive advantages can roughly be put into two categories: so called „hard“ factors such as infrastructure (i.e. transportation, office space and quality), tax burden, availability of workforce, etc. and „soft“ factors such as quality of life, security, culture, or urban lifestyle.

Increasingly, these „soft“ factors are becoming more important. Two reasons for this development can be identified:

1) the general shortage of qualified talents (top-educated professionals, creative industry people, knowledge workers, etc) forces metropolitan regions to compete more actively for a population segment (or: clientèle, group) that is generally more interested in „soft“ aspects, such as cultural life, lifestyle, recreation.

2) in a media and opinion driven society, „soft“ factors are easier to communicate, often more spectacular than dire regulations or economic development incentives. Soft factors influence the „image“ of a certain region, and therefore its reputation which is now a key driver for a region's success.

2. CHALLENGE

In today's competition, metropolitan regions often use the same or similar strategies to become attractive. In many cases, this leads to a missing differentiation resulting from inappropriate identity development, a lack of clear positioning, poor reputation management. The reason for these shortcomings can normally be found in contradictions between a region's (economic) development strategy and its identity/positioning or marketing strategy. In a few words: many metropolitan regions market

something which is different from what they actually *are*.

3. THE LIMITATIONS OF „BRANDING“

Many metropolitan regions (as well as cities or entire countries) are beginning to use branding as a way to raise their profile, create a visible identity and define their „image“. But conventional branding has three disadvantages when it comes to metropolitan regions:

1) metropolitan regions normally consist of one or several core cities and many suburbs, exurbs or sub-centres that are often separate political entities, sometimes even in different provinces, counties, states or cantons. This fragmentation makes a coherent branding strategy difficult since everyone wants to „own“ its own brand.

2) conventional branding is still mostly aimed at creating a visible representation of a region's identity such as logo, defined „brand“ icons, slogans or key words. While this is important it is not enough. A living metropolitan region is not a new chocolate bar in need of a fancy logo.

3) the biggest weakness of conventional branding lies in the fact that it doesn't connect with the region's development strategy. Branding and economic or cultural development are often done separately from each other, by different people with different interests and agendas.

4. „THEME STRATEGY“

„Theme Strategy“ is a possible solution for metropolitan regions to align its economic, cultural or even touristic development with its identity and positioning.

The core of this process consists of carefully defined and developed „themes“ which serve as a kind of content architecture to define a region's identity as well as its competitive advantage, its development characteristics, aspiration and „brand“.

These „themes“ act as

- content for regional development across typical and generic sectors such as economy, culture, science/education or tourism.
- base for mutual understanding in a fragmented

metropolitan region (joint „story“)

- blueprint for the positioning of a metropolitan region in this global competition among regions
- base for internal and external marketing and communication efforts

Together, these themes are forming a kind of narrative about a metropolitan region, about its identity and potential as well as about its success factors. Using the principle of the narrative (story) brings a concept closer to the real world, since, as human beings, we first of all think in stories whenever we remember, assess or describe something.

A „Theme Strategy“ is by definition an integrated process allowing several participants to work on it. This is of particular importance for metropolitan regions with their fragmented structure and their often decentralized power structures ranging from city hall(s) to metro region planning bodies, economic development organizations, tourism bureaux, visitors and convention authorities, chambers of commerce, cultural institutions, associations and many more. All of them claim to work somehow on the advancement of a certain region. All of them are stakeholder in its identity, so let all of them participate – but in a controlled process.

Therefore, the main target groups for a „Theme Strategy“ are all relevant groups which, in one or another way, work on or influence a region's identity. A „Theme Strategy“ is only indirectly visible for the broad public or specific groups such as international investors, talents, local companies and entrepreneurs, local population etc. who normally are the main targets for any metropolitan region's identity or „brand“. A „Theme Strategy“ is not a brand exercise but it can build the foundation for a conventional branding.

5. WHAT IS A THEME?

Here, a „theme“ means a defined description of a pattern which is recognizable and can be filled with all kind of content.

A theme is evolutionary, since its content and meaning can be altered, adjusted, expanded or even trimmed over time reflecting new trends or aspects.

A theme allows co-authorship, since many can work on the same and each contribution ideally makes the theme richer, more perfect and more visible.

A theme follows the idea and principle of self-resemblance, since all its parts are part of something bigger (theme) but at the same time reflect the bigger. This again comes close to the reality of organisms such as cities/metropolitan regions which generally are fractal systems.

6. „THEME STRATEGY“ PROCESS

„Theme Strategies“ are created in several steps involving as many identity and development stakeholders as possible in order to gain wide acceptance by all relevant groups within a metropolitan region. Roughly spoken, these „Theme Strategy“ development steps are:

1. Define core characteristics of a metropolitan region – ranging from accountable items to intangible, soft, descriptive items.
2. Create a set of themes that reflect these characteristics but add aspirative elements as well as aims and goals. Keep in mind that ideally, a theme should not be a typical category or go across it. „culture“ or „education“ itself are not themes in the sense used here.
3. Support these themes with examples, key figures, symbols, or even with historical aspects.
4. Then open these themes for contributions from stakeholders within a region. The theme grows and keeps a balance between strict and fuzzy. This makes it dynamic.
5. Define how each theme trickles down to the usual development and identity elements of a metropolitan region. Normally these are:
 - economic development
 - urban/regional planning
 - tourism/visitor/convention
 - „city marketing“ i.e. to local population
 - direct investment agencies
 - large infrastructure such as airports
 - cultural institutions, important „beacons“
6. Develop an implementation strategy on how to use the „Theme Strategy“ and make it work. This implementation strategy can range from dedicated communication instruments

via key development or focus projects (i.e. creative industries initiative, SME programs, tourism campaigns, etc.) to longterm planning and policy elements.

7. Identify key performance factors and success indicators and ways how to measure them. Keep in mind that not every performance factor is number-based but also descriptive such as media reception or „public“ opinion.
8. Install a steering group that works with these themes and governs the „Theme Strategy“. This steering group ideally consists of the Main actors in metropolitan region development (see above). This steering group must not necessarily have an official political mandate but can work as a functional network. In an interesting side effect, this „Theme Strategy Steering Group“ develops, maintains and manages the „brand“ without being a branding committee.
9. Make sure that some of the main targets for a „Theme Strategy“ are also informal groups and networks, opinion leaders, multipliers, „ambassadors“ and other sometimes not directly visible but nevertheless relevant stakeholders. Metropolitan regions are being developed and communicated by many at the same time.

A „Theme Strategy“ is a longterm undertaking and no quick fix for a communication, „brand“, marketing or urban development problem. It works deliberately across political boundaries, across typical clusters, sectors or categories and therefore come closer to the reality of how human beings perceive a region.

7. CASE STUDY: GREATER ZURICH AREA

In 2002, the Greater Zurich Area (GZA) in Switzerland decided to use a „Theme Strategy“ for positioning itself in a growing competition among world metropolises.

The GZA is the metropolitan region in and around Zurich with approximately 2,5 Mio inhabitants stretching over 7 cantons and it is home to several global players' headquarters and a well-educated and international workforce.

Its main success factors so far are the financial sector, strong SMEs („swiss quality“), a good education system including top-end universities as well as a healthy cultural sector with a quite

large creative industry plus Zurich's reputation as the world's city with the highest quality of life.

Its main weaknesses are its small size compared to other global cities, a relatively high cost base (Zurich is one of the most expensive cities in the world), a sometimes slow and low-growth local service, a light industry sector and a general „image“ as being boring and/or very bourgeois.

The „Zurich Themeworld“ project, as the here presented „Theme Strategy“ approach is officially called, was initiated by the canton of Zurich (Zurich „state“), the City of Zurich, Zurich Tourism and by the GZA Foreign Investment Agency (GZA AG). The main goal were:

- to give the GZA an identity beyond political boundaries and entities
- to raise the profile of Zurich worldwide
- to create key guiding principles for economic development beyond traditional clusters
- to give a basis for a tourism/convention strategy
- to allow the development of a „Zurich“ brand.

The „Zurich Themeworld“ started with the idea that Zurich has the potential to add a major new value-creating element next to its financial sector. This potential was recognized in being continental Europe's most important and visible knowledge hub ranging from its strong education base to its knowledge-driven SMEs, international think tanks, creative/cultural industry as well as its two internationally top-ranked universities.

Therefore four (4) themes were developed and refined in workshops and dedicated conversations:

Machine In The Garden: Combining top performance in whatever field (applied technology, high-end products, precision, etc.) with an archetypical „garden“ of social and natural wonders.

Knowledge Eccentrics: Open for individuals of today's knowledge society as an expression of a long-standing tradition as a „safe haven“ for out-of-the-box thinking (Lenin, Dada, Joyce, Thomas Mann, Mazzini, etc.).

Corporate Utopia: Towards a new interpretation of „corporate world“: less hassle, less lost time,

more personal and civilized. In Zürich you can have some of the world's best jobs while at the same time enjoy a relaxed and organized life.

Cultural Innovation: Rich cultural life and new ideas on all levels due to an unique combination of cultures and people; visible in an everyday culture of style, perfection and design („Swissness“). The creative sector employs almost as many as the financial sector.

(Please note the themes titles which deliberately have a twinkle-in-the-eye to emphasize their internal/working character. They are not a slogan or catch phrase or brand claim.)

These themes were supported by numbers, interesting facts, phenomena, recognized patterns, symbols, examples. Together with an implementation strategy, they were put together in a book called „Zurich Themeworld White Book“.

This book was the ground work for all following identity, positioning, economic development and tourism activities. It is meant to be implemented in the long term. The project is now in its 4th year.

The implementation of „Zurich Themeworld“ consists of three categories:

- a) development projects such as „creative sector initiative“ or „knowledge marketing strategy“
- b) communication and marketing efforts, campaigns and „city marketing“ to local population
- c) symbols, „beacon“ and key image projects which are visible worldwide such as a new „ScienceCity“ or a new convention center etc.

But the most important and the strongest impact was reached in two areas:

- by confronting multipliers and ambassadors such as global players, big consulting firms, important individuals the Zurich strategy was dispersed indirectly, via „guerilla“ tactics.
- by creating an informal „Zurich Themeworld Steering Committee“ a cooperation and collaboration in Zurich's identity and future was orchestrated efficiently and effectively.

This „Zurich Themeworld Steering Committee“ normally meets every 8-10 weeks and it has

several members representing the key stakeholders in Zurich area development:

- City of Zurich
- canton of Zurich
- GZA AG (representing outlying GZA cantons)
- Zurich Tourism
- Zurich Airport
- University of Zurich
- Federal Institute of Technology (ETH)
- Fortune-500-Companies
- SME association

Side effects so far are less promotion material such as brochures, branding collateral; joint budgets for studies or communication activities; a more coherent presentation of Zurich at international fairs and trade shows.

But the biggest gain is a agreed direction in GZA's development which is starting to become visible (keep in mind the longterm aim of this project).

Main control and performance check elements are an internet image monitoring constantly what is written and said about the Zurich metropolitan region, measuring the rise of companies in certain sectors as well as Zurich's ranking in key rankings worldwide.

8. LEARNINGS

The „Theme Strategy“ approach and cases where it was used (i.e Zurich, but also Centrope/Vienna Region and others) show some interesting learnings:

- a) themes are very good baskets to use for an integrated approach in a fragmented region
- b) partnering and co-authorship work very well
- c) „Theme Strategy“ can replace conventional branding and is more realistic as an identity tool for cities, regions or countries.
- d) its long-term aim poses some challenges, since only a few changes are visible after a short-term support, for this approach tends to lower after ca. 1 year before climbing again. There definitely is a danger of stalling
- e) the initial buy-in is not done by all involved parties at the same time or with the same pace. The Zurich case showed that often smaller partners within an metropolitan area

(such as smaller suburban cities or smaller cantons) have more reservations about this approach than larger entities (such as core cities, large economic development agencies).

9. CONCLUSION

„Theme Strategy“ is a new way to combine economic development and identity/positioning of a fragmented metropolitan region. It works best for metropolitan regions who have identity challenges or need/want an image change while understanding that conventional branding won't do the job. The core of this approach are „themes“ as a narrative, descriptive assessment of a region's characteristics as well as its strategic goals. Themes go across typical sectors, clusters or categories and are evolutionary and open for co-authorship. They support an integrated project architecture involving all relevant stakeholders.

Case studies show how formally disconnected or fragmented organizations can work together and create formal and informal networks of cooperation based on common themes. The implementation is generally done via a set of projects and sub-processes.

„Theme Strategy“ has therefore the potential not only to replace conventional branding as the main approach for a region's identity development but also to finally link two areas which often are working separated from each other: developing a region and positioning a region. It seems that „Theme Strategy“ is an interesting approach for old-world metropolitan regions in today's global competition as well as emerging countries' metropolitan regions in need of a clear identity and positioning combined with economic development

FURTHER READING

Richard Florida, „The Rise of the Creative Class“, New York, 2002

Bonita M. Kolb, „Tourism Marketing for Cities and Towns“, Oxford, 2006

Nigel Morgan et al. „Destination Branding“, Oxford, 2002

Annette Schoemmel, „Centrope Theme Strategy“, Zurich, 2006

Thomas Sevcik, „Zurich Themeworld White Book“, Zurich, 2003