

12. Open sourcing the city brand

Martin Kornberger

INTRODUCTION

This chapter tells the story of why and how the city branding process of an Austrian city, Graz, was open sourced. Open sourcing was used as a novel way to coordinate collective action. Rather than relying on the brand manager and external agencies to create and control the city brand, it was conceptualised as the sum total of the stories told by consumers (including citizens, tourists, businesses etc.). In contrast to branding practices that define a unique proposition vis-a-vis rival cities in an imaginary competitive landscape, open sourcing the brand created consistency through a shared storytelling style. Metaphorically speaking, artists may change their subjects, but how they paint shines through in their different works, similar to a family resemblance. Hence, style allows for plurality and consistency at the same time. Open sourcing the brand also changed the task of the brand manager, turning it into a second order form of governance focused on platform and interaction design as well as the growth of networks around the open source brand.

This chapter makes a twofold contribution. First, it seeks to enrich the theoretical reflections on (city) branding and brand management by introducing the concept of open sourcing the brand. While a plethora of marketing and branding studies have focused on the productive capacity of consumers, only a few researchers have systematically explored the consequences of co-creation for brand management (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Iglesias and Bonet, 2012; Ind et al., 2013). In the innovation literature, scholars have approached the phenomenon by researching the role and function of brands and brand communities in user-driven innovation processes (Fueller and Hippel, 2008). This chapter offers a conceptual and, to date, missing link between these two strands of research. Second, this chapter highlights some practical implications and consequences of open sourcing the brand. Although Graz is a relatively small city, the problems that arose when open sourcing the brand might also be at play in larger (mega-) cities as well. Moreover since city branding is blessed by a

particularly troubling amount of subtleties and complexities, the chapter serves as a magnifying glass for issues that may also concern product and corporate brands.

Divided into four parts, this chapter begins by exploring the somehow subversive logic of branding, showing why traditional management thinking cannot address, let alone solve, the challenges of city branding. Second, ideas from the open source literature are introduced, helping to frame the concept of open sourcing the brand. Third, an empirical vignette of a city branding project conducted by the author with the city of Graz from late 2011 to 2012 illustrates the process of open sourcing of the brand in practice. Finally, some concluding reflections are offered.

THE CHALLENGE: THE SPIRIT OF THE BRAND AND THE VISIBLE HAND OF THE MANAGER

Brands represent a puzzle to the producer-centric logic of management thinking; supposedly, value creation takes place inside the firm, guided by the coordinating and controlling visible hand of the manager. Consumption is what happens outside the factory gates and is regarded as a process of using up, wasting away, or more precisely, in its original etymological meaning, destroying.

Brands, which come into existence through consumers' interpretations and shared meaning-making activities, question this division of labour between producers and consumers. In other words, brands are user-generated values whose production is neither coordinated nor controlled by the manager. Take the example of the legendary 1984 ad that launched the Apple Macintosh computer, which features a woman wearing red shorts and a white tank top in a Blade Runner environment escaping from what looks like police in riot gear. Gripping a sledgehammer, she storms towards a massive screen from which an over-sized face mumbles monosyllabically to a stone-faced grey mass of people. Just before the troops can catch the woman, she hurls her hammer into the screen, smashing the face, causing a massive blast. The following text rolls over the screen and is read simultaneously by an epic voice, 'On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like "1984"'.

Clearly, this ad contributed to establishing Apple as a creative, anti-mainstream, high-tech and high-touch brand, merging technology with the humanities and art. Interestingly, the ad does not mention any of the product's technical features. How does the information on the screen turn into a story that gives meaning to bits and bytes, computers and cables? How does the ad appeal to our *id*? Most obviously, Apple uses Orwell's *1984*

dystopia to portray its main competitor, IBM, as the technology of choice of the omnipresent grey 'organisation men' (Whyte, 1957) who stand for an inert, slow, bureaucratic, unimaginative, anonymous, male-dominated organisation society. The hammer – a symbol of patriarchal society – is in the hands of a woman who uses it to destroy established structures. Her colourful appearance marks the coming of a new, creative and feminine age.

A further semiotic analysis (Danesi, 2006) would show more fully what the short interpretation offered here can only suggest: that the Apple brand feeds on meaning structures and values that, for want of a better term, are part of our shared cultural repertoire. People unfamiliar with Orwell's novel will miss the reference and presumably the point of the ad. The corollary of this insight is that the consumers and their cultural repertoire are constitutive of a brand's value and meaning. A brand is nothing but what people make of it in the context of their everyday practices and the meaning structures available to them. Consequently, brands take on diverse, even conflicting meanings. To give just one example: Timberland is an outdoor boot brand that enjoys (by its management unwanted) popularity in the urban jungle of youth culture. (See the *Financial Times* online story entitled 'Hip hop adoption leaves cloud over Timberland'.)

Consumer activities reach from adding a symbolic surplus to the brand to co-creative efforts and outright brand hijacks, where the brand meaning is challenged and changed altogether (Wipperfürth, 2005). While the boundaries between wanted contribution and unwanted hijacking are fluid, the fundamental question is: if brands emerge through multiple and dispersed authorship, how can management assert authority over its development? Again applied to the Apple example, the ad did not merely echo the Zeitgeist, but actively used it to construct a meaningful brand narrative. The brand feeds on the spirit of the time, and integrates it into the capitalist production process. But once inside, the Zeitgeist may turn into ghosts and spectres that evade the manager's visible hand. Consequently brand management inevitably represents a form of organised heresy; that which makes it valuable is subversive and defies management control (Kornberger, 2010).

THE CONCEPTUAL INSPIRATION: MOBILISING OPEN SOURCE LITERATURE

Hence, the challenge of brand management is how the spirit of the age that gives meaning to the brand in the first place can be organised, or perhaps at least temporarily managed. In the innovation literature, scholars have

attended to a structurally similar problem. Von Hippel and other open source researchers study how innovations do not emerge solely within firms but result from distributed innovation systems (von Hippel, 1988, 2005). Von Hippel (1988) describes distributed innovation systems as systems in which new ideas for products and services evolve from agents operating outside firm boundaries, including suppliers, competitors and users.

The arguments for open source as an innovative coordination mechanism for economic production might apply to brands as well. A brand is a cultural good and new brand meanings, stories and applications are more likely to occur outside firm boundaries through intrinsically motivated people who combine new tacit forms of knowledge and contextual cultural codes in novel ways. The technology-driven decentralisation of the means of production via ubiquitous information processing devices facilitates the identification of like-minded users and resources, easing the exchange and dissemination of stories. Hence even loosely structured and temporary networks can coordinate brand production processes efficiently. As a result, the creation of brand expressions and the 'thickening' of brand meanings – in short, the brand value creation – takes place on external, frequently digitally enhanced user platforms.

With many features that resemble processes described in the open source literature, brand creation can be described as an open source phenomenon. In this sense, the brand can be understood as the outcome of a distributed innovation system. This poses a new set of challenges. First, how can the brand be open sourced? Second, how can the open sourced brand be governed? The following empirical vignette illustrates how these questions were tackled in the branding of the city of Graz.

THE STORY: HOW THE CITY OF GRAZ OPEN SOURCED ITS BRAND

Introducing Graz

Located in the south-east of Austria, Graz is the country's second largest city, with approximately 300,000 inhabitants. A protected UNESCO World Heritage Site, it features a beautiful old town sprinkled with modern buildings that cater to the contemporary art and design scene, partly as a result of Graz being the sole 2003 European Cultural Capital. Strolling through the city centre one could be forgiven for thinking one was in either a small city or a big village. The city is surrounded by scenic countryside and vineyards that often draw comparisons with Tuscany. The regional cuisine

offers a surprising blend of robust Alpine flavours and Mediterranean elegance. The regional economy is doing well, and according to surveys the people living in Graz seem generally happy.

But not all of them. In the 2000s, some in the city administration and the local business community felt the city suffered from a rather serious problem: outside Graz, many people are unaware that the city exists and those who do know of it lack a good reason to visit, invest or relocate here. The story told in the corridors of the town hall and at meetings about the future of the city revolved around the idea that in times of increasing competition between cities for trade, tourism and talent a strong city brand is pivotal. While some studies have been critical towards notions of city competition (Kornberger and Carter, 2010), for those concerned with the development of Graz, it was a fact that had to be dealt with. The notion of the city brand provided a ready-made narrative to make sense of the challenges Graz faced. A strong city brand, the hopeful argued, would attract more tourists, inward investment and residents, leading in turn to economic prosperity that would attract even more people, investment and tourists. The brand was supposed to function as the initial impetus to make that virtuous cycle turn.

Unfortunately, the results of city branding activities undertaken by the city were sobering, manifesting themselves in a series of swiftly changing and wildly fluctuating city descriptors ranging from 'City of Design', 'City of Fair Trade' and 'City of Human Rights' to 'City of Enjoyment' and many other noble aspirations.

In late 2011, the city elders decided to embark on yet another brand-searching mission and the author of this chapter was fortunate enough to be invited to join the conversation. Backed by the senior executives of the city and their political masters, a city brand working group was established that consisted of about ten city managers from different parts of the administration, including tourism, inward investment, the conference and exhibition centre and others. Facilitated by the author, the working group developed a concept for open sourcing the Graz brand. The story below summarises the conceptual framework the group devised. Of course, because the story is about a city brand, there are some twists and turns, and the final chapter has not yet been written. In fact, just after the working group concluded its mission and presented its idea of open sourcing the brand to the political leaders of Graz, the ruling coalition had a falling out and elections were called. Hence the narrative presented below resembles more of a short story that ends just where the idea of open sourcing the brand enters the prosaic sphere of implementation. Consequently, what is told is the story of the evolution of an idea, not the evaluation of its (intended and unintended) consequences.

The Diagnosis: Paradoxes of City Branding

In a preliminary meeting with senior city executives, the reasons for the failure of past efforts to develop a city brand were discussed. One interpretation of the problem was that the two so easily and frequently put together words, 'city' and 'brand', harbour in reality an inherent contradiction that sabotaged, from the inside, Graz's branding attempts.

First, like every city, Graz was a complex entity in which various agents struggle over how and what should be done for whom in the name of what. In other words, the city was a political arena characterised by conflicting voices and competing views. In the context of Graz, the past branding efforts could be analysed as political struggles over who was entitled to legitimately author the official story of the city's identity. City of Enjoyment made sense for tourism and restaurant owners, but the local university might feel excluded; City of Design was perceived as a rather ambitious label and was criticised because the historic city centre symbolised tradition rather than innovation; and so on. Every branding attempt was, quite literally, an attempt to put a stamp on the city and legitimise a certain claim: if naming is taming, as Nietzsche suggested, then branding is claiming. But because many different people put forward various competing claims, the branding process turned into a political arena for struggles over identity. Consequently, any definition claiming to represent a unitary city brand was contested as quickly as it was delineated and ultimately lacked legitimacy.

The identity paradox described the second inherent contradiction in Graz's branding efforts (Kornberger, 2010). The harder the city tried to distil its essence, the more abstract its representations became, which consequently made the city resemble those cities it was trying to differentiate itself from in the first place. In order to capture its fundamental nature, the quest for the 'spirit of Graz' led to ever-loftier heights such as 'creativity' or 'design' or 'enjoyment'. Ironically, at the end of this soul-searching mission, Graz was reduced to some platitudes and slogans that were unoriginal and failed to be a claim that would distinguish Graz from other cities. It seemed that perhaps, with the exception of very few global cities such as Paris, London and Tokyo, no city could claim to be *the* design capital or *the* city of creativity. In the case of Graz, the quest for uniqueness led, paradoxically, to its opposite; the harder Graz tried to define its spirit, the more it started to resemble every other city that had embarked on the same journey.

The city's leadership agreed that investing further in a business-as-usual city branding process (defining a unique selling proposition that would be contested and unoriginal) would not make sense. Consequently, it

delegated the task of exploring alternative paths to city branding to the above-mentioned working group.

Open Sourcing the Brand

The first step forward was a step back. The group reflected on the notion of the brand.

Brainstorming about what the ubiquitous golden arches gracing every outlet of that global fast food chain symbolise, it became obvious that the brand meaning was a result of the group's imagination. Interpretations of the simple letter 'M' ranged from globalisation and capitalism, to fun and play for kids and to what sociologist George Ritzer coined as the McDonaldisation of society. In other words, what the golden arches brand represents lies in the eye of the beholder. If this is the case for a corporation with an enormous advertising budget, a limited product portfolio and hierarchical management, what would that mean for the doubtless much more complex brand Graz?

In fact, the meanings of Graz could not be captured in a slogan: small streets, friendly people, the warm light on a summer's evening, the traditional cuisine, the smallness and the bigness of the city, and a myriad of other qualities were mobilised to describe the place. The question discussed was whether the plurality and the resulting complexity were part of the problem – or whether they could be seen as part of the solution. Did not most brands try to inject values into products and organisations? And had Graz not attempted to achieve the opposite in its past branding experiments – by stripping existing values out of its fabric? The suspicion grew that complexity should perhaps not be fought against – but rather used intelligently. In short, the many meanings of Graz were not the problem, but the very resource to work with.

There was also a political reason to follow this line of thinking as Graz (like any other city) is home to many people with differing views, values and traditions. Residents, tourists, businesses, immigrants, rich and poor, young and old – all groups have what the urbanist and philosopher Henri Lefèbvre (1970) called 'the right to the city'. The city is an inherently political entity in which different voices author their versions of the city's past, future and present. A city brand, the working group concluded, had to address its inherently political character. Of course, there was also an air of optimism (naiveté?) in these conversations, a sense of hope that the city brand could contribute to a more democratic and inclusive city.

The key challenge was how these two ideas – the plurality of values as a resource and dispersed, multiple authorship of the city brand – could be put into practice.

The reassuring analogy to the open source movement inspired further discussions. Open source was framed as a novel organising process that meaningfully made sense and use of plurality, complexity and dispersed authorship. If powerful software such as Linux emerged out of systems of distributed innovation, and comprehensive tasks such as Wikipedia as well, couldn't the brand as evolving narrative be written by multiple authors? If yes, what steps would have to be taken to avoid a Babylonian cacophony in which the city brand would disappear into multiple fragmented stories with little cohesion?

From Differentiation to Consistency in Plurality

Most of the working group's time was spent breaking down this problem. While a unitary brand would have rendered the city somehow one-dimensional, the open source approach was constantly threatening to burden the administration and its various audiences with too much complexity. How could dispersed authorship be organised to allow its many voices to express some kind of consistency without losing plurality?

Two metaphors – one from the art world, one from linguistics – evolved in the working group's discussions. With them, the problem of sameness and difference took on a different form, which offered a new vantage point for organising the city brand.

First, art. The working group reflected at length on what created identity in art movements. Van Gogh was used as an example. He painted flowers, people, rooms, fields etc. – yet despite this variety of subject matter, his work is of a strong, coherent nature. What gives van Gogh's body of work its distinctive identity is the style with which he portrayed the different subject matters. It is not *what* he painted, but *how* he painted it that became his signature. Put simply, his unique style ensured, despite his promiscuity in relation to subject matter, consistency.

Translated into the context of Graz, the city brand could not consist of an essence, but of a style in which a potentially unlimited amount of subject matters and concerns could be expressed. Stated plainly, Graz could be about creativity, enjoyment, human rights – you name it – as long as it approached these concerns in a certain style. Style enables plurality and consistency because it is somehow structured by a strange inner logic, as Simmel argued (1905/2000; 1908/2000). Take, for instance, fashion styles, which, on the one hand, are objectively defined through conventions, but permit, on the other, individuals to satisfy their need for distinction and difference. Style allows an individual to identify with a certain group and be part of an objectified culture. While it connects with others, style simultaneously allows one to differentiate oneself

from others. Style elevates *and* equalises; it creates envy *and* approval (Kornberger, 2010).

The second inspiration came from linguistics, or more precisely, Wittgenstein, who argued that language should be understood as life-style (*Lebensform*), as something that becomes meaningful in and through use. Translated into the context of Graz, the city brand was conceptualised as the shared language people use as opposed to a particular message or utterance expressed in that language. The style (consistency) of the city brand was to be found in grammar and vocabulary, i.e. in the language of Graz – not in its diverse manifestations. The Graz brand morphed into a kind of second-order brand that offered a generative grammar for a priori unlimited expressions and articulations. Just like with language, grammar limited *and* enabled creative expressiveness.

During working group discussions, one member pulled out his iPhone and argued that the city brand should function like the philosophy behind the Apple App Store: anyone can create an app as long as it adheres to the style and programming language put forward by Apple. Variety and plurality are not opposed to coherence but, through a common language, its very foundation. To the concern of the author, the iPhone metaphor resonated much more than Simmel and Wittgenstein, and stuck. As a result, the open sourced Graz brand was defined by a style, not content; and it provided the platform (canvas) for people to articulate their stories. The plurality of the stories would be held together by a common story-telling style.

In practice, the brand was conceptualised as a platform upon which external storytellers were invited to narrate their versions of and visions for Graz. The stories could vary from culinary to commercial and cultural; they could zoom in on a dessert plate to tell the story of a delicious local cake or zoom out to describe Graz's (almost) Mediterranean climate and the surrounding rolling hills dotted with age-old vineyards. The stories could be told in lengthy texts or short snippets, in photos or drawings etc. Technically, the open brand platform would come alive as a digital database onto which brand stories could be up- and downloaded. For instance, if the university recruitment team wanted to communicate the pleasures of studying in Graz, it could draw on narratives describing the virtues of student life in Graz. If the local automotive cluster advertised Graz as an attractive industry location, it could download stories that conveyed their message convincingly. While both stories had different authors and differed in content, they would adhere to the common style that created a family resemblance between them. The circle seemed to have been squared, the working group thought: plurality and consistency seemed to imply each other.

Governing the Brand

Of course, little was done by squaring the circle. The problem did not disappear but was only displaced. The onus of ensuring consistency was now put on the branding process and those managing it. Hence, the working group spent considerable time discussing how the role of the brand manager was to change.

The traditional brand manager's task was to define content and safeguard (police) it against too creative (ab)use. In contrast, the open sourced brand left the content generation to the consumers. The brand manager's job would be to maintain the brand platform and design interaction channels to ensure that the stories by eager consumer-narrators would nest on the platform, be shared and used by others and above all adhere to the defined style.

The metaphor used to describe the task of the brand manager was that of a gallery curator. A curator makes editorial decisions about inclusion and exclusion, sets themes as boundaries and inspiration, and ensures quality, amongst many other things. What the curator does not do is produce content. Similarly, the brand manager's role would not be to produce content but to put the means to tell their own stories in the hands of the consumers. This included helping them to comply with quality criteria and the defined style.

In this sense, the brand manager was what the French language describes as a *réalisateur*, a term that refers to a director for film, TV or other audio-visual content who is concerned with the production (realisation) of ideas. The brand manager would act as a *réalisateur* for other people's ideas, providing support and in certain cases expertise from a creative writer or designer to ensure the story was communicated using what had been defined as Graz's style.

Moreover, the brand manager's role would include nurturing and expanding the network of willing and able contributors and users of the brand. The manager would constantly have to balance the supply of appropriate stories on the one hand, and the demand for them on the other hand. The social logic that underpins peer production (Benkler, 2002) would pattern the brand manager's everyday work practice as much as commercial, technical and organisational tasks.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

This short chapter on open sourcing the city brand unfortunately has many shortcomings, the most unforgiveable one perhaps being that the

empirical story cannot provide more than anecdotal evidence. A thorough investigation into open sourcing the city brand would have to adhere to stricter methodological discipline. Nonetheless, the author hopes that there is a moral to his story, which is to raise new questions rather than answering existing ones. By way of conclusion, three new issues are worth highlighting.

First, the very subject of city branding deserves more interest and attention from marketers, geographers, urban designers and other social scientists interested in urban affairs. City branding highlights issues that other, less complex product or corporate brands only contain in small, seemingly negligible traces. A city brand does not stand still, but evolves through the plurality of meaning-making activities of a multitude of people. It can only be controlled by the price of its de-valuation, and it is inherently political. The value of studying city branding is how it can function as a magnifying glass and how the insights garnered may apply to other forms of branding as well.

Second, based on the presented study one could suspect that, in reality, every brand has always been produced in a distributed fashion. No brand can develop value outside the socio-cultural context from which it derives its meaning. By implication, the brand does not create value, but parasitically introduces socio-cultural values into the economic exchange. The brand is the Trojan horse through which society creeps into economic calculation; but it is also the agent through which the economisation of socio-cultural spheres, including cities, progresses. This two-way process – the economisation of culture and the culturalisation of the economy – would lend itself well to being studied through the lens of city branding.

Third, and in continuation of the previous two points, brand management seems to be an oxymoron. Brand governance, on the other hand, can be thought of as a soft form of influencing and shaping city branding. Values have to be attached to objects, stories have to be told, images have to circulate – all of which are activities that can be noticeably influenced by diplomatic ‘soft power’ rather than controlled by the visible hand of the manager. The design of platforms, the development of infrastructures for storytellers and storytakers and the definition of a brand style are but some examples of how governance mechanisms shape city branding without pre-empting its economic and *simultaneously* subversive potential.

Especially in the context of branding Chinese cities (see Chapter 8 by Fan) the government-issued Five-Year Plans might collide with the emerging, shifting and multiple meanings that city brands embody. Perhaps one could even speculate that Chinese cities will experience the dilemma between exercising central authority over the brand and the dispersed

authorship of the brand particularly starkly, for what makes brands valuable in the first place is subversive and defies control.

REFERENCES

- Benkler, Y., 2002, 'Coase's Penguin, or, Linux and the nature of the firm', *The Yale Law Journal* **112**(3), 369–446.
- Danesi, M., 2006, *Brands*, New York and London: Routledge.
- Fueller, J. and Hippel, E. von, 2008, 'Costless creation of strong brands by user communities: implications for producer-owned brands', *MIT Sloan School of Management Working Paper* 4718-08.
- Hatch, M.J. and Schultz, M., 2010, 'Toward a theory of brand co-creation with implications for brand governance', *Journal of Brand Management* **17**, 590–604.
- Hippel, E. von, 1988, *The Sources of Innovation*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hippel, E. von, 2005, *Democratizing Innovation*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Iglesias, O. and Bonet, E., 2012, 'Persuasive brand management: how managers can influence brand meaning when they are losing control over it', *Journal of Organizational Change Management* **25**(2), 251–264.
- Ind, N., Iglesias, O. and Schultz, M., 2013, 'Building brands together: emergence and outcome of co-creation', *California Management Review* **55**(3), 59–80.
- Kornberger, M., 2010, *Brand Society: How Brands Transform Management and Lifestyle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kornberger, M. and Carter, C., 2010, 'Manufacturing competition: how accounting practices shape strategy making in cities', *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* **23**(3), 325–349.
- Lefèbvre, H., 1970, *The Urban Revolution*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Simmel, G., 1905/2000, 'The philosophy of fashion', in Frisby, D. and Featherstone, M. (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE, pp. 187–205.
- Simmel, G., 1908/2000, 'The problem of style', in Frisby, D. and Featherstone, M. (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE, pp. 211–217.
- Whyte, W.H., 1957, *The Organization Man*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Wipperfurth, A., 2005, *Brand Hijack: Marketing without Marketing*, New York: Portfolio.

