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The secret recipe for an inclusive place brand strategy

Place branding has to benefit your community – and it has to benefit *all* of your communities. We reached out to our Expert partners to discover what they consider the key area you should be focusing on in order to deliver an inclusive place brand strategy and how you can ensure that you’re engaging with your underrepresented communities. Here are eight top tips to help you on your road to a more equitable and authentic vision for your place.

You need a two-pronged strategy.

Employ a two-step approach: Engage and inform.

Engage the communities on a macro and micro level. What are their histories in your place? What impact have they made? Do they define a particular neighbourhood? What are their cultural contributions? Talk to individuals—elders, youth, and in-betweens.

Inform your strategy with the data you develop from the engagement. Create personas around drivers, needs, and considerations. Then, evaluate your strategies and marketing against those personas. Do they align with each community? If not, adapt and reassess.

Jessica McCarthy, President & Co-Founder, Joy Riot

Collaborate with community-based organisations – but watch out for gatekeepers.

Underrepresented communities, by their very nature, will often be harder to reach and so collaboration with established and trusted community-based organisations is essential. However, it is also important to be vigilant of community gatekeepers who may traditionally speak on behalf of the community. These representatives are almost always well-intentioned and of course, building strong relationships with grassroots organisations is vital, not least for their ambassadorial role in the implementation of place strategies. However, it is also important to recognise the diversity of modern communities and to adjust our own lens (often multiple times) to see the whole picture of the place and ensure we hear and listen to all voices in society.

Chris Armstrong, Senior Project Specialist | Placemaking, TOPOSOPHY

Establish a diverse and inclusive steering group.

The secret to developing a strategy that ensures underrepresented communities benefit from a place lies in the establishment of a diverse and inclusive local steering group at the onset of any project. We recognise the importance of involving various stakeholders in tourism branding and marketing projects. The steering group consists of equal numbers of representatives from five categories: residents, local tourism or travel businesses, investors, government, and visitors. This composition ensures that multiple perspectives and interests are considered.

To further promote inclusivity, we actively seek out community-based organisations and strive to include a significant percentage of small disadvantaged, women-owned, and minority-owned businesses within the group. By involving these underrepresented voices, the steering group gains a deeper understanding of the community's needs, aspirations, and potential. This inclusive approach sets the foundation for successful tourism branding and marketing strategies, extending its effectiveness from our case studies in Cambodia to the UAE and beyond.

Danny Cohanpour, CEO & Founder, Trove Tourism Development Advisors

Place branding has to be for the many – not the few.

There is no secret. Instead, common sense suggests that a place brand strategy has to benefit all of people who live in and use the place and not just a few – those who invest in it or govern it. Why? Because if the under-represented do not experience the place positively and gain benefit from being there then a place strategy is unlikely to command

widespread support. To gain the support of under-represented groups, brand strategists need to identify them, understand them, engage with them and involve them in a meaningful way in the strategy and its delivery.

Malcolm Allan, President, Bloom Consulting

Prioritize quick wins to foster trust.

Merely going through the motions of talking to underrepresented communities and getting them to take your survey is not enough. The key lies in genuinely understanding their challenges, opportunities, and aspirations and then identifying specific ways in which the place brand can support their needs and address their concerns. By prioritizing quick wins and immediate low-hanging fruit, rather than subjecting them to lengthy planning processes, you can demonstrate tangible impact and foster trust. These communities require, and often need, visible results promptly, and by implementing their ideas swiftly, you not only make an immediate difference but also avoid the pitfalls of tokenism and superficial engagement.

Ryan Short, CEO & Co-founder, CivicBrand

Ensure authenticity for your destination through collaboration and accessibility.

Diversity and inclusion go well beyond marketing; it's a way of life and a belief system that requires destination marketers to think about the messaging they're putting out and what kind of destination they want to be. You must become advocates for both your destination and the travellers you want to attract, and advocacy isn't just about race or gender. It also includes abilities, such as making places wheelchair accessible or safe for those with autism and meeting the diverse needs of all travellers. Above all, it's important to be authentic. This level of grit, sweat, and passion goes way beyond a hollow tagline. Travellers will see through any attempts to woo them without substance.

One of the best ways to be authentic is to have open-minded conversations and learn from travellers who are looking for inclusive destinations. Rather than making assumptions or boxing in travellers, speak directly to Black, Latino, Asian and LGBTQ+ travellers to find out what they really want and [embrace who they are](#). Travellers everywhere want the same thing—to feel included, safe, and able to explore without prejudice.

Richard Black, VP, Destinations, Sojern

Provide opportunities for feedback to unearth local hidden gems.

When considering the market for any district or development, it's important to engage with all demographics in the vicinity to understand what will drive visitation, spending, and investment. Providing opportunity for feedback is a critical step in order to explore what folks would look for in an authentic, inclusive environment. Authenticity and uniqueness are often right under our noses. Expanding outreach to all cultures and neighbourhoods will reveal the businesses, entrepreneurial ideas, and perspectives that can make a development truly "of" a place. Cookie cutter developments with national concepts are a dime a dozen. Engaging with an area's diverse residents and business owners will reveal local hidden gems that strengthen a localized economic and authentic fabric in a district or development.

Rob Hunden, President & CEO, Hunden Partners

Empower community leaders and collaborate with local influencers.

The secret to developing a strategy that ensures underrepresented communities benefit from a place lies in prioritising inclusivity and equity. This involves active engagement and collaboration with community members to understand their unique needs and aspirations. Strategies should focus on providing accessible resources, opportunities, and services, while promoting diversity in decision-making processes. Investments in education, job creation, affordable housing, healthcare, and cultural preservation can foster equitable development. Empowering community leaders, fostering partnerships, and continuously evaluating and adjusting strategies based on feedback and outcomes are essential to creating a truly inclusive environment that uplifts underrepresented communities.

To stretch their marketing budget and deliver a bigger impact with fewer resources, places can focus on targeted and cost-effective strategies. This includes utilising digital marketing channels such as social media, content marketing, and email campaigns to reach a wider audience at a lower cost. Collaborating with local influencers, leveraging user-generated content, and implementing referral programs can also amplify marketing efforts. Investing in search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) can improve online visibility and attract organic traffic. Additionally, optimising marketing campaigns through data analysis and tracking ROI helps identify successful tactics and allocate resources more efficiently.

Richard Cutting-Miller, VP - Tourism Strategy, CSL, and ChatGPT