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Expert Advice Place Branding

On the Branding and Reputation of Islands

📅 27 September 2016 👤 The Editorial Team ➡ brand, reputation

*Guest author **Godfrey Baldacchino** offers an appeal to consider adding **islands** to a privileged focus of place branding. After all, cities, regions, destinations and nations are constructed by people; islands are made by God or Nature (or both).*

The Island: A powerful draw

The word ‘island’ is one of the most heavily romanced words — certainly in the English language. Along with the forest, the

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no wonder that TV series like *Lost*, which push all these buttons, have become a runaway success.

The association with mystery, fantasy, redemption, utopia and refuge is a long-lasting one that continues to be exploited by global media (consider *Fantasy Island*, *Blue Lagoon*, *The Beach*...) literature (*The Odyssey*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *The Mysterious Island*, *Lord of the Flies* ...), and the global tourism industry, replete with competing 'island paradise' destinations. Of course there are exceptions – Malta, Manhattan, Singapore – but most islands suggest themselves as (ideally) empty spaces, waiting and wanting to be possessed and tinkered with.

Islands enjoy a lingering charm, allure and fascination: qualities that are well-suited to tempt and taunt visitors who are eager for salvation, reinvigoration or escape. **'The Island' is so thoroughly seeped in emotional geography that it is perhaps impossible to determine where island dreams stop and island realities start; awkward to disentangle geographical materiality from metaphorical allusion.**

Islands as prototype brand exercises

Indeed, islands have been the stuff of branding long before the concept found its way into management schools and contemporary marketing discourse. Already in the 10th century AD, Eric the Red, an early settler on a large and remote island, is reported in old Icelandic sagas to have named that new territory *Greenland* in order to attract other settlers there. Five hundred years ago, it was claimed that one could harvest cod from the rich waters off the island of Newfoundland simply by lowering a basket into the sea.

Perhaps we should consider islands as prototypes, targets for ~~some of the earliest systematic attempts at branding: advancing~~

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and romancing, a meaningful and desirable difference in a world crowded by competitive categories.

Five reasons why islands are powerful brands

There are at least five reasons as outlined below why islands are powerful brands unto themselves.

1. There is an enduring Western tradition which has held **islands in high regard, assigning them a key role in the economic, political, religious and social life** of the Mediterranean and then Atlantic worlds, given the way that myth, icon and narratives of/from islands have functioned for mainland cultures.
2. Starting at around the European age of discovery, is the construction of **islands as outposts of aberrant exoticism, peopled by innocent and exuberant natives**, captured so tantalizingly in the paintings of Frenchman Paul Gauguin.
3. The island as **background for the enactment of a (usually) male and heroic tribute to colonialism** and settler endurance: the subject of Robinson Crusoe-style stories that extend up to the present in the likes of Tom Hanks' movie [Castaway](#).
4. The development of the notion of going on vacation as a regular activity by the world's burgeoning middle classes: whether for relaxation, adventure or self-discovery, **islands project themselves as ideal destinations**.
5. The realization by many developing **island states and territories that they can 'sell' their sea, sun and sand** (and perhaps sex, but more hopefully their salt) to such visitors, by appealing to their constructed modern need for travel, and thus carve out for themselves an easy route to development. Note that one fifth of the world's sovereign states are islands or archipelagos, and all except one (Iceland) are in tropical or temperate regions. Other attractive, physical and psychological characteristics can be added to the mix: a self-

an understanding of the totality of the locale as trophy (Baum, 1997).

The sum total of these forces at work is that islands are now, often unwittingly, the objects of what may be the most lavish, global and consistent branding exercise in human history. They find themselves presented as locales of desire, as platforms of paradise, as habitual sites of fascination, emotional offloading or religious pilgrimage. The metaphoric deployment of (the tropical) island, with the associated attributes of small physical size and warm water, is a central and gripping metaphor within Western discourse.

Challenges

With these advantages, however, come a series of challenges. The most salient include: (1) invisibility; (2) the inability to do much to an island's reputational construct; (3) the absence of congruence between 'the island' as a brand unto itself and island brands.

Being noticed

First is the challenge of being noticed. There are hundreds of thousands of islands, and many offer what appear to be similar experiences or products. The destiny of an island that is 'off the radar' is to remain undiscovered. Others find themselves permanently eclipsed by more visible, often larger competitors. For example, one is more likely to know of the **Dominican Republic** than **Dominica**; and of **Bermuda** than **Barbuda**.

In some cases, smaller islands suffer from double insularity and get side-lined by the marketing drive of a larger neighboring island. When thinking **Mauritius**, how many would think of **Rodrigues**?

Being a jurisdiction in your own right is a net advantage — this creates a dedicated administrative machinery (with, say, an island-specific tourism or investment promotion agency) that has an interest in promoting the island as a destination for tourism, investment, adventure, immigration, or retirement. Otherwise, one may try and make a virtue out of being ‘out of sight, out of mind’ by focusing on a narrow, niche concept of supply. Here, exclusivity becomes the draw and knowledge of the privilege of place is disseminated mainly by word of mouth. A prime example of such exclusivity is 5-star **St. Barthélemy** in the French Caribbean.

Forms of representation

Second is the ability to tweak one’s reputation as an island. The smaller, poorer or less populated the island gets, and the more bereft of the resourcefulness of jurisdiction (see above), then the more likely is it that its web, textual and literary content, its very (re)presentation, is dictated, penned or determined by outsiders.

All too often, the subject matter – the island as much as the islanders – becomes object matter: a ‘looked at’ reference group.

Thus, the island becomes a platform for the enactment of processes dictated by interested outsiders. These would have been mainly explorers, missionaries and traders in the past; nowadays, these are more likely to be airline companies, hotel chains, media firms and corporate interests. Feed any (small) island name to a search engine and see what textual and visual material comes up: over how much of that data does the island, and its islanders, have control?

Island brands, and ‘the Island’ as a brand

Third, any populated island finds itself riding inadvertently on parallel reputational messages: those pertaining to the island and

help to send out congruent and mutually reinforcing signals — spicy pepper sauce may be a good fit with the vibrant party culture of **Bahamas** and the pirate history of rum resonates nicely with fun in **Jamaica**. But motives can clash and jar. **Prince Edward Island**, Canada’s smallest province, calls itself ‘the gentle island,’ but this message does not exactly equate with a place that is nurturing cutting-edge aerospace and video game industries.

About Godfrey Baldacchino

Godfrey Baldacchino

(PhD Warwick) is Pro-Rector (International Development) at the University of Malta, Malta; UNESCO Co-Chair (Island Studies & Sustainability) at the




University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, and President of the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA).

He guest edited a [special issue](#) of the International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2010, dedicated to island brands and island branding.

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