A case study of rebranding

Rebranding involves both the re-imaging and the regeneration of cities. It represents an interesting new perspective on urban geography. In this article a case study of Liverpool is explored.

A brand is a name, image or symbol given to a product in order to promote and sell it, and branding is the process by which this takes place. A brand is more than just a logo. It includes the value we associate with particular names. What comes to mind when you think of Marks & Spencer, Virgin or Google? Changing the brand (or image) of a product is known as rebranding. Companies often alter or update their corporate images or re-launch themselves as new brands in order to remain competitive.

City Branding

Like companies which compete with each other to obtain a growing share of the market, cities vie with one another to attract investment and visitors. They also compete to keep their existing residents or attract new ones.

Key elements of city branding and rebranding (Figure 1) are the urban environment (a city’s artefacts such as the cityscape and its buildings), its essence (people’s experience of the city) and its brandscape (how the city positions itself in relation to other cities).

Figure 1 – Key elements of city rebranding
Rebranding often involves the reworking of a city’s existing identities but sometimes includes creating new ones (perhaps a result of re-imaging and regeneration). Every city has many identities and it can be difficult to predict which to promote. A city can represent different things to different people. In some cases rebranding can counter negative images and encourage the people who live and work in a city, and those who may wish to visit or invest in it, to think about it in a different way (Figure 2). City rebranding is a global phenomenon and has been used recently by cities such as Beijing and Barcelona to change their images.

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<th>Rebranding</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<td>• Creates a new identity for a city or area within a city</td>
<td>• Increase of Competitiveness</td>
<td>• Physical renewal</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Creates a new image for a city or area within a city</td>
<td>• More investment, e.g. retailing and tourism</td>
<td>• Economic renewal</td>
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<td>• Improved sustainability</td>
<td>• Social renewal</td>
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<td>• Often associated with increasing environmental and community sustainability</td>
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*Figure 2 – The roles of rebranding and regeneration in transforming cities*

The case study that follows looks at how the city of Liverpool, with its many contrasting identities, has attempted to rebrand itself in the early 21st century. This description is set in the context of the three key features of city branding shown in Figure 1.

**Rebranding Liverpool**

*The City of Liverpool (the brand)*

Liverpool has had many identities over time. In the 18th and 19th centuries it was huge port, in the 1960s a leader of popular culture and in the late 20th century it was badly affected by industrial decline. In the 1980s, Liverpool experienced economic and social deprivation along with high levels of crime and Vandalism. In Liverpool’s early attempts at rebranding at this time, it used its declining docks to reinvent itself. The 19th century Albert Dock (Figure 3) was revamped as a tourism attraction.

Over time, Liverpool has moved from a city dominated by commerce (19th century), to one where commerce and culture were dominant (mid 20th century) to one led by culture (early 21st century).

*Changing the urban environment (the brand artefact)*

Since the 1980s there have been a number of different approaches to regenerating the city which have radically changed the urban environment and its brand image. After race riots in 1981 in Toxteth, the Merseyside Development Corporation set about reclaiming 4km² of derelict land by creating new housing and thousands of new jobs in the city. The first flagship regeneration projection in Liverpool was the Albert Dock, a former derelict dock that opened as a tourist attraction in 1988. Today it attracts over 4 million visits a year.
Culture

Liverpool’s recent rebranding (like that of other cities) has been dominated by culture (popular music, arts and sport). Liverpool has a rich history in popular music (notably the Beatles), performing and the visual arts. It also has 2 Premier League football teams. Since 2003, when Liverpool was awarded the status of European Capital of Culture 2008, the city centre has been transformed by major investment. In addition to the nearly $4 billion invested in regeneration, the city’s economy is said to have been boosted by £800 million of additional income in 2008 alone. Over 15 visitors were attracted to the city for the 7,000 cultural events in this year. Numbers of visitors broke records at all Liverpool’s visitor attractions and attendances were up by over 30% at the Albert Dock venues.

The Waterfront

In 2004, Liverpool’s waterfront was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, reflecting the area’s historic importance as a trading port. The whole of the Waterfront has now been regenerated for a second time and the Albert Dock has once again re-invented itself following the departure of a number of financial services and media companies. A £19m liner terminal has been built in the Princess Dock area, while south of this the Pier Head (Figure 3), where the Mersey Ferries depart, has been revitalised by an extension of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal and the re-building of the Museum of Liverpool Life. This cost over £10m and opened in 2010.

Much of the regeneration of the city centre has been led by Liverpool Vision, an urban regeneration company. It worked with stakeholders in the public sector such as Liverpool City Council, North West Regional Development Agency and English Partnerships, as well as private-sector companies like JP
Morgan, Barclays Wealth Management, Peel Holdings and the Gross-Venor Group to attract the $4bn needed for regeneration.

**Shopping**

In the late 1960s, Liverpool was the third most visited shopping centre in the UK behind London’s West End and Glasgow. By 2002, it had dropped to 17th place with near neighbours Manchester (10th) and Chester (5th) well above in the popularity stakes. By 2008 it had come back and it was estimated that shoppers would spend more money in Liverpool than in any other UK centre apart from London, Birmingham, Glasgow and Manchester. Liverpool has a potential catchment of 1.8 million people within 30 minutes drive.

The Liverpool One shopping centre has been one of Liverpool’s largest flagship regeneration projects. It started life at the end of the 1990s when the City Council decided to develop the area around the Paradise Street bus station. This 17 ha site had mixed uses such as transport, retail, warehousing and some housing. The City Council appointed the Grosvenor Group (owned by the Duke of Westminster, the richest British person as well as the 4th richest person in Britain), as the principal developer of the Paradise Projection, as it was then known.

Over the next few years, a development plan was put together and a public consultation was held. Negotiations were held with potential development partners and other stakeholders such as the tenants of the anchor stores Debenhams and John Lewis. After a lengthy consultation process, various archaeological digs and the compulsory purchase of land, work on the projection started in the autumn of 2004.

The Paradise Project itself was rebranded as the Liverpool One shopping centre in November 2005 and the first phase opened in May 2008, with further phases opening throughout 2008/09.

The development has been retail-led, with 160 stores, but with additional elements including leisure and dining (a 14-screen cinema and cafes, bars and restaurants), over 600 residential units, offices, public open space and transport improvements. Liverpool One has 6 distinct districts (or quarters). The cost of the projection was over £1bn, all of which was raised from the private sector.


City-centre living and neighbourhood rebranding

In many city centres, former industrial districts or neighbourhoods have been regenerated to create a place in which people seek to live as well as to invest and development economic activity. The RopeWalks area of Liverpool city centre is undergoing rapid change. It lies next to the central docks and in the days of sailing ships its long, straight streets were used by rope makers to bind rope. In the 18th century fine houses were built here for the city’s wealthy merchants. During the 20th century the central docks and their associated industries declined and for many years this was an unattractive part of the city. It had large areas of vacant and derelict warehouses and land. However, since the early 1990s, RopeWalks has developed as the centre for Liverpool’s burgeoning night life and creative industries. Many businesses now located in the RopeWalks area are from the media, publishing, design and communication sectors.

RopeWalks has also become a popular place for city-centre living. Stakeholders and developers such as Urban Splash and Liverpool Vision have worked within the RopeWalks partnership to refurbish historic and listed buildings as trend luxury apartments and there has been a lot of new building on vacant land in the area. An active residential community is now established. Similar transformations have taken place in other city-centre areas of Liverpool, such as the Beatles-focused Cavern Quarter.

People’s experience of the brand (the brand essence)

The changes that are taking place in Liverpool city centre have an effect on how people who live in, work in or visit the city engage with it and respond to it. Regenerating and rebranding a particular area or district can change its character, and not always in a way that pleases local residents. The in-migration of more affluent residents (as in the gentrification of parts of the London Docklands) and the opening of businesses and cultural/leisure facilities more suited to people with large disposable incomes may outprice existing residents. Poorer people may be forced out of the area by rising property prices and rents.
A new brand suitable for one group of stakeholders (entrepreneurs for instance) may be inappropriate for others (e.g. elderly residents). It is sometimes forgotten that areas can have a legacy of socioeconomic issues from the time before rebranding and be diverse in terms of ethnicity, religion/cultural, social class, lifestyles, income and types of employment. The rebrand may not appeal to everyone. This was true in the case of Liverpool One. Initially, there was much opposition to the impacts of the new project, such as the removal of public rights of way and the effect it would have on other parts of the city centre. In inner-city districts close to the city centre such as Everton, poverty is widespread and there was a view among the residents there that little of the investment being made in the city centre would reach them.

Existing residents may want their area’s brand to project their district’s uniqueness and the cultures of the current population. Urban development agencies such as Liverpool Vision, on the other hand, will have commercial considerations, such as the supply of cheap labour (many of the projects in Liverpool were built using eastern European workers), local and national government incentives, favourable interest rates, and the city’s international linkages and reputation. This can mean little to local residents if they are not directly, and beneficially, affected by regeneration projects.

Stakeholders such as Liverpool Vision often take decisions about the organisations and individuals they wish to attract from elsewhere and which groups of existing inhabitants they want to retain and cultivate. Most urban areas have numerous stakeholders, including established and new residents, commercial investors, retailers, tourists, and owners of leisure venues such as pubs and clubs. Conflict between them will often occur, as happened in Liverpool One.

**The brandscape**

One of the outcomes of Liverpool’s recent regeneration and rebranding has been that the city is now better placed to be a rival to some of its competitors. Liverpool One has boosted the city’s retailing, allowing it to compete with shopping amenities in Manchester and Chester. The Liverpool Arena and Convention Centre attract conferences and concerts which would have gone elsewhere.

In some ways Liverpool’s rebranding has made the city centre more similar to other city centre but the city is still able to promote its distinctive cultural and maritime character. In recent years, 8-10 million tourists have visited Liverpool each year from the UK, other European countries and further afield, especially Japan and the USA. Tourism has been helped by the budget airlines that use Liverpool John Lennon Airport, itself rebranded from Speke Airport in 2002. These tourists have made Liverpool one of the ten most visited destinations in the UK.

**Conclusion**

The rebranding of Liverpool is typical of that in UK cities. Coalitions of locally powerful stakeholders have adopted a series of strategies intended to attract tourists and to mobilise large-scale investment by the private sector. In the 20th century Liverpool declined from its 19th century role as a world city. It is now rebranding itself into a world-class city for the 21st century.

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