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Renaming as a tool of city-branding

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The name is one of the most important elements of branding. That stands for city branding too: the name of the city defines a lot of things. Just like with "classic brands" it's good if it refers to the product (the city) it raises positive feelings, it's short and easy to pronounce, and most of all it makes it unique – so there are no other cities with the same name. There is no reason to surprise that sometime mayors are changing the name of the city. In the past this had political reasons: the Soviet Union's big leader's names were often used in the cities' names. Nowadays the changes have marketing reasons: with the new name they want to attract more tourists or potential investors. It happens that a company buys itself into the city's name and becomes its sponsor. Of course the local people don't like this; the names are usually really old, and changing them can harm the historic roots. This article looks at a couple of name-changing and sums up their experiences.

Keywords: city branding, renaming, marketing, politics

1 Lenin and Stalin city-invasion

In the former communist bloc, there were a lot of cities named after the big leaders of the Soviet Union as a tribute to them. The Hungarian Dunapentele was renamed to Sztálinváros (Stalincity) in 1949 for the celebration of Stalin's 70th birthday. The people who lived around the city just said "We are going to Stalin" when they went to work there. Hungary's capital, Budapest tributed in a different way: in 1949 when the capital city's trolleybuses started to commute the numbers started from 70, because of the 70th birthday of Stalin.

The Polish Katowice picked up the name Stalinograd (Stalincity) because of Stalin's death, in 1953. It got rid of it in 1956, when the scandals of the former "hero" started to leak. Dunapentele stayed loyal until 1961, when changed its name to Dunaújváros. The now Volgograd had the name of the leader for the longest time: it was called Stalingrad

between 1925 and 1961. (Before 1925 it was called Tsaritsyn, so this was a political change in every sense.)



Illustration 1

Dunaújváros, Hungary was called Sztálinváros (Stalincity) between 1949 and 1961. The people living around it just said: "We are off to Stalin!"

There were a lot of cities named after Lenin as well: the Hungarian Tiszaszederkény picked up the name Leninváros (Lenincity) relatively late in the April of 1970. The reason was the 100th birthday. After the switch of the system in the February 1991 the name changed to Tiszaújváros.

Of course in the Soviet Union a lot of cities had the name of Lenin, the most famous was Saint Petersburg. The city founded in 1703, got rid of the "saint" and became simply Petrograd in 1914, and in the year of Lenin's death in 1924 it was changed to Leningrad. The city got its original name, Saint Petersburg back in 1991.



Illustration 2

In the former Yugoslavia there were several cities celebrating Tito:
The Montenegrin Podgorica had the name Titograd.

We could list a lot of similar examples. In Yugoslavia, more than one city had the name of the leader Tito. The now Macedonian Veles was Titov Veles between 1945 and 1991. The Montenegrin Podgorica was simply Titograd.

In Vietnam Saigon got the name of a communist freedom fighter Ho Chi Minh. And that, independently from the politics, is a horrible brand name. Who would like to travel to Ho Chi Minh City?

2 Dotcom cities

While in the 20th century the mostly communist leader names were appearing – in little cases just on the street's name, or in a bigger case by renaming the whole city. However, in recent years it looks like the brands begun a similar invasion. The first serious example for that was the name changing of “Halfway” in Oregon. The city was persuaded by half.com company in 1999 – at the top of the dotcom madness -, to change its name to “Half.com”. The city inhabited by 350 people was chosen from 40 cities, having the word “half” in their names. The company picked Halfway for practical reasons: it was the littlest, so it was possibly easier to transfer the idea through the city council.

The website paid one hundred thousand dollars to the city and donated twenty computers to the local school. It wasn't a bad investment, because the news of the world's first dotcom city got into the Wall Street Journal, the Associated Press, the Good Morning America, and the NBC's Today Show and even into the South China News! The number of half.com registered users grew from zero to 8 million in only three months – it would be a big achievement even today, not ten years ago! Soon, the owner of the site sold the system and the user base to eBay for 300 million dollars. Later on the story was called “the biggest publicity trick of all time” by the Time magazine, and the Half.com became the number one case study of the so called “buzz marketing”. The inventor of the idea, Mark Hughes wrote a book of it with the title: “Buzzmarketing - Get people to talk about your stuff”. [1] The city of Half.com – located in the Devil Canyon – could only be happy about the 100 thousand dollar and the computers, and not the tourism: the local Halfway Motel's managers say they only met one tourist, who came to the city because it changed its name.

Another little American city, in Denton county Texas, changed its name “Clark” to “DISH” in November 2005. Yes, this way with capital letters. What was the motivation? Free TV basic pack for ten years and digital video recorder for all the families from DISH Network. [2] It was only 55 households, so wasn't a big investment from the company. However, it didn't explode that big, as Half.com. DISH could only be second in line. And the city they renamed had no connections with the brand, unlike the Halfway-Half.com story.



Illustration 3

The first dotcom city and one of the most profitable PR-idea of all time



Illustration 4

The city of DISH with a matching slogan:
 “Home of Free DISH Network Satellite TV”

3 Direct and random match

Then researchers found out that renaming cities by brands was started longer time ago than they knew. Came to light in the county of New-Mexico Sierra there is a town with the name of „Truth or Consequences”. It’s not a typical name but here is the reason why. Originally the town was „Hot Springs” because of its natural sources.

But in 1950 one of the most popular radio presenter, Ralph Edwards announced on air: he’ll broadcast a special radio program from a town which will want to add the name of the show. Hot Springs took that chance and the radioman kept his words: for 50 years every first week of May he and his show appeared in the town to organize a huge fiesta and a parade with beauty queen election. It isn’t a bad annual festival and media event for a town of two thousand, is it? [3]



Illustration 5

Would you have thought that this was a name of a town?

Indeed it is and it's got its name after a radio show

Besides it may happen that matching of a brand name and a city name is only random. Modane – which is a small town in France – doesn't enthuse for that. The name of Modane is a laxative too. This brand made a national campaign in 2009 which was about a man with his pants were pushed by.



Illustration 6

Pants off: good ad for a laxative, but hardly for a town with the same name

But at the same time the little town in Savoy wants to maintain its popularity as a resort and its inhabitants were offended by the ad. Therefore the council of Modane asked the brand owner to change the name of the drug and stop that campaign. The company is open for the latter idea but ignoring the former one. Turned out the laxative has been available since 1964 but before 2009 it did not have any „pants off” advertising. [4]

4 Political Correctness

The name change has other causes too. The Texas White Settlement was founded in the 1840's when it got its name from the white settlers which was the base among of the former Indian settlements. The white space and then the political correctness have become increasingly uncomfortable, so a voting was issued recently to the town by change the name “White Settlement” to “West Settlement”. However, all in support of 219 votes were cast against the 2,388 votes against. [5]

And even though we started with that in the 21st century cities don't change their names because of politicians any more, yet there is also an example for this. Antigua and Barbuda's prime minister announced in 2009 that the Caribbean island's highest peak soon will be renamed to “Mount Obama”. They wrote in the letter which was sent to the President of United States: “the light of the mountain would be those for whom there is hope” – referring to Obama's “Hope” campaign. At the same time the prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda also would like if Obama would help their development and visit the country more often. [6]



Illustration 7

Mount Obama at Antigua and Barbuda:
They are hoping for the help of the American President

This decision of course has other reasons too. On the one hand the current name sounds extremely strange: “Boggy Peak” basically means high-marsh which is not very attractive. It does not reflect the beauty of the approximately 400 meter high hill with a wonderful view of the sea and the beach. However this is not only a simple renaming of a hill. The new name of „Boggy Peak” is “Mount Obama Monument and National Park”. Right up the mountain there is a monument, a national park, nature trail and a museum. It also expands the scope of the tourists and it shows that the Caribbean not only has beaches, but is has hills, mountains, forests and waterfalls as well, and from now it has a national park....

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