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Research Paper

Putting places on the map? Marketing rural and regional Australia



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ABSTRACT

Limited analysis of the promotion of migration to rural areas by local governments or regions, exists. In Australia a unique development strategy has emerged in Sydney and Brisbane. Originally, called Country Week when it began in 2004, the Country and Regional Living Expo attempts to encourage urban–rural migration via place promotion by local councils at an annual Expo. The approaches of two local councils, Glen Innes and Oberon, are the focus of this paper. These towns demonstrate the construction of place-identity to distinguish them from competing locations in the minds of urban residents, particularly in the initial phase of differentiation. As representatives of these towns learned, however, this does not address the most important stimuli that attract new residents. These stimuli are employment and housing, followed by services such as health and educational facilities. Understanding these stimuli, comprehending the process of urban–rural migration, understanding place-brand, recognising the relative strengths and weaknesses of “warm” and “cold” place marketing, and integrating communications and working to build relationships with prospective migrants are the factors that are most likely to generate success in marketing rural destinations to potential urban emigrants.

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1. Introduction

Many rural areas in the developed world are experiencing population loss and economic decline. Population decline in rural areas continues in the USA and in Canada, particularly in inland states such as Kansas, Nebraska, areas of the Rockies, and on the plains provinces of Canada (Crowley, 2012; Eimermann, in press; Mayda, 2011; Otterstrom & Shumway, 2003; Parton, Gutmann, & Ojima, 2007; Wood, 2008). In smaller and more densely populated European countries, similar but less substantial population declines have occurred and have often been continuous over several decades (Cawley, 1994; Halkier, 2006; Hospers, 2011; Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011). Throughout Australia many, but not all, rural areas have experienced population loss over the last 20–30 years. In contrast, larger cities and towns have generally increased in population (Connell & McManus, 2011; Pritchard & McManus, 2000). This demographic change has generated various approaches to boosting rural and regional Australia, including the creation in 2004 of the Country Week Expo in Sydney to promote country and regional Australia and to encourage urban–rural migration.

In this article we employ the concept of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) to understand the overall Country Week

approach, and examine how two particular councils in New South Wales (NSW) have worked to attract residents to their town. As demonstrated below, this approach is consistent with what Hospers (2010) calls “warm place marketing” and is an example of what Finne and Grönroos (2009) identify as relationship communication. We use these concepts in this article to answer three important questions;

- How does the 2 1/2 day event of Country Week fit within an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) framework?
- How do selected councils market themselves at Country Week, following or outside Country Week (and how does this fit with an IMC approach)?
- Does an activity like Country Week, and the actions of councils, require adjustment of the framework to reflect what is happening in practice?

The article begins by providing a brief context for the emergence of the Country Week Expo. We then review the literature on place marketing, particularly drawing on the differences between marketing places and marketing conventional products. We use this distinction to highlight the importance of warm place marketing, which is achieved mainly through Integrated Marketing Communications, and its extension into relationship communications. The article then outlines the research methods used for the study, before presenting the findings of our research into Country Week, and the towns of Oberon and Glen Innes. In the analysis section we compare the marketing of the Expo and the two towns

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with the six criteria used by Keller (2001) to assess the collective impact of an IMC programme and its extension into relationship communication. The article concludes with a commentary on the possibilities for improved destination marketing, and the prospects of this approach contributing to a rural revival in Australia and elsewhere.

2. Background to the country week expo

Rural decline in various parts of the developed world has been hastened by many factors, including farm amalgamations, continued mechanisation and more capital-intensive production, plus a reduced interest in agricultural employment and difficulties in obtaining loans (Collits, 2000; Dufty-Jones, Argent, Rolley, & Walmsley, 2014; Davies, 2014; Forth & Howell, 2002; Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011). The costs of decline include the loss of local schools, health services declining and disappearing, difficulties in recruiting teachers and skilled health workers and the loss of morale of those who must fill the gaps. In Australia declining production has meant the closure of both public facilities, such as post offices, police stations and schools, railway lines and stations, and of private sector activities, most evident in bank closures, but also in the widespread loss of chain stores, supermarkets and more specialist stores such as butchers (Argent & Rolley, 2000; Collits & Gastin, 1997; McManus et al., 2012; Pritchard & McManus, 2000). The burden of retaining other services falls on older, fewer or more distant, people.

Until recently the dominant approach to address concerns about rural decline has been state-sponsored regional development programs (Beer, Maude, & Pritchard, 2003; Collits, 2000). In Europe, especially, population decline and the loss of services has occurred in countries where governments have tried a range of policies centred on subsidised regional development strategies and incentives, salary supports and tax concessions, and infrastructure provision—to halt and reverse declines. Halkier (2006) highlights the use of many such approaches in Scotland, however (Giles, Bosworth, & Willett, 2013, p. 4) note ‘the reform to policy-making structures, notably the abolition of Regional Development Agencies’. This places greater emphasis for promotion and economic development on the district and local levels, and the need for endogenous development emerging from within local areas (Margarian, 2013). These areas often have less experience, resources and the ability to coordinate at different scales and, as Margarian concluded, even when coordination exists it ‘cannot usually compensate for the lack of agglomeration advantages in rural areas’ (Margarian, 2013, p. 21). Counterurbanisation (the movement of residents from urban to rural areas) has generally favoured areas of high environmental amenity and cultural heritage close to major cities, and has often been the prerogative of the more wealthy sections of society (Argent & Rolley, 2008; Connell & McManus, 2011; Costello, 2007, 2009; Halfacree, 2008, 2012; Stockdale, 2006). This raises the question of how best to support and promote rural areas that may be declining and appear less attractive for in-migration.

Strategies for rural revival have hitherto been primarily centred on providing the context for regional development or promoting development from within regions that are already declining and are strapped for resources. An alternative migration-oriented approach is documented by Niedomysl (2007), who studied 14 rural municipalities in Sweden that were conducting a marketing campaign in 2002 to encourage in-migration, but found no conclusive evidence for the success of marketing. A more detailed case study of one municipality, Bräcke, concluded that there was some evidence for the positive effect of marketing, but overall a marketing campaign was most successful in raising internal

morale in depressed regions as a tangible sign that something was being done to address population decline (Niedomysl, 2007). Eimermann (in press) studied Swedish municipalities marketing themselves at the Emigration Expo near Utrecht, The Netherlands, designed to encourage Dutch residents to migrate to Sweden and elsewhere, and concurred with (Niedomysl, 2007, p. 708) that there was ‘no general evidence of success from the marketing campaigns’. Despite this outcome, in total some 164 of 290 Swedish municipalities have engaged in place-marketing efforts in the Netherlands in the 21st Century, with the number of municipalities involved at a single point in time rising from 76 in 2008 to 131 in 2011 (Eimermann, in press).

A similar approach in eastern Australia, called Country Week when it began in 2004, is a market-based approach employed to attract urban residents to a two-and-a-half day Expo in the city. This Expo is attended by many non-metropolitan local governments and other organisations in the two eastern states of New South Wales and Queensland, to attract people to their town or organisation, including government departments (and the occasional business organisation). This paper seeks to examine the significance of this particular strategy for rural and regional development, in the unusual context where strategies are directly targeted at individuals and households and where the place-promotion is undertaken by smaller rural towns (rather than large cities) and is oriented towards both permanent migration and tourism, the latter being seen as one stage in the migration process.

3. Place branding, integrated marketing and relationship communications

According to Anholt (2008, p.1), there appears to be no evidence to suggest that marketing communications to influence international public perceptions of an entire city, region or country is anything other than a vain and foolish waste of taxpayers’ money’. We seek to examine this notion in this article. Rather than branding a place, Anholt (2008, p. 2) suggests that ‘places have brand images’ (emphasis in original) and that there are five new ideas within place branding or competitive identity (Anholt, 2008, p. 3). These may be summarised as the need for clear and coordinated communications to influence public opinion, recognition of the importance of brand image even though a brand is not under the direct control of an ‘owner’, the importance of brand equity being a hugely valuable asset that needs to be managed, recognition that brand purpose is critical and that brand management is an internal project, and finally, sustained and coherent innovation is more important than recalling past glories (Anholt, 2008). Place branding, Anholt (2009) argues, is different from product branding in that product branding is reductionist in character, whereas place branding (at the scale of the country, region or city) should encompass the richness and complexity of places. This enables various endeavours, such as tourism promotion, in-migration and economic development, to take place within a brand image that is conducive to all of these activities.

The complexity of even small human settlements, however, makes place branding a very challenging exercise. As noted by (Anholt, 2010, p. 5), ‘the tiniest village is infinitely more complex, more diverse and less unified than the largest corporation, because of the different reasons why people are there. Places have no single unifying purpose...’. While the homogeneity of corporations, in both purpose and form, can be debated, the key point is the complexity, and futility, of trying to control the branding of places. Govers (2011, p. 229) believes that to think ‘just a destination branding programme (implying a tourism campaign) can change place image is rather ambitious ...’, not just because of

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