Championing the City Motto: An Analysis of Edmonton’s Un/Official Slogan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines urban slogans using a case study of Edmonton’s unofficial motto; “City of Champions.” We will be exploring the decision-making process regarding the city slogan, specifically who creates and adopts a city slogan, and what the relationship is between a city’s slogan and its residents. The analysis focuses on events in 2003, when the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation suggested creating a new slogan for the City, prompting a debate over whether to keep or discard the old slogan: “City of Champions.” We carried out a historical case study, using newspaper articles, blogs, and city documents, to gauge public opinion and the slogan-building process. We argue that the residents are ultimately the key decision-makers regarding the creation and acceptance of a city’s slogan. During the slogan-building process, residents modify, twist, and may adopt a slogan to build collective and multiple identities and images of the city to exhibit to themselves and outsiders.

Key Words: city slogan, city image, urban promotion, urban branding, civic identity

INTRODUCTION

“Cities are no longer just built; they are imaged”

- Warner, Jr. and Vale 2001, xxiii

A recent article in the nationally distributed Globe and Mail newspaper noted how Canadian cities are becoming more concerned with their city motto and brand (Tucker 2012). Cities across Canada are spending millions of dollars to create slogans for their city, where some, such as Regina, even employ Branding Managers. The article gives a number of examples of slogans from Regina (“Infinite Horizons”), Toronto (“Diversity, Our Strength”), and Ottawa (“Canadian, Just Like You”). Each of these slogans is an
attempt to create a city brand, which can be defined as “the unique multidimensional blend of elements that provide the [city] with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie 2011, 16). Essentially, the city brand attempts to represent something that is unique to that city, to differentiate the city from others, and to attract attention.

In this paper, we will take a closer look at the development and impact of Edmonton’s slogan, “City of Champions.” We will be exploring the process of slogan-making: who creates it, who is it for, and who influences its acceptance? Additionally, we will examine the relationship between a city’s slogan and its residents. The analysis focuses on events in 2003, when the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC) suggested changing the “City of Champions” slogan. We examined various outlets used to express opinions (newspaper articles, op-eds, websites, blogs) on the slogan debate. This paper focuses specifically on the role of the slogan within larger urban branding efforts aimed at outsiders, as well as the perspectives of city residents, and it will highlight the role of residents in shaping the slogan debate.

City brands are attempts to create an image of a city. The city image concept is famously pioneered by Kevin Lynch in *Image of the City* (1960). Lynch recognized the link between the physical structure of the city and the citizens’ mental image of that city. The city is not just a physical object, but it is something that is perceived by its inhabitants (Lynch 1960, 3). These inhabitants constantly modify the city’s structure for their own reasons, changing the way it is perceived. The resident’s perception of a city is dependent on the urban landscapes’ legibility, influenced by nodes, edges, paths, districts, and landmarks, which in turn creates familiarity and attachment to place. Lynch acknowledges that image development is a two-way process between the individual and the city, and that an image may be strengthened by changing the environment or through ‘symbolic devices’ (Lynch 1960, 11). We want to suggest that city slogans can be classified as one of these ‘symbolic devices’ that strengthen the city image and identity for the residents.

Expanding on Lynch’s work, Sam Bass Warner Jr. and Lawrence Vale (2001) moved beyond the physical environment’s production of a mental image to examine how external sources affect city images among those who have not visited that particular city. Warner and Vale show that Lynch’s mental maps miss “the multiple other ways that citizens learn about places,” and hearing a city name “yields not a mental blank spot but a clearly imaged stereotype about a never-visited place, based entirely on what has been seen and heard through various forms of media” (Warner and Vale 2001, xvi). Therefore, how a city is presented, and the message within that presentation, is crucial in developing the city image for non-residents. Julia Beinart (2001) summarizes Lynch’s and Warner and Vale’s concepts, demonstrating there are two image categories of a city; “one, the mental images carried by its citizens; the other, those held by outsiders” (Beinart 2001, 4). Consequently, slogans have the potential both to build an image for the residents and to strengthen an image of that city for outsiders.

There has been extensive research on how cities are marketed or promoted. Sociologist Harvey Molotch (1976) noticed a method of city promotion emerging in the late 20th century. Molotch termed it the “urban growth machine,” a partnership between local politicians and developers, real estate actors, and businesses. The primary purpose of the growth machine is to increase and attract economic activity, often through development of infrastructure that facilitates investment (e.g., roads, energy, telecommunications). Geographer David Harvey claimed that local governments have shifted from a managerial role to an entrepreneurial role in the neoliberal age (Harvey 1989). Due to the effects of deindustrialization and the ‘roll-back’ of financial support from state and federal bodies (Peck and Tickell 2002), financially depleted cities transitioned from managing resources and providing services to
promoting urban development and economic growth (Harvey 1989, 3). City governments have become entrepreneurs as they participate in a zero-sum competition to “lure highly mobile and flexible production, financial, and consumption flows into its space,” with the belief that these corporations will bring jobs and urban prosperity (Harvey 1989, 11). Consequently, the city became a ‘spectacle’ as the growth machine began building replicable convention centers, shopping malls, waterfront parks, and the like, in order to attract attention from outside investors. This has had detrimental effects, including the diversion of tax money from providing welfare services to subsidizing infrastructure for large corporations, “producing greater polarisation in the social distribution of real income” (Harvey 1989, 12).

City leaders perceive a number of benefits from branding efforts, including attracting tourism and investment, boosting investor confidence, increasing political influence and global partnerships, and promoting local products and services (Middleton 2011). Scholars have agreed that cities should move beyond “traditional approaches” and transition towards “techniques that were once the domain of commercial products and services,” (Dinnie 2011, xiv) a strategy that furthers the process of ‘corporatization’ of city governments (Harvey 1989). Keith Dinnie (2011) and Alan Middleton (2011) favoured the concept of “one city, one brand,” a strong umbrella brand that summarizes a city’s core attributes and caters to a wide range of audiences (Middleton 2011, 25).

Conversely, a more diverse approach may be more effective. Peter Allingham studied Volkswagen branding initiatives in two German cities and found that the “one strong unanimous and unified corporate brand identity” was unsuccessful (Allingham 2008, 918). Instead, initiatives that allowed customers to create their own individual experience and ideas were not only successful but also authentic since the “brand you belong to is a private individual matter” (Allingham 2008, 918). Gilmore and Pine (2007) demonstrate this perceived authenticity or realness is integral for the consumers’ choice, or in our case the residents’ and outsiders’ perception of the City in branding initiatives.

To build an effective urban brand, Sicco van Gelder (2011) suggested a collaborative consultation process. For a brand to be effective, it needs to be relevant for its key stakeholders, including various government departments of tourism, immigration, education, and culture, the private sector and finally, the residents (van Gelder 2011).

Such image building efforts have become an integral part of the urban growth machine. McCallum, Spencer and Wyly (2005) discussed the overabundance of images and marketing techniques in the post-industrial city. McCallum et al.’s study on Vancouver’s 2010 Winter Olympic Games bid highlighted the various constructed images the City used to persuade the International Olympic Committee to choose Vancouver as the host. The post-industrial city has become an ‘image-creation machine’ where local elites mobilize images in order to latch on to “fast-circulating transnational resource flows” and acquire the economic benefits (i.e. tourism, consumption) that theoretically come with hosting high-profile events like the Olympic Games (McCallum et al. 2005, 44). These economic advantages have been contested as some argue that ‘one-time’ mega-events do not create lasting business or employment improvements after the event (Kasimati 2003; Mount and Leroux 1994; Spilling 1998). Regardless of these criticisms, the construction of urban images continues to be viewed as an essential strategy, geared to outsiders, for landing such global spectacles. However, like the promotion of mega-events, the benefits, both economically and socially, of branding initiatives and slogans have been questioned by some scholars (Greenberg 2003; Gotham 2007).

McCallum et al. (2005) show that the entrepreneurial city is alive and well today as municipalities of all sizes are investing in marketing and branding initiatives. Al-
though there are three target audiences of urban branding initiatives -- visitors, investors and residents (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2007), it is evident from the previous literature that urban branding and city slogans are heavily geared towards influencing the views of outsiders (visitors and investors). Meanwhile for residents, the oft-contested city brand and its slogan have effects on their urban identity. As a result, image building is a process fraught with conflict and politics (Ward 2000; Boland 2010). In cities such as Manchester and Birmingham, for example, attempts to use a singular brand to promote the city to “secure interest, investment and jobs” and to strengthen the residents’ “sense of civic pride and ownership of the [city]” have run into difficulties (Ward 2000, 1100; Boland 2010). Not only was there “political friction” (Boland 2010) between the public authorities and the private sector, but there was also disagreement of this singular brand message among business leaders, which local politicians tend to view as homogenous (Ward 2000, 1105). Residents also had conflicting views of the positive message of the branding initiative, as citizens of impoverished communities did not identify with the prosperous image presented to outsiders (Boland 2010). Clearly, there are inherent tensions surrounding branding efforts between stakeholders; furthermore, it is problematic to treat any single stakeholder group as a cohesive and consenting unit.

Earlier literature has focused on the use of architecture to rebrand and refresh the image of a city. Buildings are icons affecting perceptions of place, and can be used to modernize the image of a city (Kaika 2010), recover from a traumatic event (Greenberg 2003) or establish a city’s place among the urban hierarchy (McNeill and Tewdwr-Jones 2003). Essentially, architecture and iconic developments are symbolic devices used as “key markers of and for success” and as expressions of the urban brand (Kaika 2010, 471). But, as with other branding efforts, such buildings are highly contested among various stakeholders.

An area of image building that has received less attention is the city slogan or motto, defined as a short phrase or tagline used to promote a city. We explore the slogan as a symbolic device and examine the contestation surrounding it. In the decision-making process of a slogan, residents are often seen as one stakeholder among many (van Gelder 2011). We will explore the issues that emerge as a result of viewing the resident stakeholder group as ‘homogeneous’ (Ward 2000) and emphasize the residents’ perspective and their role in building a slogan for their city.

**METHODOLOGY**

To analyze the decision-making process regarding the slogan, we carried out an in-depth case study of Edmonton’s “City of Champions” slogan, centered around events in 2003 when the EEDC proposed to change the slogan. A historical case study of Edmonton and the slogan is accompanied by an analysis of city documents and information found on the websites of the City of Edmonton and the Edmonton Economic Development Corporation, detailing the decision-making process. To gauge public opinion, we examined various communication channels available to residents: newspaper articles, op-eds, blogs. We chronologically followed the debate over the slogan as it unfolded in order to assess progressions of perspectives on the slogan. The analysis concentrates on the backlash experienced in 2003, but includes comments leading up to current Edmontonian branding initiatives. We then discuss the decision-making process regarding the slogan, with a focus on the oft-neglected role of the residents. We also look at the nature of the disputes surrounding Edmonton’s brand among both marketers and residents. We then challenge the concept of a singular, unifying brand as well as the tendency to treat residents as only one of many stakeholders. Lastly, we examine the conflicting and multiple identities of Edmontonians and show how the slogan-building process can be an op-
portunity for the residents to shape their image of the city.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EDMONTON AND ITS SLOGAN**

Edmonton was founded in 1795 by the Hudson's Bay Company as one of a series of trading posts in Western Canada, and it became the dominant center of trade in the region during the early 19th century (Smith 2012). Edmonton is the capital of Alberta and is located geographically in the center of the province (Fig. 1), adjacent to rich oil deposits in Fort McMurray and the northern part of the province and highly productive farmland surrounding it (Smith 2012). During the twentieth century, Edmonton was typically seen by residents and outsiders as a regional center of Central and Northern Alberta's resources and as a provider of resources to the rest of the country. The city's place among the other great urban centers of Canada can be summed up using Canadian author Mordecai Richler's analogy:

If Canada were not a country, however fragmented, but instead a house,
Vancouver would be the solarium-cum-playroom, an afterthought of affluence; Toronto, the counting room, where money makes for the most glee; Montreal, the salon; and Edmonton, the boiler room. (quoted in Scherer and Davidson 2011, 158)

This analogy is a metaphor for Edmonton’s regional role in providing oil and energy to the rest of Canada, but also implies a wider view of Edmonton as a less-than-desirable “room” to reside in.

Edmonton’s place within the Canadian urban hierarchy, measured by population and growth, has dramatically shifted in the past twenty years. In Harry Hiller’s formulation, Canada’s cities fall into two categories (2007). Canada’s three largest cities, Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto, are categorized as gateway cities for newcomers entering Canada and are the residential locations of choice for immigrants (Hiller 2007, 51). Edmonton and Calgary, meanwhile, whose recent population growth is not due to international immigration but to internal migration, are each classified as arriviste cities, that is, cities that have “recently obtained more power and influence, but often lack… general acceptance and respect” (Hiller 2007, 56). Essentially, arriviste cities challenge the existing urban hierarchy and threaten the existing urban patterns by becoming new foci of growth (Hiller 2007). Since the oil boom in the 1970s, Edmonton has increasingly become a service centre for the petroleum industry and a gateway to Alberta’s northern resources, thus attracting investment and migration. Edmonton’s explosive growth continues today; the Canadian census showed Edmonton and Calgary leading in population growth for large cities, with 12.1% and 12.6% increases respectively between 2006 and 2011 (Jordan 2012). Edmonton’s population growth and recent metropolitan status is causing the city to mature and diversify, and is no longer solely defined by its historical ‘boiler room’ status. As Edmonton works to shed its old identity and gain national and international influence, its newfound power, as well as its new identity, are “tenuous and often uncertain” (Hiller 2007, 57).

In Edmonton, sport has long been used as a means of promotion, a source of civic identity, and a means to establish prominence and respect from other cities. Mid-size cities such as Edmonton typically use sport to “stake their claims in the national and global urban hierarchies” and “signify their cosmopolitan status” (Scherer and Davidson 2011, 162). Sports have also become a key component of Edmonton’s civic identity, giving residents a common bond and cause to support, creating a sense of “Edmonton-ness” (Scherer and Davidson 2011, 161). In particular, Wayne Gretzky and the Edmonton Oilers hockey dynasty team during the 1980s were instrumental in creating a collective identity for Edmontonians. The success of the Oilers was enthusiastically celebrated as the world had to come to Edmonton to see the National Hockey League’s best, counterbalancing the City’s “inferiority complex” stemming from its ‘boiler room’ status (Scherer and Davidson 2011, 158). Since sports have long played a key role in Edmonton’s identity, they have been an intrinsic part of the City’s marketing initiatives. Edmonton has actively used this athletic success to develop and shift its image, and one of the major efforts that has emerged lately has involved its long-time slogan: “City of Champions.”

The nickname was first coined by Mayor Lawrence Decore in 1987 to describe the community’s response to a tornado that caused extensive damage in East Edmonton (Schneider 2003). However, the slogan is more popularly recognized as a description of the winning tradition of Edmonton’s professional sports teams in the 1980s (Trail Times 2003). The Edmonton Eskimos of the Canadian Football League won five consecutive Grey Cups, an all-time record, while the Edmonton Oilers of the National Hockey League won 5 Stanley Cups from 1984 to 1990 (Trail Times 2003). In 1987, local journalist Terry Jones applied Decore’s “City of Champions” concept to Edmonton’s sporting success, thus giving
the nickname a new association (Schneider 2003). The nickname included many athletic teams and folded them into this image, including the Edmonton Grads, “a women’s basketball team that compiled a record of 502 wins and 20 losses between 1915 and 1940” (Scherer and Davidson 2011, 176), and successful Edmontonian curlers, figure skaters and equestrians (Trail Times 2003). Today, the slogan has continued to evolve and has been rhetorically expanded beyond disaster response and sports; the “champion spirit” has been recognized by residents and the local media in Edmonton’s volunteerism, arts scene, international festivals and a multitude of other areas (Sager 2003). Although it was created by a former mayor and is currently used on every ‘Welcome to Edmonton’ sign when entering the city (Fig. 2), the “City of Champions” slogan has never been officially sanctioned by the city government (Schneider 2003).

THE “CITY OF CHAMPIONS” DEBATE

By 2003, however, many felt that the old slogan was outdated. That spring, a group of business leaders and local politicians presented a proposal to City Council to create a new, official slogan for Edmonton. The Edmonton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC), formerly Economic Development Edmonton (EDE), is a non-profit company owned by the City of Edmonton to market the City and promote economic development (EEDC n.d.). The EEDC volunteer board consists of 15 local business leaders who are appointed by the City of Edmonton. The EEDC is essentially Edmonton’s version of the growth machine and exemplifies the city’s entrepreneurial role first noted by Harvey (1989). As part of an ‘Edmonton Branding’ initiative, Council members and the EEDC brought a proposal to the City Council,
claiming the “City of Champions” slogan was tired, which prompted City Council to initiate a $300,000 marketing campaign (Teotonio 2003).

Local leaders and journalists responded in local newspapers advocating their support for a new slogan. Marketing professor Adam Finn from the University of Alberta argued that the City of Champions slogan was not memorable or believable for marketing purposes, and stressed the need for a new image “if the city hopes to be more economically competitive” (Teotonio 2003). Local journalist Gary Lamphier argued that, without a new slogan and image, Edmontonians would pay the “price in lost business opportunities, foregone growth and stunted development” since the old slogan, ridiculed by the outside press, was causing a negative misrepresentation of Edmonton (Lamphier 2003). Therefore, Edmonton was in need of an effective tagline to garner the national and global attention required to ensure economic prosperity (Lamphier 2003). Promoters of the change also argued that the seemingly-gloating “City of Champions” slogan posted on the welcome signs was unfriendly to visitors (Tanner 1995), and a Calgary sports announcer claimed that the slogan was “pretty self-absorbed” (Teotonio 2003).

The most common complaint was that the “City of Champions” slogan had become a source of ridicule and was often mocked by outsiders. Since the Oilers’ last Stanley Cup in 1990 and the Eskimos success in the early 2000s, Edmonton’s two most prominent sporting teams have not won any championships and have struggled to make the playoffs. Local and domestic newspapers provided a list of mock nicknames, created mostly by residents of Calgary, Edmonton’s provincial rival to the south, including “City of Chumpeons,” and “City of Memories because of its obsession with great teams of yesteryear” (Lamphier 2003; Teotonio 2003). This mockery of Edmonton’s slogan affected some residents negatively. They felt the slogan did not fully represent the diverse Edmonton population (Teotonio 2003) and were getting tired of the constant jabs at their city (C2E 2011).

Despite all the reasons to move on from the “City of Champions” motto, some residents responded fiercely to defend the slogan through op-eds in local newspapers and blogs. Hockey supporters and sport fans in general “cherish the current name,” since it represents an important time in Edmonton’s history (Teotonio 2003). In addition, the slogan got support from more than sports fans. The champion nickname over time has continually evolved to praise things as diverse as Edmonton’s burgeoning art scene, festivals including the second biggest Fringe theatre festival in the world, high rates of volunteerism, Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry’s commitment and service in combat most recently in the Afghanistan War, and even its garbage disposal system which has one of the highest rates of landfill diversion in the world (Sager 2003: City of Edmonton (b) n.d.). Other residents were also skeptical that a new slogan “would bring in more money,” (Teotonio 2003) and that the money being spent on the slogan-building process would be better used towards the “hot lunch program” and other welfare needs of the City (Sager 2003). Finally, others questioned the legitimacy of the EEDC to initiate a new slogan. One journalist claimed that Edmontonians would not accept a new civic slogan created by the “suits,” and called the vice-president of the EEDC at that time, Myron Borys, a “clown,” and even worse, a Calgarian (Sager 2003). Despite being mocked, the ‘champion’ spirit had become entrenched within the identities of many Edmonton residents, who were not willing to discard the beloved slogan.

In the end, the “City of Champions” remained. The EEDC gave up the fight to create a new slogan as any alternatives were “getting shot at and torn apart locally” (Trail Times 2003). Suggested slogans included Festival City, River City or Gateway to the North, but some residents thought these alternatives felt “tacky,” uninspiring, and portrayed Edmonton’s inability to believe in
itself (C2E 2006). It is interesting to note that the EEDC claimed the new slogan was simply a “regional marketing slogan” and would not change the City’s unofficial slogan, and that the development agency had no plans to change the ‘City of Champions’ welcome signs (Schneider 2003). Despite these claims, some Edmontonians still saw a new slogan as threatening to the “Champion” legacy that had been a part of its history and had been widely adopted by its inhabitants.

However, the battle did not end there. Again in 2006, Gordon Kent from the Edmonton Journal wrote about an informal poll showing residents, particularly younger people, feeling it was time to ditch the “City of Champions” slogan since it had become a joke due to the lack of sporting success (Kent 2006). This article appeared on a blog set up by the City of Edmonton, connect2edmonton.ca, where residents debated the slogan (C2E 2006). Some bloggers claimed the “City of Champions” slogan represented Edmonton’s attitude and history, was a source of pride, and that the slogan included much more than sports. Meanwhile, others claimed Edmonton has “much more to offer” than sporting traditions and that the slogan “doesn’t necessarily reflect what Edmonton is today” as an emerging, cultural metropolis (C2E 2006). Even today, the EEDC maintains its dislike of the “City of Champions” slogan with Chief Executive Brad Ferguson claiming the Edmonton brand lacks global attention. Factoring in name and place recognition of Edmonton to outsiders, he ranked the current brand 1.5 on a scale of 1 to 10 (Kent 2012). In 2012, the local press and politicians responded critically to the EEDC’s new branding initiative, including a new slogan, claiming the $2 to $5 million spent annually was ill-used and unnecessary, and that Edmonton instead should adopt the slogan “City of Branding Initiatives” (Diotte 2012; Harding 2012).

It is becoming evident that there is a disconnect between the EEDC marketers and Edmonton residents regarding the urban brand. There is also a disconnect between residents and what they believe Edmonton’s brand should be, but the reasons for this disagreement are different. The EEDC wants to change the “City of Champions” slogan because of its ineffectiveness in marketing Edmonton to the outside world, particularly investors. Residents, however, are more concerned with the authenticity of the slogan, and whether it truly represents Edmonton and resonates with their own urban identity. The disagreement among residents over the nature of the Edmonton identity results from Edmonton’s status as an arriviste city (Hiller 2007), as Edmonton’s newfound growth challenges its traditional oil/sports city image. The fact that supporters of the “City of Champions” slogan were able to thwart the establishment of a new slogan, which would have been geared towards outside investors and would not have changed the unofficial slogan, reveals the power residents can have in shaping the marketing efforts of a city.

Although one of the reasons for creating a new slogan was to escape ridicule, it is clear that many Edmontonians are okay with laughing at themselves. Mike Kendrick, an illustrator based in Edmonton, created posters mocking the Edmonton brand (Fig. 3) with catchphrases poking fun at the “over-inflated civic pride,” holding on to the sporting success of the 1980s, and its harsh winters (Kendrick 2011). This poster also appeared on the connect2edmonton (C2E) blog. Some commenters on the C2E thread were very offended by the poster, complaining about how the poster “pisses [them] off” and “isn’t [their] image of Edmonton” (C2E 2011). However the majority of commenters enjoyed it, saying the poster was “pretty funny,” “amusing” and that Edmontonians should embrace civic joking and need to learn to laugh at themselves (C2E 2011). Mike Kendrick also created a second poster (Kendrick 2012) in his I <3 Edmonton series that directly mocked the ‘City of Champions’ slogan (Fig. 4). Despite his taunting, Mike Kendrick himself proudly confesses that he “loves his hometown” of Edmonton (Kendrick n.d.). While the poster and the “City of
Champions” slogan brings ridicule from the inside and outside, some Edmontonians have embraced the civic joke. These Edmontonian jokes are becoming a source of identity for its inhabitants, something uniquely shared by the residents and desperately needed as an arriviste city (Hiller 2007).

As mentioned previously, the tensions arose from the fact that the EEDC and Edmonton residents perceive different purposes and uses for the urban slogan. The EEDC measures the value of a slogan on its marketability to investors and future residents, while residents are concerned with whether the slogan reflects their urban identity. However residents are also concerned with how outsiders view Edmonton. A portion of Edmontonians thought “City of Champions” was no longer relevant and did not provide the right message to outsiders. Meanwhile, supporters believed the “City of Champions” emulated their urban identity and was the correct message and image to present to non-residents and residents alike. Therefore the urban identity of the residents and the perceived authenticity of a slogan and its brand presentation to outsiders are intertwined.

Edmonton’s preoccupation with how other cities view them is likely due to its “inferiority complex” (Scherer and Davidson 2011, 158), part of the ‘growing pains’ that comes with maturing into a metropolis. Additionally, the plurality of images and slogans deemed
to be authentic among residents stems from Edmonton’s newfound growth and influence and its consequential identity uncertainty (Hiller 2007). This diversity and disagreement also makes clear that “the residents” are not a single, homogenous group, unlike the way they are often treated by marketing researchers.

CONCLUSIONS

Edmonton and the EEDC’s efforts to create a new slogan have followed previous scholars’ recommendation to create an umbrella slogan that offers a singular definition of an ultimately diverse and complicated city (Dinnie 2011; Middleton 2011). However, as we have shown, an umbrella, one-fits-all slogan is ultimately problematic, since a singular phrase will either be too generic that it will not be effective, or it will be too specific and end up excluding portions of the city. Although the “City of Champions” slogan remains intact, a significant portion of residents, who were displeased with the slogan and felt it no longer represented the city, may feel excluded from the image development process. The challenge of finding a slogan is handling the plurality of images and identities that the residents possess. The multiple and distinct identities supported by populations within a city should be included and coincide within the urban brand as much as possible in order to accommodate the residents’ diversity.

A number of other slogan possibilities have emerged. Some C2E bloggers approved of ‘Festival City’ to represent Edmonton (C2E 2006). A recent poll conducted by the Edmonton Sun found that ‘Gateway to the North’ was becoming the favourite among residents (Maimann 2013). Also, on top of the numerous op-eds about the “City of Champions” debate, a local columnist has suggested an entirely new slogan altogether; the ‘Gritty City’ (Staples 2013). From these numerous suggestions, the likelihood of finding a mutually agreeable and singular tagline is low. Furthermore, the Edmonton case study showed how futile city slogans can be for engineering a city’s image, particularly among residents themselves. The City of Edmonton and the EEDC attempted to apply a new slogan to the City but failed, because they did not take residents’ perceptions into account. No matter what slogan is officially attached to a city, the inhabitants will still call it whatever they wish. Any slogan that the EEDC attempted to apply was not adopted by its residents because they did not approve of it. It also shows that slogans themselves can shift in meaning over time as urban leaders and residents attach new meanings to the motto. This is seen with “City of Champions” beginning as a description of the tornado disaster response, shifting to describing its sporting history, and finally being used to highlight other areas that Edmonton excels in, and as a form of civic joking as seen in Kendrick’s posters. Urban promoters, such as the EEDC, desire a slogan that is marketable, but it is also sensitive to the residents’ approval, its authentic reflection of their urban identity. It does not, however, have control of how the slogan is modified or interpreted.

There are other examples that showcase the power of residents in killing a slogan. In 2001, Ottawa’s ‘Technically Beautiful’ slogan was met with public upheaval and quickly “died the death of a thousand jokes” (Ottawa Citizen 2007). Therefore, the residents are the key decision makers when judging the legitimacy of a city slogan. Of course, the residents of a city will never unanimously agree on topics; there will be multiple sides on any given subject. Peter Allingham (2008) suggests the reason why traditional corporate branding of cities does not work is because “public organizations like municipalities are, unlike many private organizations, founded on democratic principles where disagreement is fundamental” (Allingham 2008, 908). Furthermore, the very creation of city slogans are often seen as problematic by residents; Edmonton residents and local politicians objected to the millions of dollars invested in branding exercises every year, diverting funds from welfare needs of the city. Again,
this echoes Harvey’s (1989) critique of the shifting role of cities as they embrace the entrepreneurial role of place promotion while community needs, resources, and programs are being cut.

While we are being critical of slogans, we do not want to go to the extreme and suggest that slogans do not matter. As mentioned previously, slogans have the dual purpose of providing an urban identity for residents and building an image of the city for non-residents. The Edmonton case proved that residents cared about the ‘City of Champions’ slogan since it encompassed the city’s historical and current achievements of sports, community, festivals, and its arts scene. However, residents were also concerned about how others viewed the city; some worried that the slogan was bringing ridicule upon Edmonton. For some Edmontonians, the joke of the “City of Champions” itself became part of the city’s identity. If in a previous generation, the popular meanings of a mayor’s comment about the community’s response after the disaster of a tornado quickly morphed into a community “we feeling” (Molotch 1975) that could be captured by locally-based franchises of professional sporting capital. Thus “City of Champions” became a chant at every big-time sporting event. But over the years, it became clear to Edmonton’s urban promoters that the real big-time event wasn’t just about sports: it was about competition amongst classes, cities, and capitalists in Canada’s urban hierarchy. In the last generation, this competition has become a much more intense experience for individuals and institutions; people and places face a variety of penalties for “falling behind” on a variety of metrics of innovation, efficiency, creativity, and sustainability. The inter-urban competition necessitates the need for cultural capital, as the perceived financial success of cities depends on the marketability of the urban character, creating an economy of identities. In Edmonton, falling behind in sports competition, or city competition, made the “Champion” slogan a joke and the EEDC viewed it as ‘unmarketable’. But then, a botched high-profile private sector effort to create a new slogan inspired a backlash among some residents, and thus restored the collective community goodwill for the original slogan; the joke itself becomes a securitized slogan, with today’s sophisticated irony backed by a nostalgic, baby-boomer memory of some sort of authentic, shared community where it seemed that everyone had the same interpretation of the “City of Champions.”

The ability to thwart the new branding initiative further showcases the inherent tension between authentic urban identity and today’s era of increased economic competition and expectations.

So the new and old meanings of “City of Champions” both create a shared experience for city residents, a new kind of “we feeling” (Molotch 1975), a new, entrepreneurial identity for Edmonton. Therefore, for arriviste cities like Edmonton, slogans do matter. They create their own multiplier effects in an expanding economy of signs. Slogans matter, and they should be taken seriously.

This focus on residents’ perception of the urban brand corresponds with Kavaratzi’s and Ashworth’s (2006) study of the Amsterdam brand. One of the positives of the “I Am Amsterdam” slogan is how it’s “been developed having in mind the residents and the existing base of the city” which is “very important for the whole marketing effort” (Kavaratzi and Ashworth 2006, 24). Additionally, if brands are “constructed in people’s minds” and if the “statement that “the people make the city” is true, then additional attention should be given to the city’s residents and stronger efforts should be made towards their participation in city marketing” (Kavaratzi and Ashworth 2006, 24). Residents are powerful agents within the city and their unique story is what separates cities from one another. We argue these unique stories and the marketing efforts should work together to promote the city.

Edmonton’s latest branding initiatives may be a step in the right direction. In 2008, Edmonton initiated the branding initiative edmontonstories.ca; a website/blog where the
EEDC and the City of Edmonton encouraged its residents to write about why they love their city. The campaign has “no logo, slogan or tag line,” but instead uses online and social media to facilitate the residents’ message (City of Edmonton (a) n.d.). This campaign doesn’t contain an over-arching, excluding, singular motto, and empowers the individual to represent their city to the outside world. Manuel Castells (2012) mentions the internet is a powerful platform with its “mass self-communication” ability; the processing of “messages from many to many, with the potential of reaching a multiplicity of receivers, and of connecting to endless networks that transmit digitized information around the neighbourhood to around the world” (Castells 2012, 6). Furthermore, blogging is becoming increasingly popular and an authentic source as millions of people express ideas and thoughts without the “message being clouded by an editor” (Gillet 2007, 29). Therefore, the internet is a powerful tool that has the potential to empower residents to build their urban image and slogan for themselves and for outsiders.

However, ‘edmontonstories.ca’ was quickly scrapped and replaced in 2012 by the latest branding initiative ‘Make Something Edmonton’ (Maimann 2013). ‘Make Something Edmonton’ is somewhat a continuation of edmontonstories.ca as the blog encourages residents to tell their story of why Edmonton is the best place to create and build a project. Local writer Todd Babiak, one of the leaders of the “Make Something Edmonton” group, has learned that the generic, replicable tagline with trendy buzzwords that an outside marketing agency creates is no longer effective at representing Edmonton (Staples 2014). Much like the replicable ‘spectacle’ developments of convention centres and waterfront parks (Harvey 1989), these types of slogans can be widely applied to multiple cities and lack originality; the “City of Champions” slogan was used by six other cities before Edmonton claimed it, including Pittsburgh and Detroit (MSE 2013; Parish 2014). Instead, the local stories of Edmontonians resonates with residents and assists in finding a unique and authentic urban identity to share with the rest of the world, including that self-deprecating humour that its unofficial slogan helped generate. The residents’ projects and stories show how their Edmonton is the “Festival City,” the “Gritty City” or even the “City of Champions.” These online media are able to host a multitude of urban identities, and the various slogans residents possess are able to coexist with one another.

When marketing an urban brand, treating the city as a commodity is ultimately problematic. The image advertised does not merely represent the local government and businesses, but also needs to embody who Edmontonians are. Residents care about how their city is being presented to outsiders because brands display their identity, thus marketers need to create brands that are seen as having legitimacy among those it represents. Marketers must also realize their limited role in creating the city slogan and brand. Certainly urban leaders can suggest and create a slogan, as did Mayor Decore, but how the slogan is perceived is out of the marketers’ control. Residents may approve, reject, spoof or mock the slogan, assigning new meanings and attachments.

As opposed to the top-down approach of urban branding (Dinnie 2011; Middleton 2011; van Gelder 2011), urban branders should engage in constant dialogue with residents to create a mutually agreeable advertised image. Better yet, citizens should be able to find and share their image of the city, and effectively build the brand to outsiders while marketers provide the space and direction to broadcasts the residents’ identities. The city and its people, after all, have a two-way relationship, each constantly modifying one another (Lynch 1960). As a result, the images of the city will be diverse and will change as the city grows, thus all the more need for urban branders to be in tune with the residents.

It has been suggested that residents should be included in a long list of stakeholders when building an urban brand (van Gelder 2011). However, we argue that the residents
should be the main decision-makers in the creation of the urban slogan and brand. As mentioned previously, the survival of a city slogan is dependent on the acceptance of the residents and therefore a city should seek residents’ opinions of their city and not solely what markets well for outsiders. In fact, Harvey (1989) mentions the image-building process can be a powerful force. Harvey mentions the production of an urban image has the potential to “create a sense of social solidarity, civic pride and loyalty to place” (Harvey 1989, 14). By defending the ‘City of Champions’ slogan, residents have created a shared experience and defended an urban identity that a significant portion of Edmontonians have chosen. The ‘Champion’ spirit is ingrained in the Edmonton identity for some residents; however, efforts should be made to allow other aspects of the urban identity to be showcased, as seen in the Make Something Edmonton platform. Allowing all residents a voice in creating the collective image of the city fosters a more democratic process within urbanism, granting the “right to change and reinvent the city more after [their] hearts’ desire” (Harvey 2012, 4).

REFERENCES


Championing the City Motto: An Analysis of Edmonton’s Un/Official Slogan


