

Learning Design Research Through Place Branding

Joshua A. Siegel

Full Sail University

Abstract

Design research is a valuable tool that helps define a design problem, explores how the problem can be solved, and communicates the value of the solution. The Design Research course from Full Sail University explained the various research methods and tools through the process of place branding. Students chose a nearby neighborhood and learned about the location's current brand equity with three assignments. Utilizing secondary and primary research, students discovered ways to differentiate the chosen neighborhood for stronger place branding. These assignments provided in-depth knowledge and new research skills in addition to hands-on experience in gathering information by visiting and documenting the place to be branded.

Learning Design Research Through Place Branding

The Design Research course from Full Sail University teaches effective research skills through the process of place branding. Julian Stubbs (2016) remarks that place branding is “much more involved than just creating a logo and slogan.” Strong branding requires deep understanding of the location’s equity, distinctiveness, and goals. Over the course of three assignments, students were tasked with choosing a local neighborhood, then conducting a brand analysis and comparative analysis. These assignments each presented new ways to research and solve design problems. Design research is unlike the scientific research conducted in the search of new knowledge. Instead, it is a research-driven design process that explores how a problem is solved, then communicates the value of the solution. Jon Freach (2011) says “Designers thrive when they have a working concept of what makes people tick, a context that allows them to shape their ideas... and somewhere to focus all their creative energy.” The class demonstrated how research can generate new ideas and inspire creative solutions to design problems.

Case Study and Project Selection

The first assignment was divided into two steps. For step one, students reviewed the “Little Mexico Branding” retrospective conducted by Kara Williams Glenn (n.d.) to instill a better understanding of place branding by identifying the core values, key characteristics, and memorability of a location. Furthermore, the article “5 Place Branding Principles for Successful Brand Development and Management” detailed the principles inherent to effective place branding: distinctiveness, authenticity, memorability, co-creation (involving stakeholders in the process), and a sense of the place that drives emotional connections (Editorial Team, 2019). These principles were kept in mind for step two of the assignment: choosing a local neighborhood to rebrand.

Located adjacent to Downtown Chico and California State University Chico, the “U-Town” neighborhood is home to many college fraternities and sororities. This historic area could benefit from branding to help overcome its past reputation for out-of-control parties and drunken riots (Hardee, 2016). Primary research was conducted by exploring the neighborhood on foot, noting and photographing areas of interest. Several of these photos were presented with screen captures from Google Maps highlighting the location (see Figure 1). The completion of both parts of the first assignment increased general knowledge of Place Branding, as well as providing hands-on experience gathering information through primary research.

Secondary Research – Brand Analysis

For the second assignment, students were given more information on Design Research and Brand Equity. This knowledge was applied by conducting secondary research to develop a Brand Analysis for the chosen location. Unlike primary research, in which information is gathered directly, secondary research utilizes “existing data like books, articles, or the internet to validate or support existing research” (Esposito, 2018). Like the first assignment, the second was divided into two steps. The first step was to research the chosen location’s background. The findings were categorized by the four dimensions of brand equity: brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality. According to Inkbot Design (2017), brand equity is “one of the most valuable assets that a company has.” It describes how customers perceive a brand. By understanding a brand’s current equity, a designer can better develop or improve those public perceptions.

The second step of the assignment was taking photographs of the neighborhood. The purpose of these photos was to demonstrate association with the brand characteristics and qualities identified in the first step of the assignment. For Chico California's "U-town" neighborhood, the photos demonstrated a connection with college fraternities and sororities, public art displays, and a variety of entertainment (see Figure 2).

Differentiation – Comparative Analysis

The third Design Research assignment was about finding differentiation for the chosen neighborhood with a Comparative Analysis. In his book *ZAG*, Marty Neumeier explains that "radical differentiation doesn't test well in focus groups" (Neumeier, 2006). People will claim to want more of the same, but better. Real innovation can be uncomfortable to many because it's new and often risky. This leads to a level playing field of sameness. In the video "Why Isn't Your Brand Differentiation Working?", David Brier says that "Finding and taking advantage of differentiating factors in your brand communications serves to unlevel this playing field" (Brier, 2018). Neumeier supports this with the simple statement, "When everybody zigs, zag" (Neumeier, 2006). The Comparative Analysis is meant to help students "find the zag" for their chosen location.

Conclusion

The Design Research course provided an in-depth introduction to the different types of research and how they are used to inform and develop effective solutions to specific design problems. The place branding assignments utilized these research skills to determine a location's current brand equity and find its differentiation. This differentiation will help set the voice and tone for the visuals that will be created in the next class.

References

- Brier, D. (2018) Why Isn't Your Brand Differentiation Working? Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKrVCxSwbyQ>
- Design, I. (2017, December 3). What Is Brand Equity and Why Is It Valuable In Business? Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@inkbotdesign/what-is-brand-equity-and-why-is-it-valuable-in-business-a2f875b5e13>.
- Esposito, E. (2018, May 8). A Quick Guide to Design Research. Retrieved from <https://www.invisionapp.com/inside-design/design-research/>
- Freach, J. (2011, November 22). The Art of Design Research (and Why It Matters). Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/05/the-art-of-design-research-and-why-it-matters/239561/>
- Glenn, K. W. (n.d.). Little Mexico Branding. Retrieved from <https://www.karawilliamsglenn.com/#/little-mexico-branding/>
- Hardee, H. (2016, April 14). Losing our buzz: Does Chico (State) still deserve its hard-partying reputation? Chico News and Review. Retrieved from <https://www.newsreview.com/chico/losing-our-buzz/content?oid=20614263>
- Neumeier, M. (2006) ZAG: The Number-One Strategy of High-Performance Brands. Retrieved from <https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/zag-the-number-one/0321426770/>
- Stubbs, J. (2016, February 26). Three Elements of Great Place Branding. Retrieved from <https://www.upthereeverywhere.com/blog/three-elements-of-great-place-branding>
- Team, E. (2019, June 1). 5 Place Branding Principles for Successful Brand Development and Management. Retrieved from <https://placebrandobserver.com/5-place-branding-principles-to-guide-brand-development-management/>

Figures



Figure 1. Location and points of interest in the “U-Town” neighborhood of Chico, California.

Figures



Figure 2. Photos depicting characteristics of the “U-Town” neighborhood.