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A new brand for Wellington: a discussion document



November 2010

Introduction

In attendance November 2010

Hilary Beaton/Downstage Theatre
Brian Calhoun/Silverstripe
Nick Kapica/Massey University
Christopher Lipscombe/Ground Zero
Celia Wade-Brown/Mayor of Wellington
Jack Yan/Jack Yan & Associates

Note (November 2013)

This session was not done under the JY&A Consulting banner. It was done by a collective of Wellingtonians concerned for the future of our city, at a meeting organized by Jack Yan. The contents of this report have not been modified, other than the deletion of an introductory statement.

The first session revolved around brainstorming about the city brand.

Wellington has marketed itself with the 'Absolutely Positively' tagline since the early 1990s. It is believed today that the tagline was created to rid Wellington of its "civil servant city" image that it held prior. Since then, the city has relied on this message, furthered to some degree by the previous three mayors who saw Wellington as an event-friendly capital.

None of the participants disagreed that Wellington is, indeed, event-friendly, but believed that it was the right time for a change, particularly with a new mayor.

Hilary Beaton of Downstage Theatre pointed out that in Brisbane, where she had once lived, the city had decided it could not compete with Sydney in attracting new businesses. It set about on a rebrand, which has helped rejuvenate the city. There are obvious parallels with Wellington.

Absolutely Positively Wellington has served us well, but it has failed to transform some of the continued underlying problems of our country, especially as our city advances. The new brand needs to change this, and allow Wellington to be an example for the rest of the country.

Envisaging our future

As suggested by Malcolm Allan of the Medinge Group, we began by envisaging what the future would look like. Concepts of teleworking and of a producer culture—where Wellingtonians created content—were considered.

We envisaged Wellington would have greater pedestrianization, higher-quality bike lanes, a higher standard of living, and products that stressed quality, not quantity.

A cycleway along the coast, as mentioned by the Mayor, could be complemented with a marketing programme that takes people to somewhere different. Google Goggles, notes Brian Calhoun, are a form of augmented reality that can show imagery related to a location, aiding knowledge and marketing.

Wellington should be, the group concluded, a city that creates high-margin products, even primary-sector ones.

There should be more companies not necessarily making things here, which is not wise given the lower-cost bases abroad, but capitalizing on concepts and earning royalties from them. Chris Lipscombe gave a good example of Paul Mather's company, selling construction equipment designs abroad.

Similarly, Wellington companies could make money on things that solve problems, such as earthquake engineering, and play to our natural skill sets.

The city could be a node for teleconferencing. In terms of technology, the disabled and the elderly could have their vital signs monitored electronically.

Culturally, devices could help people arrange to meet in an ad hoc fashion, and Wellington seems better poised for such meetings than other New Zealand cities.

People are still keen to meet up in Wellington, something that is unlikely to change. Taranaki Street, it was discussed, could be a good venue for a creative quarter in Wellington, with businesses already setting up there. It would aid patronage of the arts. The city would be beautified to enhance public spaces.

Local government should be open, and Wellington could be a leader in creating a truly open government entity in New Zealand. Ideas such as Open 411 in San Francisco and Washington, DC could be built upon.

Overall, the participants saw creativity as an economic driver, with a producer culture in Wellington.

Where we are

Wellington is already a beautiful city, but faces a danger of empty shops and drunkenness from some citizens.

No one could see the beauty of the harbour if everything else looked poorly.

Currently, Wellington is hampered by copper wiring for some internet users. Individuals who might be producers of information are restricted by a “Y”-shaped funnel, as Brian describes it, where data come in readily, but find difficulty getting out.

The culture to meet and exchange ideas in public spaces is already there, and can be built upon. The Il Casino site development is going ahead as an immediate move in this direction.

Politics are not the driver in Wellington and the reality is that people are doing other things.

This makes certain political institutions and practices out of date. For example, Creative New Zealand cut Downstage’s funding because it has a narrow idea of what standard arts’ practice is—despite claims, it is far from innovative. There is a danger to having bureaucracy control Wellington’s development.

As Hilary put it: the city faces challenges. The same people are trying to solve things. We need new people to be decision-makers.

Maori integration, for instance, was done by means of lip-service only.

Poetry readings, such as Whitireia Polytechnic’s Eat Your Words events, are taking place.

It is a centre of some niche industries already: typeface design takes place more here in Wellington than any other New Zealand city. High-end audio amplifiers and companies such as Slinkylinks are here.

The Mayor and Chris also discussed the water supply, and whether devolving the supply might be an option; and that the Island Bay marae spring could be turned into a Petone-style water source.

Wellington faces competition from a growing Porirua (which has a young mayor). It will grow around Pataka. The Hutt will grow around the Dowse. Both are likely scenarios. Indeed, New Zealand’s failures have benefited countries such as Singapore.

Kiwis are competitive in sporting endeavours, so why does the entitlement culture persist? This was something that came up with the National Government’s Bright Future programme in 1999, showing that New Zealand had not really moved on in a decade.

Yet non-Kiwis have a greater sense of contests in non-sporting endeavours, so how could we bring this concept into every aspect of Wellington life, be it civic, creative, artistic, educational or sporting? Is it through engagement? Could the Wellington Gold Awards be repositioned? Could innovation be celebrated more with institutional support? Could the NASA head coming to New Zealand somehow be harnessed in as a stepping stone toward this?

We live with a myth of ‘It can’t be done,’ and this is something that needs to change.

Bridging the gap

Hilary spoke of her experience in Brisbane, Queensland. Premier Peter Beattie had a series of roundtables involving film, art and publishing, and skipped the bureaucrats. He went to the people who did the work and whose livelihoods were at risk should things fail: bureaucrats were less likely to understand such risks.

Brisbane's lesson was also to involve young people. Grunge areas getting cleaned out also did not appeal to youth. They needed to be on the edge. Small rural towns in Australia that failed to involve the young had a record of failing, according to the University of Queensland. Those that survived had rotating boards and involved young people. It became a city that centred itself more with science and creativity—another parallel to Wellington.

A good example of having facilities for the young included Waitangi Park, with skateboarding facilities. Who did it? How did it get there? And the young people there are not causing any problems, so there is no police presence.

In Portland, Oregon, Brisbane, Queensland, and Seattle, Washington, decision-making was not left to elders and developers. They brought in groups of people on the edge of arts, creativity and innovation. These people were interested in changes and intellectual discourse, and they were then brought into contact with business.

Mayor Jim Soorley of Brisbane had realized that his city was facing empty shops and social problems—with some parallels to Wellington. He decided that the arts had to be an economic driver to attract people there.

The reality is that Auckland, for so many reasons, is a difficult place to live in.

Brian relayed his experiences of the San Francisco Bay Area. Gentrification of the Embarcadero south of Market saw high-rise apartments built—but in fact, this caused the area to become a ghost town, due to a lack of diversity. The artists left.

Nick Kapica said that Berlin was another example. When investment came in to certain areas, the creatives moved out. Areas wound up stagnating.

He was involved in a project where 7,000 m² of wasteland was redeveloped near Berlin, where the building cooperative set down a ground rule that each building had to be different, so each had uniqueness. This contributed to a sense of place, purpose and identity.

A parallel to Downstage Theatre, he noted, was Sophiensäle.

Gentrification had similar effects, it was felt, on Cuba Street—the region's most diverse street was now Jackson Street, Petone—coupled with the Dowse, the Hutt Valley is beginning to look diverse and exciting.

If Wellington decays or there is imbalance, the Hutt will be a natural magnet.

Therefore, communities needed to preserve their diversity: there should not be, for example, four apartment blocks built solidly together. Public space (be they cafés or wharves, not just parks) needed to be expanded and protected, so people could meet in a spontaneous fashion—the culture of bars, baristas and books that spur creativity.

This could be complemented by augmented reality, but both need to be drivers: one cannot work without the other.

There are already examples of Central Park in New York and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. Downstage Theatre could be such a centre, as is the Wellington waterfront, vital to the character of the city.

Concepts

Participants came up with the following concepts from the discussion.

Edge. The notion of “edge” came from this first part. Coastal cycleways are on the edge of the city, literally. Bio-diversity is celebrated as an “edgy” concept. Cutting-edge is a concept Wellingtonians can relate to. The Sevens are edgy as a concept; as is concentrated diversity.

Connections to science and technology. Following Brisbane’s example, Wellington already has research institutes that can help with R&D in the city.

Empowerment. Other ideas that surfaced from the discussion of a producer culture led to the notion of empowering individuals, which could relate not just to technology, but simpler ideas of growing fruit trees in public gardens, or poetry readings when meeting together.

Encourage diversity. The carrot is better than the stick. Ideas of tolerance, and showing a better way need to be promoted.

Nimble. Wellington can move quickly thanks to size and innovation.

Contests. The idea of competition needs to be built in to the Wellington brand, as discussed above.

Youth. Get young people involved and allow them ownership.

Economic drivers. We identified the beauty of the city, diversity, public spaces, technology and the arts as important drivers for Wellington.

The waterfront. It is a public space that is at the core of much of Wellington’s beauty and is a driver of creativity.

Creative locations. Already Downstage is becoming an incubator for productions, allowing producers to retain their IP—a shift in how theatres could be managed, and totally in line with a creative city. This shift answers how we work today. What if it extended incubation to designers and other creatives?

The weightless economy. Design, IP, and related services can help raise New Zealand’s OECD rankings and can overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’. Royalty-based products, such as *Apollo 13* and others, paint a way forward.

Ownership and shifting to an individual culture. By providing ownership of ideas, Wellington can shift to a more individualistic culture, rather than the team one that tends to hold entrepreneurship back.

Thoughts on brands

It was felt by the participants that ‘Absolutely Positively Wellington’ had run its course. It was considered ‘too meta, too abstract.’

Rough ideas that emerged for a city brand included ‘Doing it for Wellington’ or some adaptation of the airport’s ‘Wild at Heart’ slogan.

Another was to use the words ‘creative capital’ as a suffix, allowing each person to affix a word at the beginning. Tying in with the ownership idea, it creates a brand that everyone can be a part of.