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## The role of place branding in local and regional economic development: bridging the gap between policy and practicality

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Place branding has become an increasingly integral part of local and regional economic development strategies in the global competition for business investment. Professional and academic understanding remains limited, however, regarding whether place branding can be classified as a ‘high-road’ policy with substantive and effective merits or a ‘low-road’ policy that is generally inefficient and ineffective at fostering sustainable economic growth. Through the context of business attraction, this study examines whether place branding represents ‘high-road’ policy by comparing what economic development practitioners are doing to create and support their brands against the needs and desires of businesses considering relocation. The research goal is achieved through a series of in-depth interviews with economic development practitioners ( $n = 25$ ) and private-sector site selectors ( $n = 10$ ) in the province of Ontario, Canada. Gaps between policy and practicality are identified by comparing the responses of the two groups. Results demonstrate that place branding has the potential to be ‘high-road’ policy given its utility in business attraction. In its current implementation, however, place branding remains better described as a ‘low-road’ policy, as it is not being used efficiently. Several gaps in place-branding policy are identified, including an overreliance on visual identities and narratives, poor communication of the brand information, and overemphasis on presenting quality of life and affordability. These gaps present possible areas of ineffectiveness that can limit the ability of a place brand to attract investment, but provide areas of future policy improvements, thus enabling place branding to shift from ‘low road’ to ‘high road’.

**Keywords:** place branding; investment attraction; economic development; policy gap; practitioners; site selectors; Ontario

### Introduction

Cities and regions in advanced economies face fierce international competition for foot-loose business and investment, spurred by loosened trade barriers, more efficient and integrated global transportation and communication systems, and the emergence of new competitive markets. As a result, practitioners and policy-makers who are charged with fostering economic development have to ensure the strategies they pursue position their locale to have greatest opportunities for prosperity. Over the past 20 years, place branding has been increasingly adopted on both local and regional scales to attract businesses. Indeed, place branding has been adopted by places of all geographic scales and contexts with the goal of improving local or regional competitiveness in the global market.

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Place branding is a set of place-based elements that range in scope from logos and slogans (Anholt, 2005; Braun, Eshuis, & Klijn, 2014; Cleave & Arku, 2015a, 2015b; Zenker, 2009) to a broader range of place attributes including promotional and marketing activities, expressions of place through the built and natural environments, actions and attitudes of local government and key stakeholders, and quality of local infrastructure (Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Kavatzis, 2005). The use of place-branding policy influences which elements are emphasized, ultimately influencing how effective the place will be at attracting and retaining business.

Due to the broad nature of place branding, policy-makers and practitioners have a plethora of policy approaches available to them to attract and retain business investment in their communities. But policy-makers need to grasp the nature of place competition and the critical role that effective policy development can play in allowing an area to be competitive against international competition. Indeed, not all policy approaches are created equal. Gordon (1996), Helper (2009), Malecki (2004), and Ornston (2014) draw key distinctions between what can be classified as ‘low-road’ and ‘high-road’ approaches to local and regional economic development policy. In terms of local economic development, ‘low-road’ policy implies a narrow set of homogenized policy initiatives (Gordon, 1996; Helper, 2009), characterized by low-end prescriptive activities that propagate and are mimicked among many places (Malecki, 2004; Ornston, 2014). Alternatively, ‘high-road’ policies focus on comprehensive place-based strategies to attract and retain mobile resources through enhancements and improvements to local conditions and attributes (Clark, Palaskas, & Tsampra, 2004; Helper, 2009; Malecki, 2004; Markusen, 1996; Turok, 2004). ‘High-road’ policies are more likely to be effective and provide the strongest opportunity for a place to be competitive (Clark et al., 2004; Malecki, 2004; Turok, 2004).

Despite its attractiveness as a policy approach to policy-makers, it is unclear whether place branding represents an effective, ‘high-road’ approach to business attraction. Empirical evidence and research are lacking regarding whether place branding is effective in the attraction and retention of business (Bergqvist, 2009). Understanding the effectiveness of place branding is important due to the high costs required to undertake these policy initiatives. Establishing such place brands requires the allocation of scarce public resources. From a perspective of public policy, therefore, it is necessary to understand whether local governments are prudent in their allocation of resources.

With this ambiguity over both policy approach and effectiveness in business attraction, local governments are challenged to make substantive policy decisions that enable place branding to be optimally used. This study seeks to fill these gaps in research and provide policy suggestions by examining the perspectives of key stakeholders: specifically, public-sector economic development practitioners and private-sector site selectors within Ontario, Canada. The perspective of practitioners is significant as they are tasked with initiating and implementing local and regional economic development programmes. Equally, site selectors are important players in business and industry location decision-making as they are responsible for providing professional advice on location for industrial and commercial sites, buildings, data centres, offices and retail locations. They also provide economic development services for business and industry. Together the perspectives of these actors are explored to determine whether place branding has an influence on the investment decisions of potential businesses.

The current study is informed by the following questions:

- To what extent does place branding play a role in business attraction?
- What factors do economic development practitioners consider as important in their local place brand?
- What factors do site selectors consider as important in business and industry location decision-making?
- To what extent are the elements of place branding strategies consistent with the considerations of site selectors in the business and industry (re)location process?

The appraisal of these research questions will determine whether gaps exist in how place-branding policy is being implemented to attract business. Specifically, the responses of practitioners and site selectors will allow for an examination of place-branding policy in two ways: *effectiveness*, or whether this form of policy intervention has any meaningful ability to improve the local economy through business attraction; and the *efficiency* of the policy. The latter takes a more nuanced view of the policy approaches and contrasts them with the practical needs of businesses. This essentially captures whether place-branding policy is capturing the maximum benefit at the minimum costs (Budd & Hirmis, 2004). A ‘high-road’ policy approach, therefore, would be one where the place branding is leveraged to optimize place attributes to provide the best opportunity to attract business. Divergences between the policy implementation and the practical needs can be viewed as policy gaps that may limit the local benefit because the brand is not optimal in the way it connects with the target audience.

From a policy perspective, determining the effectiveness and efficiency of place branding initiatives is an important exercise. Since place branding requires an enormous amount of financial and human resources – which are increasingly scarce in contemporary urban governance – local officials should, therefore, consider substantive and meaningful policies (i.e. ‘high road’). This study considers the implications for place branding as a tool to attract business, a hitherto unexplored domain of research.

### Theoretical framework

Within the larger historical context of global capitalism, economic development has often been characterized as essentially a zero-sum game, being embedded in a framework of inter-place competition for resources, jobs and capital (Harvey, 1989, 2006; Leigh & Blakely, 2013; Malecki, 2004). Indeed, contemporary business attraction can be characterized as a circuit of constant migration, where places poach these footloose economic resources from their competitors (Gertler, 1990), and businesses continually relocate to the locale that provides them the best opportunity for success (Leigh & Blakely, 2013). Due to the zero-sum constraints of the economic system, development activity becomes an exercise in uneven development, as the market simply reorganizes capital, labour and production over space (Harvey, 2006). Camangi (2002) and Malecki (2004) argue that because of this uneven accumulation, cities and regions can essentially go out of business as they become so depleted by outmigration of economic resources that they are at a long-run competitive disadvantage. For instance, the Rust Belt of the Northeastern United States is littered with urban areas that have faced severe economic and urban decline due to the loss of the industrial sector that once dominated the region. Similarly, the province of Ontario, Canada, has seen nearly a one-third decline in manufacturing productivity since the year 2000, accompanied by a loss of over 300,000

manufacturing sector jobs, with the capacity and productivity of the automotive sector being severely diminished (The Mowat Centre, 2014).

To attempt to facilitate a competitive advantage, and mitigate economic losses from the decline in the manufacturing sector, many urban governments have begun adopting entrepreneurial approaches towards local governance. Entrepreneurialism captures the businesslike sense in which cities are being run, as well as the practices that have seen local government imbued with characteristics once distinctive to businesses: risk-taking, inventiveness, promotion and profit motivation (Harvey, 1989, 2006; Hall & Hubbard, 1996). The introduction of private-sector and marketing-led strategies of economic development have allowed place branding to be privileged by planners and politicians (Hannigan, 2003). Based on the pervasive free-market ideology imposed by neoliberalism and globalization, local and regional place management programmes exist in response to decreased state regulation. Place branding, therefore, has been described as a ‘market-led’ approach to stimulating local economic development, as its development, refinement and application as a place management strategy have strong links with the changing global economy. In fact, place branding is typically interpreted from the context of globalization, and is situated in the climate of aggressive inter-place competition (Giovanardi, 2012; Kavaratzis, 2005; Pasquinelli, 2013).

Place branding is a form of competition within the field of economic development. It is an attempt by local and regional governments, through policy intervention, to compete against other local and international markets by actively shaping how their locale is perceived by potential consumers. As Pasquinelli (2013, p. 2) describes, places ‘need to construct their own competitive advantage in order to position themselves in a “market of geographies”, an open territorial competition space where new development opportunities might spill out’. Place branding can, therefore, be viewed as the conscious attempt of governments to shape and promote a specifically designed place identity through policy-making (Ashworth, 2010; Kavaratzis, 2005; Turok, 2009).

Despite its popularity amongst economic development practitioners, it is unclear whether place branding represents a ‘high-road’ or ‘low-road’ policy approach with regards to business attraction. On the one hand, place branding has been described as a strategic set of policy initiatives designed ‘to integrate, guide, and focus place management’ (Kavaratzis, 2005, p. 334). In essence, place branding becomes the compass that guides the enhancement of local attributes and resources to facilitate the development of ‘sticky places’ and create competitive advantage over other markets (Govers, 2013; Malecki, 2004). Conversely, governments have been heavily criticized for misuse of place branding, particularly when focusing on logos and slogans to whitewash local issues in an attempt to create a positive image (Braun et al., 2014; Hall & Hubbard, 1996; Pasquinelli, 2010). Furthermore, place branding has been criticized for being used by local and regional governments as a panacea for a wide array of issues, without clear evidence for effectiveness (Ashworth, 2011). In particular, the specific implications of place branding on business attraction, however, remain unexplored.

## Methodology

The province of Ontario and its municipalities face critical economic challenges similar to those in many advanced economies (Arku, 2015; Clark et al., 2004; Reese & Sands, 2007). Since the 1980s, Ontario has been forced to cope with the challenges of significant economic restructuring caused by globalization and neoliberal policy-making (e.g. the North American Free Trade Agreement – NAFTA). Ontario’s historical

strengths in traditional manufacturing sectors, such as automotive and steel, have faced restructuring and decline; and along with emerging advanced industry sectors face increased competition to maintain their global niches (Bradford & Wolfe, 2013). Municipalities that had previously prospered from the presence of large manufacturing complexes were forced to cope with the aftermath of industrial restructuring and shifting of capital to more productive areas of the economy and different methods of industrial organization (Wolfe & Gertler, 2001). Further pressure is placed on Ontario's municipalities through increased global competition. The municipalities are increasingly integrated into the global market and face stiff competition beyond their historical local and regional rivals for business and industry.

Additionally, Ontario has been affected by the ongoing global economic crisis, which started in 2008. The province has suffered from a range of economic problems, such as closures of traditional industries, fiscal stress and rising unemployment (Arku, 2014). Overall, the challenges of the changing economy have affected the fortunes of most municipalities and communities in Ontario and their approaches to local economic development.

By necessity, municipalities in Ontario have become very proactive in their economic development efforts. Similar creative policy-making, however, is found in many advanced economic areas caused by similar pressures of globalization and neoliberalism (Braun et al., 2014; Malecki, 2004; Reese & Sands, 2007; Turok, 2004, 2009). Because of the political-economic pressures, structural changes to local and regional economies, and the perceived need for creative policy solutions common to Ontario and other advanced economies, the province serves as a strong location for research into place branding and its effectiveness.

### ***Data collection***

Data for this study was collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 25 economic development practitioners and 10 site selectors, representing those who accepted the research invitation and agreed to in-depth interviews. An advantage of in-depth interviews is that they help uncover information that is rich in detail, gained by a clear and comprehensive knowledge of the subject and their perceptions, as well as an appreciation of the context behind the facts (Laing & Crouch, 2009).

The main objective of in-depth interviews is to access expert knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible. The goal of the data collection is to access sufficient subjects to make logical inferences about place branding's role in business attraction. Thus, these two groups of actors are important for key reasons. The practitioners are tasked to initiate and implement economic development programmes and have key insights into local challenges and policy responses, including place branding initiatives. Site selectors are important actors in business relocation because, as discussed here, they provide consultancy for one-half to two-thirds of companies considering a move. Characterized by a systematic approach to decision-making, they provide experience and acumen in the discussion of factors driving business relocation, and can provide insight into both the overall utility (i.e. effectiveness) and optimization (i.e. efficiency) of place-brand efforts.

An effort was made to include practitioners from a range of geographic, political and economic contexts in Ontario to obtain a cross-section of responses. While much of the literature on place branding and economic development has focused on core or larger cities, municipalities of all sizes are employing place branding as part of their economic development strategies (Cleave & Arku, 2014). Reese (1992) argues that research

that incorporates smaller and more peripheral municipalities, in conjunction with larger core urban areas, provides more vigorous analysis and allows for a broader understanding of policy approaches within a region compared with narrow case studies. Furthermore, smaller and peripheral municipalities face the greatest likelihood of economic decline and are most likely to be affected by globalization. Consequently, it is important to understand the decisions that municipalities of all sizes are making (Reese, 1992). Additionally, selecting municipalities within a single region helps to control for variation in institutional restrictions and the general economic development climate.

The final list of localities that participated in the study is diverse geographically, economically and demographically (Table 1). While experienced officials were targeted because of the perception of greater knowledge and understanding, several more recently hired practitioners were included to obtain more diverse perspectives (Sadler, Cleave, Arku, & Gilliland, 2016). Interviews were conducted until the point of saturation was reached (at  $n = 25$ ), where no new information was being obtained. Due to the saturation of data and the diverse group of practitioners included in the study, the perspectives on place branding obtained through the interviews are reflective of the larger state of place-branding policy-making in Ontario.

Similarly, the site selectors were identified by their experience and seniority in their respective firms. To create a point of common experience with the practitioners, site selectors had additionally undertaken (re)locations of businesses in Ontario. The site selectors were additionally selected due to their experiences of operating internationally, which meant their responses could be contextualized in a more global context, giving credibility to transmission of findings and policy suggestions between regions. As

Table 1. Municipalities participating in the study.

Municipality	Tier	Type	Population
Barrie	Single	City	135,711
Brampton	Lower	City	523,911
Brantford	Single	City	93,650
Brighton	Lower	Municipality	10,928
Brockville	Single	City	21,870
Burlington	Lower	City	175,779
Cambridge	Lower	City	126,748
Hamilton	Lower	City	519,949
Kingston	Single	City	123,363
Kitchener	Lower	City	219,153
London	Single	City	366,151
Markham	Lower	City	301,709
Mississauga	Lower	City	713,443
Oakville	Lower	Town	182,520
Orangeville	Lower	Town	27,975
Orillia	Single	City	30,586
Ottawa	Single	City	883,391
Peterborough	Single	City	78,698
Pickering	Lower	City	88,721
Samia	Lower	City	72,366
Simcoe	Upper	County	446,063
Springwater	Lower	Township	18,223
St. Thomas	Single	City	37,905
Toronto	Single	City	2,615,060
Woodstock	Lower	City	37,754

before, the interviews were conducted until saturation of information was reached (at  $n = 10$ ). Due to the limited number of site selectors currently operating and the international experience of those interviewed, the responses on place branding are representative of the broadly held opinions on place branding within the industry.

Interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014 and averaged approximately 45 min in length. The practitioners were asked to respond to a series of questions such as: What is place branding's role in local economic development?; and What elements are emphasized in business attraction? The site selectors were asked questions such as: What is the role of place branding in the site selection and relocation process?; and What common elements are businesses looking for when considering relocation?

### ***Analysis***

To appraise the research questions, analysis of participant responses was divided into two broad themes: the *effectiveness* of place branding in business attraction, and the *efficiency* of place branding. Within these two broader themes, several sub-themes were developed to guide analysis: conditions (the social, political and physical context used as the basis for their place brands, and the requirements identified by site selectors as important for relocation); interaction amongst actors (for instance, the relationship between economic development practitioners and site selectors, or efficiency of the local government); strategies and tactics; and consequences (specifically, whether the policy is 'high road' or 'low road', and how place branding affects site selection). The meanings that practitioners and site selectors attached to place branding were also examined to understand further the changing landscape of economic development.

Public policy should be constructed in a way that maximizes benefit and minimizes cost (Nagel, 1986). As described in Figure 1, this analysis of place-branding policy considers these implications in the two dimensions of effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness, at its core, captures whether place-branding policy provides any benefits through its utility in business attraction. The second dimension, efficiency, also influences the benefit that a policy can return, but perhaps more importantly considers

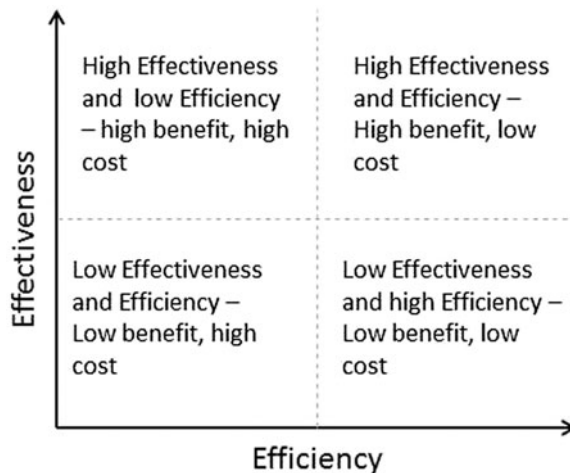


Figure 1. Relationship between policy effectiveness and efficiency.



the cost in financial, political and human capital required to implement a policy (Budd & Hirmis, 2004). If policy gaps exist between what is being done and what is necessary to facilitate business attraction, the cost–benefit ratio is likely to be poor. Likewise, if unnecessary place-branding elements are being developed, the cost will be high and the cost–benefit ratio will again be poor, even if place branding is perceived as an effective strategy. Limiting policy gaps and creating efficient policies that align with the practical needs of business should therefore maximize benefits while limiting costs.

Assimilating the responses with general themes on local economic development and place branding, the policy approaches in Ontario are used to explore the underlying reasons for branding, as well as the consistency with which place-brand messages connect with the needs of prospective businesses. While the research is carried out within Ontario, its in-depth, qualitative grounding allows for abstraction and a transfer of findings and policy recommendations to other geographical areas. Indeed, Ontario provides a useful location for a regional case study. The province and its cities are well integrated into the national, supra-regional and global economies. Ontario, like most advanced economies, has transitioned from a traditional economic base relying on large-scale manufacturing towards service provisions, advanced manufacturing and knowledge-based industries. It has also been identified as a region where place branding is prevalent. Nearly all communities, regional authorities and the province are heavily invested in place branding (Cleave & Arku, 2015b).

## Results

The analysis identifies existing gaps between place branding initiatives in Ontario and the practical needs of relocating businesses. Throughout the results section, quotes are used to illustrate key issues raised by the practitioners and site selectors. Interviewees have been randomly assigned a pseudonym for clarity (P1, P2, ..., P25 for practitioners; and S1, S2, ..., S10 for site selectors).

### *Practitioners' perspectives on place branding's rationale: 'reputation building'*

Within the context of local economic development, practitioners not only regarded place branding as a sound policy but also expressed optimism about the role of place branding in business attraction and retention. Broadly, practitioners perceived place branding as a way of 'positioning the community that makes it seem business-friendly' (P21). Indeed, the result of place branding efforts was described as essentially synonymous with reputation, and the goal of a branding exercise was to grow strong local reputations. The use of place branding for business attraction was justified by the perceived importance of businesses to the local economy. From a more traditional perspective, one practitioner expressed that manufacturing 'does represent our key wealth creation aspect. [...] It generates a lot of wealth, it creates employment' (P5). As this relates to branding, the practitioner indicated: 'We want to be identified as an industrial community' (P23).

Practitioners noted that the attraction of business improves the economic base of their area, thereby strengthening the place brand by increasing the mass of promotable assets as well as the local and regional reputation as a positive place to invest. As the business base increases in size, it makes the locale appear more attractive to external parties: as a good place to do business. As an illustration, one practitioner described:

So we started dealing with a large manufacturing firm. As soon as that happened our number of inquiries really took off. [...] In a really good year we might get 70 to 80 bona fide inquiries. That year we had 210 [...] and the rationale was if the large manufacturing firm picked here, they are a big company, they really do their homework, and it's kind of like the seal of approval. So we've really benefitted from that.(P25)

The addition of the large manufacturing facility helped to draw attention to the area, as well as legitimize the place brand. As a result, the local and regional authorities were able to parlay their public image into greater interest from their target audience, and ultimately greater investment.

***Site selectors' perspectives: 'place branding has value but caution is needed'***

While practitioners firmly believe that place branding has a role in economic development, the site selectors were more cautious in their optimism. According to the site selectors, the goal of the site selection process is to ensure that the new location correctly matches the needs of the prospective businesses. As one site selector explained, 'the key is that they are looking at all the variables and factors that are important to their business' (S1).

Considering the scope of site selection and the large number of places jockeying for investment, the site selection process was described as one of elimination rather than discovery. One site selector commented that their role was 'to get down to a short list of communities and facilities' (S1). Emphasizing the global nature of business relocation, another site selector commented:

It's always helpful to keep in mind that site selection is one of elimination. It's not necessarily one of seeking. It's to start with the globe in some cases literally, and to continue to whittle down the list, so any misstep a community makes, whether in the data or how they present themselves is an excellent excuse to get rid of them.(S2)

Interestingly, site selectors noted that favourable images of places created through branding initiatives play a role in their location considerations for prospective business and industry. While the systematic and objective nature of site selection appears to limit the impact of place branding, a strong image or reputation may help overcome some limitations:

It's our job as site selectors to provide our clients with intelligence that might not be readily apparent from the data itself. So if there's a community out there that has 90% of the must haves but missing that last little bit. But I as the professional in the room can use my discretion to say something along the lines of: 'I've been looking at this and I know of a community that fits on most of these but misses on one. [...] I recommend that we include it through the rest of the analysis and see how it does'.(S2)

In this regard, a logical implication is that in cases where the site selector is involved, the brand must inform them about the distinctive advantages of the place, not just the business and industry that is considering relocation. To achieve this, however, a point made by the site selectors was that it must be accurate and positive to provide any value. As one selector noted: 'I will tell you if it's specific and rings true to me, then it's something that I will pay attention to. [...] I pay much more attention to bad branding than I do good branding' (S2). Given that the site selection process is one of elimination, poor presentation of an external image can cause site selectors to perceive

the community as a bad fit or an unsuitable place to do business. Bad place branding can, therefore, provide an easy excuse to remove a region from consideration for business and industry.

### ***Important factors in place branding efforts***

While the responses of the practitioners and site selectors suggest that place branding has perceived utility (or effectiveness) in business and industry attraction, further examination is needed on the efficiency of place-brand policies by comparing the brand elements perceived as important by practitioners and site selectors. Between the two groups of respondents, eight factors were identified as important in the business attraction and site-selection process: availability and quality of talent or labour; logistics and location; ease of relocation; available land and services; cost and other financial considerations; quality of life and place; place narrative or visual identity; and channel of communication. Opinions diverged between the two groups on what factors were ultimately important in business attraction. Table 2 provides an overview of the relative importance of these factors, as enumerated by practitioners and site selectors. Indeed, the perspectives of the two groups indicate both areas of alignment and divergence between place-brand policy and the factors important in business relocation. The next sections will examine the areas of alignment and divergences. The divergences form the basis of policy gaps that can hamper the efficiency of place-branding policy.

### ***Areas of agreement: what is going right in place branding efforts?***

The main areas of emphasis identified as important by both groups were: the availability of a workforce and talent; location and logistics; access to supplies and end markets; and the character and effectiveness of local government (Table 2). For instance, both strongly highlighted the importance of a competent workforce for investment decision-making. The site selectors noted that ‘I have yet to find a site selection that does not involve workforce at some point down the line’ (S2). Providing an example, one selector noted that ‘[advanced manufacturing firms] need micro-electronics engineers.

Table 2. Importance of place brand components for practitioners and site selectors.

Brand element	Practitioners		Site selectors	
	Mentions	Perceived importance	Mentions	Perceived importance
Visual identity and narrative	24	High	2	None
Location and logistics	22	High	10	High
Financial considerations	15	High	3	Variable to Low
Available talent	18	High	10	High
Government efficiency	10	Moderate	10	High
Infrastructure	8	Low	8	Moderate
Quality of place	23	Moderate	6	Variable to Low
Channel of communication	25	Print: high In person: high Digital: moderate	5	Print: low In person: moderate Digital: high

So they need to find a market that they're going to find a lot of those talents' (S1). Likewise, a practitioner stated that 'having a talented and well-trained population [or workforce] is important. [...] Having the people that businesses are looking for can really make us attractive' (P24). In an effort to develop further a workforce, local and regional governments are making investments into areas traditionally outside their purview, as captured in the comment below:

We invest heavily into our universities and colleges. We invested \$CAN 2.5 million in the creation for the centre for research in advanced manufacturing and design technologies. Investing in that helps build our future talent workforce, our human infrastructure which we believe is as important as enhancing our strength and making us competitive.(P2)

Site selectors also indicate the importance of higher education facilities, with one site selector mentioning 'we may actually scan universities to find out what programs they have to find out what would be the best place to be near. Should I be in London? In Ontario? Boston? British Columbia?' (S8).

Another area of strong agreement between the practitioners and site selectors relates to having efficient local bureaucracy. Both noted the time sensitivity of the relocation process, and places unable to fit within the parameters set by the businesses and site selectors can quickly be excluded from consideration (S1, S5). This suggests that places perceived by site selectors as chronically inefficient could find it difficult to attract businesses, as this reputation limits the possibility of their consideration as a suitable location for investment. Both the practitioners and site selectors acknowledged that creating a path of least resistance is an effective way to facilitate business relocation. One practitioner shared the following steps undertaken by their local government to improve efficiency in the delivery of services:

We've put in the tools to get business through the system faster. We've put in a one-stop shop on the main floor of city hall if you have any questions. We have two business facilitators that shepherd you through the process and refer you to the correct people in the corporation.(P8).

Efficiency in delivery of services was equally important to site selectors, with one stating that: 'world class permitting is 90 days or less. That's the benchmark. If you can't do it in 90 days or less you are probably going to be eliminated' (S3). Indeed, the need for efficiency is viewed as important, to the point that public authorities willing to do initial 'leg-work' on site permitting and certification will be viewed more positively. As one selector described: 'We look for certified sites [...] sites that have most or all of the environmental and geotechnical work done to prove that the site is shovel ready. That you can start building on it right away' (S7). Having available, shovel-ready land 'is much more important than cash money, because it's going to save the client so much time that they are going to be able to get into that building ahead of schedule' (S1). These quotes suggest that faster and simpler local bureaucracy presents a monetary advantage to businesses and that 'speeding up' the relocation process can be a key point of differentiation. Additionally, the responses of the site selectors suggest a disregard for long-term vitality and instead emphasize a concern for short-term efficiency. This is perhaps because site selectors have their own short-term agendas: their methods and agendas may not necessarily be in the best long-term interests of their clients. Alternatively, it could indicate that businesses considering relocation are most concerned with

the near-term and are willing to make long-term sacrifices if it allows for immediate profitability.

Another point of agreement relates to how the area's character is developed through interaction with various local stakeholders. The image that local stakeholders present is important in the successful recruitment of business and industry. Initial stages of a project may involve contact with economic development officials in the collection of information. Describing the perception about the ease of doing business, one site selector intimated that: 'if the economic development agency seems to have a blasé attitude, this would probably eliminate an area quite frankly' (S5). Another site selector said:

I think it is really valuable [...] the first impression is very important. [...] it can be as simple as returning my phone call or email in a reasonable amount of time [...] there are some that never called me back. What's with that? They're certainly not going to make the list.(S1).

The practitioners identified a similar need for creating a positive image in the initial phases of contact. As one practitioner explained: 'we want to be seen as being easy to do business with and we want to make sure that the experience is a positive one [...] to make sure that they get the information that they need' (P25).

The character of a place is also important in the advanced stages of site selection, where a short list of places receive site visits (ranging from five [S1] to twelve [S9]). In this stage of the process, interviews are conducted with local companies and employers (S8) as well as economic development personnel (S3, S7). The sense of place – in an economic or business sphere – that developed from these meetings had an influence on final decision-making:

Community A had everything that we need but I wasn't comfortable with their leadership group. Community B had just about everything we need [...] but wasn't that a great bunch of people that we met with. They convinced us that they will stand by us and help us be successful at all costs. And that's generally where that plant will locate.(S7)

Contextualizing this response, emotional dimensions are leveraged by creating a strong personal impression.

A final area of agreement among the practitioners and site selectors involves the importance of location and logistics. Every site selector who participated in this study listed these as vital in the relocation process (Table 2). These factors are important in allowing a business 'access to suppliers' and 'access to the market' (S5). Similarly, proximity to large urban centres (P7) and major transportation hubs (P25) and the presence of production facilities (P23) are touted as virtues.

### ***Areas of disagreement: identifying the policy gaps***

Notwithstanding the areas of agreement noted above, several areas of disagreement emerged over the importance of place-branding elements in business and industry attraction (Figure 2). The greatest divergence in the perspectives of the site selectors and practitioners regarded the use of direct promotion through logos and slogans. Practitioners heavily promoted such strategies, identifying the logo or slogan as a vital part of the brand, with practitioners stating 'you need it to help explain who you are and what you are about' (P23) and that 'it is a shorthand way to get your message across' (P15). Additionally, several practitioners identified that place branding involved telling a story

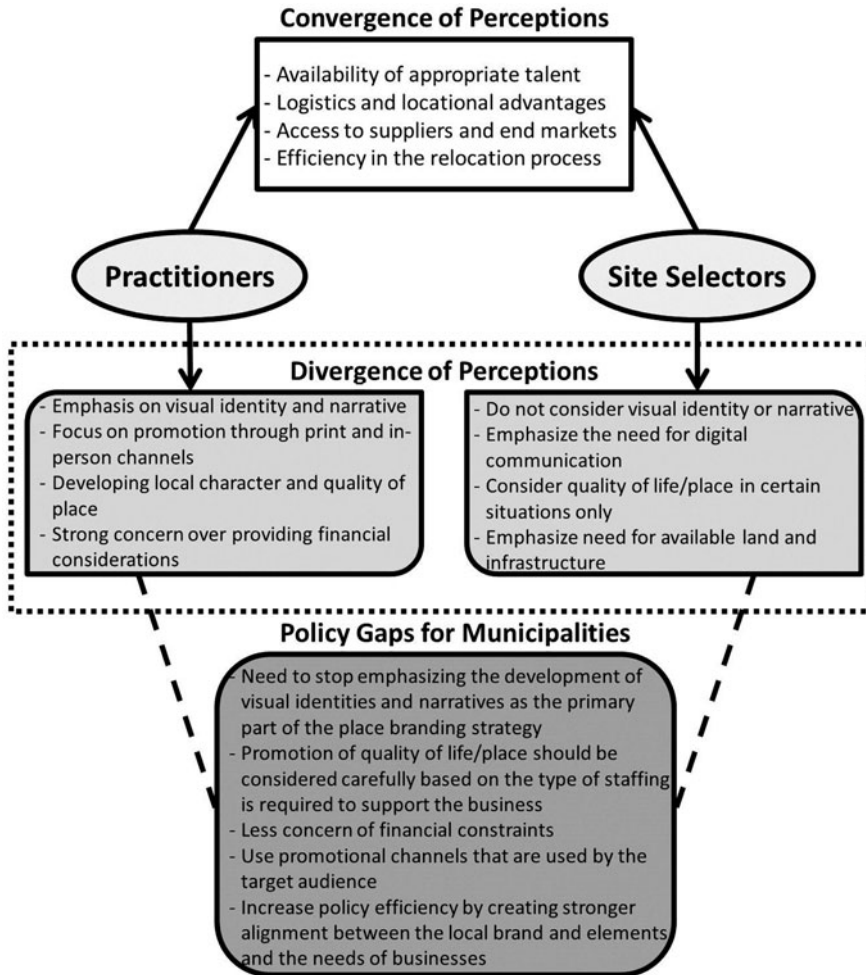


Figure 2. Identifying areas of convergence and divergence in importance of place-branding elements.

or narrative to capture attention (P4, P10). Ultimately, the slogans and logos were considered important, as they are ways to ‘crystalize or formalize the message you are trying to communicate’ (P2). In contrast, the site selectors doubted whether visual identity or any narratives associated with the place brand had any relevance in location decision-making by businesses and industry. One site selector discussed that, ‘I’ve never included any community in my site search because they have a nice name [...] or a nice theme. That just doesn’t come into play’ (S3). This divergence is important because in an attempt to create a unique identity and differentiation from competing markets, place branding efforts generally have dedicated scarce resources to the development of logos and slogans.

The second significant divergence between site selectors and practitioners concerns the channel of communication used to promote the locale and its brand. Hospers (2003) argues that brand communication is important. Without it, potential investors will not

understand the assets or advantages an area has to offer. The practitioners emphasized two areas used as promotional channels for business attraction: traditional media (i.e. newspapers, brochures) and local residents. Several practitioners (P3, P7, P8, P12 and P15) suggested that print media was a viable method of promoting a brand. As one noted:

It's about getting to people in the way they consume information [...] we still have a segment of the audience that are reading magazines, are picking print magazines. So it's an opportunity to amplify and reach what we are doing digitally through print.(P12)

Additionally, the practitioners noted that beyond earned media, a strategic effort was being made to have content created and disseminated, which required financial resources to carry out. As one practitioner explained in describing their print-media strategy:

We've elicited the services of a Toronto-based publicist and she's going to get us earned media in several publications, key publications while this whole [branding] campaign is going on. [...] We're looking to get articles in 15 to 20 publications at the same time the campaign is going on.(P8)

A theme that emerged from the responses of the practitioners – as alluded to in the previous quotes – is that the method of delivery should be meaningful and relevant. Using stakeholders to promote locality is a second strategy to ensure the brand message is clear and appropriate for the target audience. One practitioner noted that ‘we use people in our ambassador program to support us’ (P5). In this instance, the brand is being delivered in a way that is accurate and ‘comes from a voice that they [the target audience] trust and respect’ (P24), setting up realistic expectations about the area. Cultivating and training a group of local stakeholders to be ambassadors for the brand, however, requires a strong investment of human resources to be effective. More importantly, based on the perspectives of the site selectors, this approach is misguided.

Site selectors indicate that the approaches practitioners use to communicate their brands are extremely inefficient. While there is an element of business-to-business communication in the latter stages of the site selection process, the majority of the process – when an area is most likely to be removed from consideration – is done digitally. Indeed, the site selectors were unanimous that a strong digital presence is needed for a city or region to increase their chance of attracting business (Table 2). Specifically, the site selectors suggested that there should be focus on developing websites with access to ‘information that we require [...] costs of land, taxes and fees [...] even some of the lifestyle indicators. It should be easily accessible’ (S9). The responses of the site selectors suggest that the channel of communication is actually becoming a brand element itself, and can influence the perceptions of a potential investor. As one site selector described:

I find most community economic development websites are lacking in what the customer really needs. And I don't really understand it. There are plenty of examples of what we need, especially expressed through organizations like the International Economic Development Council, yet these websites continue to be inferior. I don't get it. Very frustrating.(S5)

The implication is that poor presentation or limited data availability ‘can knock a municipality out of the running’ (S10). Municipal authorities must, therefore, necessarily consider who constitutes their target audience, and how they will react to the channels

in which the brand is promoted. If they do not, negative perceptions could potentially be developed.

The third major area of disagreement was the role of incentives in the investment attraction process, as only one site selector stated this as a make-or-break factor. Generally, site selectors were unmoved by incentives, indicating that ‘costs are not the defining factor of site selection’ (S4), ‘there are many other factors we need to consider before we can even start to think about costs or incentives’ (S6), and ‘it is rare that a company will come in and tell us that getting the best deal is the most important thing’ (S1). A prevailing perception among the site selectors, however, was the potential to overcome the issue of incentives if the correct elements are presented in place brands.

This differs from the perspective of practitioners who (as previously discussed) felt that incentives and bonuses were crucial in business attraction. This was particularly pertinent when competing with markets in other jurisdictions (e.g. proximate municipalities in neighbouring states of the United States) where the use of financial incentives is an integral part of the economic development process. To illustrate, practitioners noted that ‘We can’t really offer financial reason to invest here’ (P1) and ‘we are a really expensive place to do business in, land rates are high’ (P24). This may have the negative side effect of public authorities avoiding certain economic sectors because they perceive that financial concerns may limit success. The practitioners noted that lowering corporate tax rates (P24) and reducing or eliminating development charges (P7, P13) were strategies to attract business by keeping costs low. Overall, the implication is that practitioners feel the need to brand their constituency as cheap places to do business. This policy approach may be inefficient, however, as a beneficial situation is created for business, but the loss of revenue limits spending in other areas.

The quality of the place, particularly as a place to live, was another area of divergence between site selectors and practitioners. The practitioners felt that the quality of the place was important in all business attraction, with one noting ‘we feel the local character and attractiveness will be an important consideration. [...] Companies will come here because we offer unique features that nobody else does’ (P14). In particular, the ideal of ‘live, work, play’ (P1, P5, P9 and P14) was seen as an asset in all business attraction. In contrast, the site selectors indicated its importance was more contextual and based on what type of business was being courted. As one site selector said:

If it is a big R&D facility, where they have to wheel in a lot of top talent it’s probably near the top. It may be the top factor because they’ve got to get these people to move. And people are not going to move from one place to another unless it’s a beautiful place and they are going to like living there.(S1)

When it came to general labourers, another site selector noted: ‘We aren’t going to be so concerned about the local appeal, because we likely will be drawing from the community, not attracting outside talent’ (S6).

The implication of the previous quotes is that businesses are less concerned about the quality of place, except in very specific circumstances. In contrast, practitioners viewed the promotion of the quality of place as necessary across the board. Cultural elements were consistently touted, such as local history, performance arts, local festivals, lifestyle programmes and recreational activities. Emphasis was often given to developing a ‘buzz’ within the community which could be communicated to a target audience. These programmes, however, were not specifically focused on attracting explicit



audiences or businesses. Additionally, such programmes require significant investment of financial and human resources to successfully implement.

One consideration, alluded to in the responses of the consultants, is that depending on the specific industry there may be significant divergence of expectations, or even contradictory expectations, of the potential investors as different businesses will have specific needs. As a result, the practitioners need to have an understanding of what their target audience's specific needs are. Although the current paper presents broad similarities in the perspectives of the site selectors, greater heterogeneity likely exists at more granular levels.

The homogeneity of the responses of site selectors may also be caused by a selection bias, given that site selectors are proxies for businesses: the needs of businesses who employ site selectors are likely different from those who do not. For example, a business simply looking for the best incentive package may not need to employ a site selector, as little need exists to identify the place-based advantages of a specific locale. This may, therefore, present a limitation for future research to elucidate through the perspectives of businesses that do not employ site selectors. Similarly, each site selector who agreed to participate in the research held a positive view on place branding; it is possible that those who declined participation would have had a more negative view on place branding and its role in local economic development.

### **Discussion: place branding effectiveness**

Is place branding effective at attracting business? Practitioners and site selectors were broadly positive about place branding's potential utility in attracting businesses. Place-branding policy can be used to guide identification, enhancement and leveraging of the place-based advantages a city or region has to offer, tailoring the image of the area to align with the needs of the business. It is through this well-measured and substantive approach to coordination, organization and promotion of local resources that provides the best opportunity for effective policy development. This conclusion, however, is not meant to imply that effectiveness is purely the alignment of city elements and site selector needs, as simply pleasing the site selector will not attract business or guarantee local competitiveness. Instead, it demonstrates how place branding can be maximized to increase its utility in business attraction. Local and regional economic development can be complex and difficult to relate specific outcomes (i.e. attraction of specific businesses, changes to competitiveness indices; Malecki, 2004). This approach, however, begins to demonstrate a relationship between place branding and competitiveness.

Lever and Turok (1999, p. 792) note that 'cities and other places compete with one another. This takes many different forms – some direct head-to-head competition for particular projects or events; others more indirect, subtle and incremental in nature'. Place branding is a competitive tool, as the policy aims to differentiate one area from its competitors with the goal of creating inward investment. If properly designed and executed, it has the potential to benefit to the local economy. An important caveat, however, is that simply undertaking place branding will not guarantee local growth or prosperity. The zero-sum nature of the global economy means that development is not a win-win proposition. The uneven distribution of a finite set of resources will result in some area becoming winners and some becoming losers. Indeed, many disadvantaged areas (e.g. restrictive state government, high cost of employment, limited access to key natural resources) may be destined to lose, regardless of whether they undertake shrewd place branding (Ashworth, 2010; Leigh & Blakely, 2013; Malecki, 2004). For advanced

economies like Ontario's, the emergence of markets such as China, India and Mexico provide low-cost sites that are also engaging in aggressive place branding initiatives (Zhang & Zhao, 2009). Consequently, further economic decline is a possibility in Ontario, even if strong place branding is undertaken.

Based on the perspectives of the site selectors and practitioners, however, evidence suggests that Ontario is still considered a viable market as the province transitions towards advanced manufacturing and a knowledge economy. Advanced economies are perceived to have competitive advantages over emerging markets, and in the light of this view, Ontario's communities are branding themselves to highlight the locational strengths – such as skilled labour, efficient local government, access to the North American market and an existing economic base – which help ameliorate issues related to cost. Additionally, Ontario is transitioning to an intensive knowledge-based economy and emerging branding is beginning to reflect this change.

As such, Ashworth (2010) argues that place branding should not be undertaken unless there a 'product' that exists in the community and is worthy of promotion. In the context of business attraction, it means that place branding should only be employed to attract business and industry that fits into the existing local economy, and thus strengthens an existing sector of the local or regional economy, rather than attempting to attract businesses in sectors that do not already have a local or regional foothold. Based on the responses of the practitioners, it is evident that place branding is being used as the compass to improving local capacity. This appears to fit nicely with place-branding policy, as it is most effective when designed to guide the improvement of the overall area and its attributes. Through this enhancement of place, a community become 'sticky' enough to attract and retain business.

In Ontario, the city of Kitchener used place branding to facilitate broad improvements to the local economy, urban landscape and culture. The economy, buttressed by knowledge-based industries, was cultivated through partnerships with two local universities, the recruitment and retention of highly skilled labour, and an aggressive online strategy designed to engage and attract potential businesses. This online strategy included an up-to-date website that provided site selectors with an array of information about the city, its workforce and the costs of doing business in Kitchener (e.g. housing, taxes and development charges). This development of the economy was paired with redevelopment of Kitchener's downtown, and placing heavy emphasis on revitalizing the local culture and social environment. This represents an example of 'high-road' place branding, as Kitchener was strategic in identifying its strengths (i.e. a highly educated workforce and a strong technology-based regional economy), its target businesses, and the improvements that the city needed to have the best opportunity to attract and retain them. By matching policy direction with the needs of the businesses (as identified by the site selectors; Table 2), Kitchener optimized their opportunity for growth. As a result of these policy decisions, Kitchener attracted Google to open its largest campus in Canada (Google Careers, 2016).

Despite the success of Kitchener, place-branding policy in Ontario often takes a 'low-road' approach. Typically these failures are associated with superficial branding attempts. From 2008 to 2012 the town of Innisfil, Ontario, spent C\$42,000 on developing a new logo (Kirkby, McMahon, Westwood, Taylor-Vaisey, & Rekai, 2013). The poorly executed place branding resulted in negative national media attention and was held as an example of government wastefulness. Additionally, the municipality of Port Hope, Ontario, spent C\$100,000 (or 1% of its 2012 annual budget) in a failed attempt to develop a new logo (Vyhnak, 2013). In both cases, the poorly focused place branding

attempts ignored aspects identified by site selectors as important; these included a lack of shovel-ready serviced land, ineffective systems to facilitate relocation and poorly designed websites with limited information. Innisfil and Port Hope's rebranding attempts thus represent 'low-road' approaches to development, as the local governments focus on policy areas that site selectors acknowledge have no effectiveness in attracting business. As a result, these efforts undermine – rather than strengthen – place competitiveness.

### **Policy recommendations and conclusion**

The overall goal of this study was to identify the effectiveness and efficiency of place branding in business attraction, or simply: whether place branding should be used in business attraction and whether place-branding policy is being used in a meaningful, substantive way. To evaluate and discuss the research question fully, it is necessary to determine an adequate base to judge the social costs and benefits of place branding. In this context, insight can be provided by identifying whether place branding is 'high-road' or 'low-road' policy.

If constructed in a measured way that targets appropriate sectors of the economy, the potential benefit of 'high-road' policies are likely to outweigh their associated costs for several reasons. First, the potential to be competitive remains high, as the policy is optimized to more efficiently align the policy direction with the needs of the target audience. Second, the general improvement of a place through 'high-road' policy is likely to produce positive externalities that may provide benefit to the community or region (e.g. improved social and cultural opportunities, more efficient government, better education facilities, or upgraded infrastructure). Furthermore, some branding activities could yield additional benefits – especially in a regional context – in attracting workers, businesses and leisure visitors, as these groups have overlapping needs. Place branding should therefore take a 'high-road' approach and convey the quality of the region and its potential long-term competitive advantages (Hall, 1998). The results of this study demonstrate that place branding has the potential to be an effective strategy in business attraction, as site selectors noted the influence of place brands and their elements on the relocation process.

Presently, much existing place-branding policy can be classified as 'low road'. With few exceptions, public authorities generally do not optimize their place brand strategies because they focus too heavily on features unimportant to site selectors; authorities are therefore not maximizing the brand's utility in attracting businesses. Figure 2 shows the specific gaps between existing policy and the practical needs of the site selectors, demonstrating that current place branding strategies are not meeting the expectations of the target audience. Specifically, existing place-branding policy appears to focus on representational elements of the place brand. The site selectors, however, are more inclined to consider functional assets in their systematic and more objective approach to decision-making.

As noted in Table 2, the largest policy gap is in the development of narratives, logos and slogans. Heavy financial commitment is associated with the creation and dissemination of visual identities, yet it has little or no bearing on the decision-making being done by site selectors and the businesses they represent. This reveals that local governments lack a firm sense of what really constitutes a place brand. Indeed the criticism of place-branding policy is that it is too often focused solely on the development of a visual identity (Anholt, 2005; Ashworth, 2010).

Two other gaps between policy and practice – the emphasis on finances and the quality of place – appear to have a similar root cause. From the responses of the practitioners, place-branding policy appears to be viewed in a general, all-encompassing way, where the brand is not differentiated based on the target audience. The site selectors, however, indicate variability in the needs of each business based on the type of firm and the part of the company being relocated (i.e. back-offices, production and headquarters). Municipalities and regions, therefore, are not optimizing their place brands by focusing on assets and reputation, as these do not necessarily meet specific business needs. It is unlikely that a place brand will be fully optimized, since business preferences vary with regard to relocation strategy – for instance, the focus some businesses give to acquiring incentives. Furthermore, given the fast pace of the global economy, a place is unlikely to ever hit on a fully optimized brand that synergizes completely with business needs. Through ‘high-road’ policy, however, a place brand can be broadly optimized to meet the needs of an economic sector, as the improvements to local or regional attributes are specifically attuned to drive attraction and consumption within a target audience (Gordon, 1996; Helper, 2009; Ornston, 2014).

The practitioners were also strongly concerned with their municipalities appearing to be an economical place to operate. Conversely, the site selectors indicate this as a minor concern for many relocating businesses, and as such advocate that it should not be a strong focus for municipal and regional policies. Investing to provide the greatest quality of infrastructure, services and efficiency will strengthen the reputation of a place in a more favourable way than simply being inexpensive (or, in some cases, providing direct subsidies).

Finally, place branding’s effectiveness is limited by failing to promote through the ideal communication channels. Indeed, the channel of communication actually can be viewed as an integral component of the place brand. The site selectors were strongly in favour of detailed, business-relevant information about the community that could be easily accessed through websites. The practitioners, however, demonstrated a fundamental lack of understanding regarding where the site selectors would acquire their information by relying on more traditional information dissemination. Cities and regions are therefore not providing sufficient information or leveraging contemporary channels of communication, limiting their effectiveness in promoting their locational advantages.

The implication of these identified gaps is that local and regional authorities need to consider what type of businesses they are planning to compete for in the near- and long-term based on their economic development strategy. From there, consideration must be paid to the elements being sought by a particular businesses sector, and municipalities must then reallocate funds to strengthen these areas to meet business needs. Over time, this will help to create a strong reputation as a place to do business.

To improve place brand effectiveness, and create the opportunity to transition from ‘low-road’ to ‘high-road’ development, the existing policy gaps identified in this research must be addressed (Figure 2). This current set of priorities needs to be reconsidered and reconfigured for an area to be successful in business attraction. Indeed, place branding needs to be strategic and the entirety of the brand – its form and what elements are included in it – should be considered. The local government must have a clear, realistic understanding of its assets and the current political–economic climate, and thus determine reasonable expectations for future growth. From this, development direction can be set and investments can be made to improve key areas. Careful consideration of where to invest scarce public funds is paramount and, indeed, should be focused less on a logo or slogan and more on cultivating assets that create

differentiation from competing markets. Equally as important, there must be a concept of the type of businesses being sought. Based on the responses of the site selectors, businesses seek a consistent set of characteristics when considering where to locate (Table 2). A way to shift policy from ‘low road’ to ‘high road’, therefore, is to use knowledge about the target group to strategically align place branding. This will create efficiency, as effort will increasingly be spent pursuing policy approaches more likely to generate substantive outcomes, which will increase potential effectiveness by generating greater opportunities for competitiveness and economic growth.

As place branding becomes an increasingly present part of local economic development, local and regional governments must be careful to undertake it in a way that is both effective and an efficient use of public resources. As such, the elements meaningful to a target audience (i.e. a business considering relocation) must be considered, rather than appealing to a subgroup unlikely to invest in the community. Without this alignment, the brand will fail and the potential for attracting investment will be hampered, as it will be difficult to align or enhance assets to present any form of competitive advantage. This is particularly pressing as globalization allows more regions to enter the competitive marketplace. With the development of these place brands comes the potential for homogenization. Consideration of the branding practices and policy development discussed here will engender creative, meaningful brands with substantive underlying support and allow local and regional governments to create differentiation in the marketplace, thus increasing their local competitiveness.

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