

How Can Destinations Resume Tourism After the Pandemic, While Ensuring Sustainability?



Inspiration and practical advice for destination developers, managers and marketers, curated by **The Place Brand Observer**, in partnership with the **Sustainability Leaders Project**.

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Table of Contents

Foreword	2
Key Takeaways	3
I Sense of Place	4
II Audiences Review	5
III Product and Distribution Strategy	6
IV Infrastructure and <i>to-dos</i> after the Pandemic	7
V Regulations and Financial Support	8
VI Communication Strategy	9
VII Open Dialogue with Local Community	10
VIII Be a Visionary	11
IX New Measurements of Effectiveness	12
X Avoid Common Pitfalls	13
Further Reading	14
TPBO Premium	15
Contributing Specialists	16

Foreword

Dear reader



After several months of lockdown, uncertainties, political pressure, economic and social losses — but also inspiring stories of nature renaissance, solidarity and awareness, we have (hopefully) learnt a valuable lesson or two, as human beings.

The travel industry is among the most affected by the pandemic. At the same time the visitor economy is an essential ingredient for the economic recovery of many destinations. That means much pressure on destination managers and marketers to resume tourist flows as soon as possible, and to get back to business.

Alas, back to business as it was before Covid-19 is easier said than done, and often not advisable, considering that the expectations and needs of customers and communities may have changed, together with influencing external market conditions and bigger picture concerns, especially tourism sustainability and the climate emergency.

"Never waste a good crisis" — and indeed, destination managers and developers are given an unprecedented opportunity right now to rethink tourism and to come up with ways to make it more sustainable and resilient in the face of future crises.

The purpose of this white paper is to help you future-proof your destination — city or region. We asked leading consultants, managers and researchers to share their suggestions on how to resume tourism after the pandemic, taking into consideration the challenges and pitfalls which destination managers and marketers will face.

In a nutshell, destination branding and tourism marketing need to be serious about the challenges places will face in opening up again. We need to be accurate, measured, realistic and honest in our assessments of what is safe to do and to offer. And we need to communicate these requirements proactively.

This is the moment where success will depend on courage, and the power of imagination of a 'different' destination — one with greater local participation, and a smaller ecological footprint.

Have a clear idea of the 'why'. What do you (your community) want from the visitor economy? Answer this question as detailed as possible — looking beyond outworn (and often untested) assumptions of job creation and income for the host community. The first step to lasting recovery is to figure out what a community really needs and wants (and what it does not want), from the visitor economy. Once the 'why' is clear, you'll find the 'how' and 'what' much easier to write down and implement.

I hope you find this white paper useful and inspiring! If you have feedback, suggestions or ideas (also for topics we should address in future white papers) - I'd love to hear from you.

With thanks to our expert panel at The Place Brand Observer, for sharing their thoughts on this important topic. You'll find the panel's answers to many other "hot" topics on [PlaceBrandObserver.com](https://placebrandobserver.com).

Happy reading!

Florian

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Key Takeaways

Communicate well internally.

Make sure businesses and locals are heard, involved and on board - in your response to the pandemic and in your destination sustainability initiatives.

Promote slow travel.

This can help the local economy to recover, while reducing the risk of spreading infection.

Make your destination feel clean and safe.

Hygiene is on everyone's mind, which means that as a destination manager you should pay utmost attention to cleanliness and physical distancing norms.

Assume responsibility.

Though tourists have their own reasons and liberty to travel, at the end of the day it is your responsibility as destination manager to take care of checks and controls, together with the authorities.

Ask: why tourism?

Now is a good time for a new tourism vision, one which prioritises resident needs and concerns, ensures opportunities for local people, and protects the resources and biodiversity which communities depend on. Take a step back and be honest about what went wrong in previous years - including overcrowding - and how we can do it better in the future.

Focus on sustainability.

Define the sustainability agenda of your destination with respect to its unique features. A triple bottom line approach with a focus on people, planet and profit should be the driving force behind all tourism recovery measures. The UN Sustainable Development Goals provide a good starting point for aligning your activities and strategy with sustainability.

Keep an eye on the long-term.

As tempting as it is to try and drive visitor numbers up in the short term, a steady, responsible and sustainable recovery requires time. Especially to ensure that the mistakes of overtourism from pre-COVID days aren't repeated.

Reward and celebrate the right achievements.

Implement performance indicators that focus on high value tourism and sustainable destination development, rather than volume attracted through price-competition.

Community first, visitors second.

Your destination's community (locals) and their interests should be central to any adjustment of your tourism strategy. For too long, destinations - particularly at the national level - have played a numbers game and chased visitors without considering the impact on the host community, their culture, and the environment. Therein lay the seeds of 'overtourism' resentments.

I Sense of Place

Amplify what a place stands for, its DNA.

But also seize this as an opportunity to reposition or pivot, and look to change the narrative to what better suits local needs. Create meaningful differentiation, which in turn can drive price premiumisation.

Use this pause to ensure you understand local culture and ambition.

Who are you, as a destination, what do you want, and where are you going together? Before you understand that, it's difficult to tie any tactical plan to 'sustainability'. So first, try to do one hundred, hour-long interviews with a mixture of tourism operators and regular citizens, a random sample, asking them a series of tough questions: Who are you at your best? What do you leave behind? What do you turn out? Then distill the results of those interviews into a cultural expression, a story in plain language. Then, work with partners to put together a five-year plan, based on what you have learned, to unify efforts.

Focus on rebuilding local confidence.

The people most invested in the long-term sustainability of a place — economic, social, and environmental — are locals. Visible and creative collaborations involving residents, businesses, and community groups reinforce the community's capacity to adapt and be resilient.

Prioritise and promote local produce.

Linking food and drink to the destination, encouraging the use and promotion of local consumables; having local people work in hospitality and tourism, training and developing them well is of much greater benefit to the local economy and offers more authenticity for the tourist experience, than being served by foreign staff flown in for the tourism season. Strengthen the products and experiences related to identity, so that it makes you different as a destination.

"Harness community pride, willingness to contribute, and we're-all-in-this-together spirit with fun, new traditions and socially-distanced cultural happenings. Help locals rediscover their place with local 'insider' tips."



**Jeannette Hanna,
Canada**

II Review Your Audiences

Start with domestic visitors.

Domestic tourism is booming this year and that's a good thing - both for containing the pandemic and for tourism sustainability. Visitors from your own country or region will be aware about the new rules in place. But make sure your destination community is recovered and ready to welcome visitors from other areas of your country or region.

Accurately define and identify your ideal target audiences.

Soon enough, international travel will resume and you'll want to make sure to attract the right kind of visitor. Find out about their preferences, their desired activities and how they behave. In the context of COVID-19, try to understand and respond to their fears about the safety of your destination. Make sure your targeted audiences are a good fit for your destination's sustainable development strategy.

Encourage local community participation.

A tourism destination can be holistically sustainable only if the residents who live in that location are actively involved in tourism's spinoff economic activities, and when they benefit from such participation. Consider them as your most important audience, your team and sparring partner.

Limit the offer of short-term rentals.

As you rethink the concept of 'destination and your role in it, look for a more balanced offer between spaces for residents and places catering to tourists, for instance. In the case of cities, involve universities in the place branding strategy to attract international students, researchers and entrepreneurs: visitors who might become long-term residents.

III Product and Distribution Strategy

Diversify the range of your offering.

Many visitors right now want to stay away from busy, centrally-located popular spots. Meet those needs by creating off the beaten path experiences, in new places.

Think about targeting specific niches where fewer tourists could bring in the same if not more revenue to the destination. For instance, develop 'community' tourism by areas of interests such as the tourists' profession (artists, architects), hobbies (jewelry making, food). Promote 'geographical' tourism in the open-air — every place has nice spots which are not always obvious, and visitors will welcome the opportunity to explore them.

"I would strongly suggest focusing on sharing the destination's brand story and strengthening its commitment to sustainability and the need for visitors to adopt a respectful approach - be 'temporary citizens' when visiting the destination."



**Juan Carlos Belloso,
Spain**

Restrict access to your destination for large-volume operators and short-time tourism.

Limit or ban tourism flow from cruise liners, tour operators, low-cost carriers and subsidise fine-grained targeting. To a large extent the economic benefits from those channels are in no proportion to the harm - including crowdedness - they bring. Instead, encourage tourists to travel on the ground with trains. Destinations should focus on slow travel, keeping each tourist longer within the region and hence getting more value out of each customer than before. At the same time, that behaviour minimises the risk of contagion and impact on the environment.

Inspire creative collaborations.

Inspire people to reimagine old conventions and think outside the box. Foster new kinds of collaborations and experimentation with culinary, retail, arts, and cultural offerings. Take advantage of the fact that people are primed to explore new approaches. Positive new experiences are also valuable to help counter the sense of loss that many feel right now.

IV Safe and Clean: Infrastructure

"Establishing the perception of superior cleanliness would be at the top of my priorities. Before COVID-19, that was a point of parity — a primary value that the travellers expected to be in place for any destination that they considered. Going forward, it will be a point of differentiation for a while."



**Günter Soydanbay,
Canada**

Motivate tourism businesses and invest in the education of their staff.

Support safe place management for their tourism offers, instituting credible and effective workplace management procedures, investing in their people to ensure they have the skills required to deliver their safe place offer.

Plan a gradual, safe, opening-up as lockdown restrictions are eased.

Destinations now require safe health management: temperature checks for visitors, proof of immunity certificates, one-way systems for visiting places, and hand sanitiser stations. Estimate what the new levels of capacity will be if social distancing and other forms of safe gathering are being continued. Be realistic about safe access to the destination by public transport — rail and air in particular, and the limitations those services will be operating under, for some time. Organise the offer of the place to respond to guidelines from the WHO and WTO on securing and maintaining the safety of places that are tourist destinations.

Accommodate the concerns of tourists and workers in tourism about the safety of the places they want to visit or work in.

Adapt tourism facilities to the new reality.

Destinations will have an opportunity to transfer some of the capacity developed for tourism and channel it to local communities, organisations, and companies.

At the same time it is important to balance the housing that is available to the local people, versus housing available to the tourists. Some infrastructures could be open exclusively for residents during certain times.

V Financial Support & Regulations

Provide temporary business support.

Facilitate interest-free loans, extended repayment periods, and partial unemployment compensation for workers, in order to compensate potential negative effects associated with the transformation towards a healthy and resilient destination, and the need for businesses to adapt to such new scenarios.

Link public financial support to sustainability.

It is very clear that the tourism industry is one of the hardest-hit economic sectors by the pandemic. It is also unquestionable that the industry needs financial support and government assistance in securing it. These transfers should though not come free from obligations. Companies and places receiving public money should be forced to invest in their sustainability, so they are stronger and more resilient when the next crisis hits.

Regulate.

Rules and regulations are necessary to help strike a balance between the needs and wants of communities, businesses and the natural environment. Seize the moment to set up destination access fees and (already widely practiced) tourism tax. But offer something in return: make museums, monuments, public transport and other public attractions and amenities free of charge for visitors.

“There is an opportunity in labelling accommodations and attractions based on their ecological footprint and their local economic footprint. If the system behind such labelling is secure enough, the application of the system might be required by law. In some places, the level of tourism tax could even be differentiated based on the label category.”



**Martin Boisen,
Netherlands**

“Offer and promote ways to habituate sustainable living within the place. Communicate the importance of sustainability in your promotional materials and content, so that the visitors are aware and choose accordingly.”



Natasha Grand,
UK

Be very clear in communications with tourists about the changed circumstances.

For instance, opening does not immediately mean a return to full capacity; not all of you may be able to get here or be allowed in, and we have a duty of care for your safety and the safety of our staff. Communicate what may or will change for visitors, potentially including booking timed entry in advance, fewer tables for sitting in cafes, pubs, and restaurants, temperature scanners at entry points for public transport, proof of negative coronavirus tests undertaken and confirmed 3 days prior to flight departures.

Promote your destination responsibly.

Create promotional guidelines for your stakeholders and all those who are marketing and selling trips within and to your destination. To avoid overcrowding, you may even consider to make locations less 'Instagrammable'.

Establish sustainability labeling and certification.

Create an awards scheme to recognise tourism businesses' contribution to safe destination management and sustainability. In your communications, highlight the stakeholders and operators that are doing an exceptional job in quality and environmental controls, as those are the ones that have a positive impact on your destination. Also provide them with marketing tools to specifically target sustainability-conscious travellers.

Infuse branding content with sustainability emphasis.

All the content that is created for brand communication must be consistent with, and indirectly help communicate, the key ideas of sustainability attached to your destination, so as to guide all follow-up actions and to encourage responsible travel behavior.

Develop a communication and pricing strategy.

Target the travellers for whom sustainability is an important choice criterion and to promote and stimulate sustainable behaviour within the existing customer base.

VII Open Dialogue with Local Community

“Organize programs, processes and activities that are capable of involving a large part of the local community, making the tourism income impact the largest number of people possible.”



**Caio Esteves,
Brazil**

Shift focus from the tourist to the locals.

Try to increase their levels of empathy towards foreign visitors. The border walls — both literal and figurative — will most likely get higher, making xenophobia a nastier problem. Things will probably take a turn for the worse over the next decade before getting better.

Highlight the value of your destination.

Portray it as something unique and worth protecting, for instance by means of promoting it as a boutique experience with higher rates, or higher entrance barriers.

Listen to your local community first.

If destination communities do not want tourists at all, then destination managers should think very carefully about whether or not they should persuade these communities to welcome them again. Places should, primarily, serve the people who live and work in them. Just by changing the word to 'visitors', the attitude starts to shift. The main challenge has been mass tourism in all its variations — along with the associated race to the bottom, in terms of price.

Be honest about what has worked and not worked in the past and use this moment to reset, to ask hard questions, and to build a better plan with your community.

Take this time to listen and understand. It will take enormous courage to say no from time to time, if your community says no. Share with the locals a clear strategy for resumption, seeking common goals, and explaining the importance of tourism to the local economy. If we have seen recent cases of tourismophobia in the pre-COVID world, now with the threat of new waves of infection, the gathering of people has an even more negative impact, notably on health.

VIII Be a Visionary

Be a visionary.

Destination marketers and managers are the ones who are pressured to help the economy to recover quickly, especially in tourism-dependent destinations. As previous times have shown, a purely economy-oriented tourism approach is not the solution. It is time for you to acknowledge the limitations of the 20th century tourism business and to envision a new, more sustainable model, which is also better for the economy to recover and to strengthen its resilience.

Start with destination management and brand strategy – not with destination marketing.

Destinations need to decide what kind of tourism they want first, then plan and build it, in terms of the infrastructure and visitor experiences put in place, or permits granted. Only then can innovative branding and marketing attract the right tourists and influence visitor behaviour.

Stay connected.

It's important to understand the current psychological climate. Be open to, and invite input from the community: what does success in this phase look like to you? When people are feeling insecure, they often jump to conclusions that are unfounded. Know the facts and use them to counter knee-jerk reactions. Provide goals and context for decisions – here's where we are and here's where we're hoping to go next.

Avoid the pressure to move back to 'business as usual, as fast as possible'.

The saying "never waste a good crisis" implies that one should use the momentum of a crisis recovery to instigate the changes that seemed impossible before the pandemic. This obviously differs from place to place, but the task is shared: start now to future-proof your community and businesses.

“Do your research. You need to understand how the behaviour of your previous target groups has changed to be able to accommodate that, as well as search for new opportunities and target groups created by that behavioural change.”



**Hjörtur Smárason,
Denmark**

IX New Measurements of Success

Look at other measures of success.

Tie tourism to other elements of place branding - like trade, investment, and workforce attraction, student attraction and, most importantly, community ambition. That gives you a more powerful lens than simply trying to go back to the way it was.

Be demanding: It's no longer just a numbers game.

Will the type of tourism you aim to develop contribute to the destination's wellbeing and long-term sustainability? If it won't, revisit your marketing strategy and make sure it matches and supports the new requirements for achieving your sustainable development goals.

“There is always a lot of pressure on destination marketers. Their success and failure are nearly always determined by numbers. If that continues to be the most important aspect of the job of a destination marketer, there's no chance for sustainability.”



**Todd Babiak,
Australia**

X Avoid Common Pitfalls

Avoid chasing discount visitation.

Promoting low-cost stays will have long term negative impacts on the value and economic viability of a destination. In the low-cost scenario, if you are successful, tourists will contribute (even) less to the local economy. If you're not successful, it'll be difficult to adjust the strategy.

Promotions and price cuts are easy to implement, generate an immediate response, and are therefore very tempting, But in the end, everyone loses.

In the current scenario, price is only a major determinant for a minority of tourists when considering where to visit next; health and the perceived safety of the destination are much more important.

Avoid being a slave to volume.

It's hard, because politicians, whose governments at both national and local levels are often major funders of destination marketing, are addicted to positive media coverage linked to apparent popularity of their place. And, unfortunately, visitor numbers make for more comprehensible soundbites than visitor expenditure.

Again, don't rush.

Be measured, don't pretend things are back to the previous normal. Share in an honest way what is new and what has changed. The 'new normal' is here, and it might mean limited accessibility to some of the most popular destinations and experiences.

Avoid low quality — support the community.

It might seem like a good solution to tourism businesses to reduce expenses by working with suppliers who offer lower quality products (especially non-local) at lower prices. But in the long run, this is going to damage your destination's businesses and its reputation. As a destination manager or marketer, do whatever you can to encourage collaboration across the region, supporting the local produce and experiences which are, after all, often the reason why visitors are attracted in the first place.

Further Reading

Destination branding is all about how to develop, manage, and communicate a destination's identity and its reputation — and PlaceBrandObserver.com is full of useful insights, strategy advice and inspiration to help you get it done. Below just a few resources and reading suggestions for you.

No time to browse through our knowledge library yourself? The TPBO team is happy to help you as an **Information Scout**. You ask questions, we find answers. Please contact us for details.

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TPBO Premium

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“Place branding as a discipline is just beginning to come of age. The Place Brand Observer pulls together insights and trends on this growing and flowering discipline incredibly well. It’s an important window into a growing phenomenon.”

David Adam

Founder & Principal at Global Cities

Featured Contributors

The following place brand researchers, advisors and managers have contributed their views to this white paper on how destinations can resume tourism after the pandemic, while ensuring sustainability.

(In alphabetical order – highlighted specialists are available for [consulting](#), [research](#), or as [speakers](#)).

Andrew Hoyne



Andrew is the Principal of Australia's leading place brand and property marketing agency Hoyne. Over the last decade Hoyne have evolved to a core focus on place and property, and today they work with major international asset owners, developers and local councils to create recognisable landmarks and destinations; from residential towers and masterplanned communities to commercial developments, new mixed-use precincts, and even cities.

[More about Hoyne](#)

[Book Andrew as speaker](#)

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Caio is the founder and CEO at Places for Us, a Brazilian place branding and placemaking consultancy. Pioneer of place branding in Brazil, he understands it as the art and practice of strengthening the identity of places and the resilience of cities through the identification of vocations, and community engagement. Author of the book "Place Branding", released in 2016.

[More about Places for Us](#)

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Günter is a brand strategist with significant experience working with places around the world. Holding a B.Sc. in Psychology, his thinking about destinations is heavily influenced by the unconscious mind. Consequently, he treats places as stories. His proprietary narrative-based brand strategy approach draws parallels between branding and mythology, dreams and stories.

[More about Soydanbay Consulting](#)

[Book Günter as speaker](#)

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[Heather's researcher profile](#)

Featured Contributors

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Hjörtur is a place branding expert focusing on story-telling, crisis management and local economic development. He has worked with governments and destinations all around the world, including Iceland after the economic collapse of 2008 and the volcanic eruption of 2010, Nepal after the earthquakes of 2015 and more recently countries in Africa and Middle East, following political and economic instability.

[Book Hjörtur as speaker](#)

Martin Boisen



Martin is the owner of For the Love of Place and a founding Board Member of The International Place Branding Association. He is a geographer who specializes in the marketing and branding of cities and regions as part of urban and regional governance and planning. Based in The Netherlands, Martin has been involved in over 100 advisory projects.

[More about For the Love of Place](#)

[Martin's researcher profile](#)

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[João's researcher profile](#)

Jeannette Hanna



Jeannette is Chief Strategist at the Toronto-based brand agency, Trajectory. Writer, lecturer and podcast host. Jeannette's place brand work includes award-winning strategies for regions, cities and districts across North America.

[More about Trajectory](#)

[Book Jeannette as speaker](#)

Malcolm Allan



Malcolm is the President of Bloom Consulting, which he joined in 2018 when it was merged with Placematters. He has qualifications in town planning, civic design and development economics, has worked across the world for both central and local governments.

[More about Bloom Consulting](#)

Juan Carlos Belloso



Juan Carlos is an expert on the positioning, development and promotion of places and destinations, based in Barcelona. He helps places become more attractive, through strategic advice and innovative methodologies and tools.

[Book Juan Carlos as speaker](#)

Featured Contributors

Natasha Grand

Natasha took on place branding after studying modern national ideologies at LSE following a natural fascination with the power of that the sense of home and belonging holds over us. She co- founded the Institute for Identity in London in 2009 and has worked in regions and cities with a total population of over 20 million people since.



[Book Natasha as speaker](#)

Robert Govers

Robert is an international advisor, scholar, speaker and author on the reputation of cities, regions and countries. He is the author of the highly acclaimed book, *Imaginative Communities*, chairman of the International Place Branding Association, co-editor of the quarterly journal of Place Branding and Public Diplomacy and a contributor to Apolitical, the World Economic Forum Agenda and the Economist Intelligence Unit Perspectives platforms.



[More about Robert's consulting](#)

[Robert's researcher profile](#)

[Book Robert as speaker](#)

Sebastian Zenker

Sebastian is a Professor for Place Branding and Tourism at the Copenhagen Business School (Denmark). He achieved his doctoral degree at the University of Hamburg (Germany) and gained further international experience as visiting scholar at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands). In his current research, he concentrates on place brand management.



[Sebastian's researcher profile](#)

Todd Babiak

Todd has worked as a place branding consultant and practitioner since 2011, when he happened upon the discipline by accident. He found place-branding infinitely more meaningful than product or corporate branding, and far more difficult. Todd is currently the CEO of Brand Tasmania in Australia.



[Book Todd as speaker](#)

Tom Buncle

Tom is Managing Director of Yellow Railroad Ltd., an international destination consultancy, which helps destinations improve their competitiveness through branding, marketing, destination management planning, and crisis recovery.



[More about Yellow Railroad](#)

[Book Tom as speaker](#)

Contributors

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Bill Geist

Bill is the author of “Destination Leadership” and a 25-year consultant to Destination Marketing Organizations, working with over 200 communities since 1995. He is the host of the DMO industry podcast, DMOU (Destination Marketing Organization University) on which he interviews the best and the brightest in tourism marketing and management. Bill is the former CEO of Destination Madison (WI) and currently serves on the Board of the Destinations International Foundation.

Buck Song Koh

Buck Song (Rick) is a Singaporean brand advisor and author and editor of more than 30 books, including Brand Singapore (second edition, 2017, with a Chinese edition in China). He has consulted on various aspects of Singapore’s country brand, and served on the Marketing Advisory Panel of the current “Passion Made Possible” brand. He is also Adjunct Editor at Singapore’s Centre for Liveable Cities, where he has authored reports of the World Cities Summit.

Cecilia Cassinger

Cecilia is Associate Professor at the Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Sweden. She currently conducts research on city branding connected to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 on urban sustainability. Her research is multidisciplinary and concerns the communicative aspects of place branding, particularly in relation to achieving socially sustainable urban environments in the Nordic context.

Contributors

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Jordi de San Eugenio Vela

Jordi is Associate Professor of Place Branding at the University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia (Spain). From 2013 to 2014 he was the Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Business and Communication. From 2011 to 2013 he was the Head of the Communication Department. He received his PhD (with honours) in place branding from Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona.

Contributors

José Pablo Arango Calle

José Pablo is the former director of Brand Colombia. He specializes in marketing and reputation, with over 40 years of experience in advertising agencies, including Young & Rubicam, J.Walter Thompson and Sancho BBDO, where he has had the opportunity to work for most of the most important brands in Colombia.

Marta Hereźniak

Marta is Assistant Professor at the University of Lodz, Poland. She is the author of the first book about nation branding in Poland. In 2003-2010 she served as expert to the Polish Chamber of Commerce and the Institute of Polish Brand. Consultant in brand-related projects for companies, public institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Regional Development etc.) and local governments.

Sonya Hanna

Much of Sonya's research at Bangor University in Wales, Great Britain, is focused on the theory and application of place branding, and more specifically in relation to the process of 'strategic' place brand management and its various components (ranging from brand communications to the co-creation of place brands and stakeholder engagement) and the inter-play between such components.

Stella Kladou

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