

*Looking back at the conference Identity, Image and Economics –
Principles of Regional Branding in West Cork – Ireland*

Innovative approach to regional development encourages regional economy

This brochure is about success. It relates the success in regional development, new ideas, cooperation and passion. It relates a movement that started in 2005 and is still in full progress. Fortunately so, because this is a story that can be read by everybody and shared by everybody. What is more, there are still many chapters in this story to be written in which new characters can play a role, in which their cooperation may lead to exciting developments and where passion may guarantee success. The title of this story: Het Groene Woud

You can also read this brochure in a different way. You can read it to gain insight in how to deal with regional development in an innovative way by encouraging the stakeholders in this region to join efforts. Whatever way you want to read this brochure, it amounts to the same. The choice is up to you...

Branding?

Imagine a British entrepreneur at the end of the 19th century selling a piece of soap in a package for the first time: Lever's Pure Honey Soap and Sunlight Soap. How was soap sold on the market before then? Quite simply really: a shopkeeper would cut a piece off a thick block of soap, wrap it up in a piece of newspaper and exchange it for a certain sum of money. Obviously not creative or interesting enough for ladies of the upper class. However, Sunlight Soap did evoke their interest. A soap with its own identity! A coloured piece of soap in an attractive packaging and recognisable shape. No competitor could match this and the concept of branding was invented. Nowadays it is impossible to imagine a society without the concept of branding.

Branding has become an essential part of just about any market. The consumer in the 21st century is wealthy, flexible and mobile and is continuously creating new needs. Products and services, recreation and care, profit and non-profit; in all these areas the commercial battle not only to attract the interest of the consumer but also to retain it, is becoming increasingly more aggressive. Look at builders, developers, corporations and even cities that make use of the principles of branding. Recent examples in the Netherlands: *Rotterdam lééft, Zot van Antwerpen, I Amsterdam, Er gaat niets boven Groningen.*

Also rural areas attract employment, businesses and subsequently people by making use of regional branding. The favourable living conditions of a region are emphasized and visitors are attracted by the promise and availability of peaceful surroundings, space and recreation. These are exactly the aspects that *Het Groene Woud* can offer. The question is: how should *Het Groene Woud* propagate this. The answer is: by making use of a contemporary approach.

What you can see happening in *Het Groene Woud* is that a large group of local entrepreneurs are actively participating in an innovative process of regional development by deploying a bottom up approach. Of course this requires further explanation.

Remarkable area

'*Het Groene Woud*' is situated in 'de Brabantse Meierij', in between the towns of Eindhoven, 's-Hertogenbosch, and Tilburg. Because of the remarkable nature and the abundance of agricultural and cultural landscapes, the government has designated 'Het Groene Woud' one of the 20 National Landscapes. Also the historical buildings, the traditions and customs add to the values of the area. Values that contribute to the unique identity of this area. An identity with a positive charisma, essential for a strong sense of belonging and prerequisite for a powerful and balanced foundation for regional branding. It is certainly possible to preserve the



What does regional branding have to offer? Three examples.

West-Cork - Ireland

By making use of European subsidies in a very clever way, the region of West Cork in Ireland transformed the worst economical situation in the 80's to a healthy investment climate. They did this by developing the Fuchsia brand, a quality label for numerous products and services in the agriculture, fishery, tourism, small enterprises and social services. However, the fuchsia-brand is more than it seems. The success is based on a mutual view on the market and society, established by joint ventures and concerted action of private and public enterprises and carried out by educating and training entrepreneurs and organising existing distribution channels, professional collective marketing and PR, and effective quality control. Seems too good to be true, if not for the fact that for the last 15 years, West Cork has been noted and famous as an example of regional branding.

Lego - Denmark

Everybody knows Lego. The small village Billund is notorious for the development of the immensely popular toy building block. The brand has been cleverly used to develop the whole region. Without the Lego

factory, the village would not have counted more than 200 inhabitants; nowadays Billund has 8,700 inhabitants and provides for 8,500 job opportunities. The village has dared to invest in local facilities such as a library and even an airport which is now the second international airport in Denmark. The development of the theme park has led to a highly developed tourist industry; each year 1,6 million people visit Billund.

Bourgogne - France

The Bourgogne region is world famous for its culinary experience. Regional traditions, the regional identity, are central for presenting the specific regional products in a unique manner. The powerful image of the Bourgogne was founded in the first half of the previous century. Several vineyards established an organisation that actively attracted international interest. Even now, companies like Unilever and Nestlé are involved in a creative way, resulting in an even broader food industry sector. The regional government plays a crucial part in this development. There is much attention for the food industry and for the regional patrimony. The result is 11,500 jobs just in the food industry, not to mention the 3 million tourists that visit each year.



regional identity for the coming generations. However, only if the area remains accessible. The area may need time and space to develop in a sustainable way. No longer is agriculture the cornerstone of the rural economy. The area is surrounded by urban communities representing 1, 5 million people and by many high-quality and highly specialised industries. In the future, cities will have to invest even more to ensure a liveable environment. The urban network BrabantStad and the rural area Het Groene woud are indisputably dependent on each other. Consequently the project 'Branding Het Groene Woud' was called into existence. Its objective is a reinforced economy. The question is how to achieve this. The answer: by making use of core values and by preserving as well as strengthening the identity of the region.

This seems quite simple but of course there is more to it. In the first place it demands cooperation and commitment of all parties involved. Important issues are raised by the trade and industry, governmental and non-governmental organisations. How can the quality of the landscape be deployed to create new economic activities? Is the perspective of sustainability not obstructed by active control on urban and rural development? And if that is the case, how must this be solved? Of course the creativity and effort of citizens and entrepreneurs can be deployed in regional development. But how, when and with which means? What roles can the various layers of government play? All these questions urgently call for cooperation, but cooperation is very difficult to organise. It requires that two very different worlds, the

public and the private organisations, join forces. Fortunately these two worlds have a lot to offer each other.

It might not be that difficult to change a problem into an opportunity.

Unique approach of Het Groene Woud

An initiative of entrepreneurs

What makes a regional brand work? The answer is: good management and a strong vision. *Het Groene Woud* was initiated by a man of vision, an entrepreneur, who envisaged an important role for individual enterprises in the spatial, urban, rural and nature development plans of the region. His starting point was that economic activities should contribute to a strong regional identity and sustainability of that region. More entrepreneurs were mobilised and a regional brand was created. Products and services will be represented by this regional brand. Subsequently, the identity will boost the economy, and the other way round.

As a region and consequently as a brand, *Het Groene Woud* can be called unique. The next step is to keep it that way. One of the conditions to retain the strength of this brand is cooperation. When government and private enterprises work closely together and with the region in a dynamic way, the regional identity of *Het Groene Woud* can become even stronger.

Maybe, but driven entrepreneurship and an enthusiastic government are not enough. To work on a brand is a process, a development, in which structure and culture, social developments, need for care etcetera, need to be

positioned. There are ample opportunities, more perspectives than even necessary, but everything has its price. Who is going to pay? Without vision and courage no capital. All three are the pillars of a unique and strong brand such as *Het Groene Woud*.

The right tension

In May 2005, about 125 participants from the whole of Europe exchanged their experiences with regional branding during the conference 'Identity, Image and Economics – Principles of Regional Branding' in West Cork - Ireland. This was extremely necessary to prevent a situation where everybody concerned would be inventing their own wheel of 'regional branding'. The knowledge and experience were collected in a 'reference book for branding'. This was not meant to be a manual, but more as a checklist for inspiration. During the conference it became clear that a region should always start off on its strengths and that leadership and shared vision are indispensable. Also very important are the questions: what social capital is available, who are the ones who can take action and who are the persons to take the initiatives?

Patience and urgency may contradict. The time between expectations and results can cause tension, creative tension that may not impede but preferably be of use to commitment, scale and pace of investments, risks and opportunities. Sustainability and solidity are characteristics of a regional brand. Again to achieve these, shared marketing targets and collected efforts are of crucial importance. The message is strong and clear.

Quality of life in the towns and in the country

Regional branding is not restricted to one sector but rather encourages and motivates various fields of business. Examples are the agriculture, the catering and hotel industry, small businesses, recreation and tourism and the social services. But also social organisations in the public health, education and

art are involved. It is necessary to determine who the consumer is and what his needs are, and to take advantage of the needs and wishes of the city-dweller and the country folk. If a range of high quality products and services are required, make sure to provide it. A range that also will add to the core values of the region. There are definitely many opportunities for a wide range of high quality products and services. Avoid fragmentation and compartmentalisation. Think in terms of chain management, dare to act in these terms. All this is only possible if entrepreneurs work together instead of individually. The process of branding creates a positively proud and bold attitude which benefits the social cohesion and the well-being of city and country dwellers.

What has happened so far?

40 participants from *Het Groene Woud* took part in the conference. From the start, the interest and involvement of the participants was evident. This also seemed inevitable because by nature entrepreneurs are susceptible to opportunities for development and are experienced in solving problems. The interest and involvement became even stronger when the first 'Regional festival *Het Groene Woud*' was organised in June 2005. The objective of the festival was two-fold: that entrepreneurs experienced working together in a practical way, and that inhabitants and visitors could become acquainted with the region and its products. During following successful gatherings, the number of committed entrepreneurs has even increased. Due to its success, the next festival will be organised in the summer 2006.

The regional identity now needs to be defined and perhaps even more important, to be translated into visuals. A photo can say more than a thousand words. In this case: The story the region tells. It is the medium that connects all activities regarding branding. Together the entrepreneurs have also started up new joint



Result 2005

- 40 participants from the region *Het Groene Woud* take part in the conference 'Identity, Image and Economics – Principles of Regional Branding' in West Cork
- Regional festival *Het Groene Woud* with 12,500 visitors
- Certified brand name and logo 'Het Groene Woud'
- Group of 25 active en driven entrepreneurs take concerted action
- Implementing new ways of cooperation such as the project 'Short chains', in which farmers and the hotel and catering industry work closely together
- The interest of administrators and the world of information technologies to support the branding initiative



ventures. The target: the development of new product-market combinations that also strengthen the regional cooperation. Quality criteria collected with and by entrepreneurs, are in progress to license the brand. In addition a network has been created with governmental organisations, academic institutes and other sectors. In this way knowledge, contacts, financing possibilities etc. can be provided within short notice in order to stimulate the regional branding.

The branding process is complex as well as organic. Various cross connections are made. These connections arise spontaneously or are made with a certain purpose. Entrepreneurs and governmental officials exchange information and programmes are levelled. Questions arise such as, who is doing what? This is in fact extremely important. Equally important, however, is that entrepreneurs regularly take part in local and international excursions to other regions of branding. The result: increased insight and creativity.

The organisation model that manages the process of regional branding, eventually leads to a business plan. This plan connects existing initiatives that have been put forward by entrepreneurs in the region. Branding does not mean taking the umpteenth regional initiative into consideration, but is meant as a tool to give existing and new initiatives a future.

The future

What steps must be taken initially?
The most important are:

- Translate the regional identity into pictures
- Start up pilots to decide on quality criteria
- Expand the network to acquire more money and knowledge
- Achieve more commitment in cooperation between entrepreneurs and the government
- Apply structure to the organisation

The future development runs on three tracks. Entrepreneurs develop new product-market combinations that contribute to their personal perspective as well as the perspective of the regional identity. In addition, entrepreneurs plan to apply themselves to quality criteria, besides legal and sectoral product demands.

On the public administration track, commitment is created between municipalities and reconstruction commissions in the interest of the cooperation as well as to harmonise the policies of other governmental organisations, including Brussels, and to implement them by representatives of the region.

On the knowledge centre track, problems are collected and worked out. Exchange of knowledge and experience with other areas are to be found on this track. Moreover, research institutes will be asked to contribute in the search for new sustainable economic drivers. This all is needed to fulfil the ambitions of a vital regional economy by sustainable activities.



Example based on three tracks

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

- Europe (European experimental garden sustainability)
- Sustainability council
- BrabantStad
- Administrative Platform
Het Groene Woud
- Intermunicipal collaboration (demarcation agreement)

ENTREPRENEURS

- Recruitment & Bonding
- Business café
- Defining regional products
- Criteria regional brand
- Training, courses
- Chain management and cooperation
- Examples from other regions

KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

- Methods of cooperation
- Branding & marketing
- Economic significance
- Sustainability
- Other sectors
- Benchmark



Het Groene Woud

For more information about Branding and the conference at Cork see:
www.duurzamemeierij.nl