

Las Vegas, Capitalist Sin City to New Capital of American Freedom: A case study of the use of branding and metaphor

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1. Introduction/Context

Las Vegas has made a successful business out of selling sin to tourists who may not want to live there, but who want to play there. A noticeable shift occurred in the eighties and nineties when the tourism marketing industry moved to more family friendly attractions. Then, in September 2000 the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor's Authority (LVCVA) launched the Las Vegas Freedom Party (LVFP) marketing campaign. With their own candidate, Brock Wilder [1]. The ads mimicked the images of traditional campaign television commercials in style and format. Wilder challenged viewers to "join a *real* party." The campaign presents an opportunity to study the intersection of branding and metaphor. It marked a distinct turn in the way Las Vegas identified itself. Las Vegas already had one of the strongest brand identities in the world, and enjoyed steady tourism growth. Political campaigns are not credibility producing machines, and branding is not easy, according to Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott [2]. So with numbers rising and a clear identity already established, why did Las Vegas bet the house, and then jeopardize that bet on a questionable rhetorical strategy?

2. Method

For the purposes of this study, just the companion campaign television spots, the corresponding website, and the Freedom Party Party hosted by Wilder, were examined through one of Kenneth Burke's master tropes, metaphor, within a destination branding context.

Burke defines metaphor as "a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this" [3]. Anderson's research on metaphors revealed "the potential for metaphors to be used strategically" [4]. The campaign falls clearly into the realm of

destination advertising generally and branding specifically. Lannon and Cooper noted that, "What turns a product into a brand is that the physical product is combined with something else—symbols, images, feelings—to produce an idea which is more than the sum of the parts" [5].

Although some destination branding research has been done from tourist and/or marketing perspectives, "an examination of the key metaphors that are used to describe brands has not yet been forthcoming" [6]. This study examines such a relationship.

3. Analysis

The campaign's planners stated, "In the campaign's sights are repeat visitors, who comprise nearly 75 percent of the destination's annual visitor volume and those who have never traveled to Las Vegas," [1]. Thus, the goal is not only to increase tourism but also to establish a brand for the city.

One metaphor at work in the campaign is the metaphor of Wilder as a political candidate representing the Las Vegas Freedom Party. The LVCVA uses politically charged rhetoric such as *parties, plans for America, right, left, constituents, margin of error, flip-flopping on issues, election, concession speeches*, and most important *freedom*. The metaphor of campaign as credible and respected contains the irony that political campaigns are not really associated with credibility or respectability because "each campaign tries hard to make its side look better and the other sides look worse" [7]. Why choose this metaphor then? It is a strategic decision to benefit the campaign in the same way the bureaucracy benefits politicians; Americans must take the bad (all politicians are dirty) with the good (politicians are needed to run my government and protect my freedom).

The campaign attempts to improve the image of Las Vegas by using distinctly American themes

partnered with well-chosen Vegas images. As Wilder speaks to the camera, the Statue of Liberty over his shoulder moves to reveal that he is not at Ellis Island as the opening frame would suggest but that he is actually standing in front of the New York, New York Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. This plays to the election campaign metaphor and symbolically asks if the audience has seen all of the changes in Las Vegas.

The tag line in all of the commercials, “Do what you want, when you want,” uses a Las Vegas definition of the political word freedom, showing that Las Vegas is the destination that not only discusses freedom and political parties, but it is where you can actually experience freedom. By rebranding Vegas, the campaign has the opportunity to re-name the city, thus differentiating the new city from the old city but also differentiating Las Vegas from the real political capital of the United States, Washington D.C.

The campaign differentiates other uses of the word freedom and places the term in the light best suited for Las Vegas. By presenting the topic of freedom as it pertains to government and politics, the campaign exchanges the adult freedoms of the past with a new more wholesome spin on the freedoms enjoyed in the city. The LVCVA is selling Mardi Gras fun in Independence Day wrapping paper. It brings out Burke’s “thisness of a that,” meaning the adult freedom of Vegas is American freedom at its best.

It is through the examination of the new metaphor that Lannon and Cooper’s definition of brand is seen most clearly: the product (Las Vegas) is combined with feelings (American patriotism) to produce an idea, which is more than the sum of its parts, thus demonstrating the interconnectedness of metaphor and branding within the campaign.

With the stigma of sin removed and guilt minimized, it may be that the LVCVA has given Americans as well as international tourists a way to truly taste freedom, thus making the intangible more tangible. Before the metaphor, Las Vegas was branded as the worst America had to offer; 73 percent of consumers polled who saw the most recent “What happens here, Stays here” campaign reported a heightened interest in going to Las Vegas [8].

The need to celebrate freedom indicates that freedom branding campaign helped the city recover faster than other cities also reliant on tourism after 9/11. If Americans felt politics as usual prompted the attacks, 9/11 led people to want to preserve those freedoms Americans relish at the bane of other nations, the very sins that make the U.S. a political target.

4. Conclusions

This study revealed that questionable choices masked the true nature of the communication and secondly, that destination branding is becoming an increasingly popular, although highly risky, marketing strategy. The LVCVA has successfully reshaped the old Las Vegas image from capitalist freedom run amuck to the new capital of American freedom. As Anderson’s work indicates, rhetorical power than can be used strategically. The campaign has positioning Las Vegas as not only the geographical but polarizing opposite of Washington D.C. Washington has always had its sin, but has not sufficed from as much guilt because its guilt was incurred in the nobler pursuit of freedom. The metaphor diverts attention and the brand seals the new identity.

Destination branding is a risky communicative choice. Using branding on this level without fully understanding its implications is rhetorically dangerous. Destination branding impacts a community’s cultural memory; residents of Las Vegas shared a culture of privileged knowledge about the city’s true essence, despite the bright lights and seedy reputation. It was a local understanding that created a shared sense of community. Local residents objected to the portrayal of their city in the first seedier ads that ran establishing the brand. To local residents, the larger campaign may have traded a shared community perspective for tourism revenue. As younger generations grow up with the new brand, their community’s cultural memory may be irrevocably altered.

Continued research of this campaign and others like it is necessary to help identify not only which rhetorical methods work together in significant ways, but also what methods should rhetors avoid for social reasons. Very little is understood about the long-term effects of destination branding, and with more destinations using branding strategies, research in the area of destination branding is currently lagging behind.

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