

## Does place matter in hospitality?

*Andres Coca-Stefaniak MIH takes a look at how hospitality professionals can achieve more by working in partnership with key stakeholders in town centres and tourism destinations.*

**Location is a dominant factor affecting the success of hospitality businesses. However, when that location is not blessed with the footfall of a busy high street or cannot rely on the proximity of a nearby major visitor attraction, a more creative approach is required. Indeed, offering an attractive façade, attentive staff and excellent service may not be enough for a hospitality business to succeed unless it already enjoys a well-established reputation. Even then, research suggests that the brand of a place can still have a bigger influence on customer decisions and satisfaction than a business brand on its own, no matter how established. Hospitality professionals can have a big impact on the attractiveness of a place brand by adopting a partnership approach to managing and marketing places that deliver memorable experiences to local residents and visitors alike.**

The rate of decline of town centres and high streets in the UK has reached worrying proportions. So much so, that the scale of the problem is currently under investigation by a parliamentary select committee as part of the “High Streets and Town Centres in 2030” inquiry, which I was recently invited to give expert evidence to. Whilst research currently under way at the University of Greenwich through two major EU-funded projects - SHARE and GO TRADE - suggests that local businesses (including the hospitality sector) value the role that traditional markets, events, the evening economy as well as the importance of partnership working on the delivery of authentic experiences to visitors and local residents alike, hospitality businesses do not always engage as actively as they could. In fact, as in retail, there are still established hospitality brands which maintain that their brand prevails over the place brand of their host town centre and/or tourism destination, even when social media research (e.g., TripAdvisor) suggests that the attractiveness and reputation of places play a key role in the decision making of visitors prior to travel as well as the overall assessment of their satisfaction with the quality of their experience.

The hospitality sector has a range of options available to improve local place brands. They range from working proactively as members of private-public partnerships such as destination management organisations (DMOs) - award winning Visit Greenwich is a good example of success in the face of stiff competition from nearby London -, to town centre management (TCM) partnerships and privately-funded business improvement districts (BIDs). Although TCM partnerships and BIDs have traditionally attracted mostly retailers, the recent rise of a proactive management approach to the evening economy - Purple Flag, managed by the Association of Town & City Management, is the world's first evening economy accreditation scheme - has attracted interest from the hospitality sector in the UK and overseas as an opportunity to manage place brands more effectively and support many an ailing town centre in the process. For instance, NE1 - a Newcastle-based BID - runs a restaurant week. Cheltenham successfully challenged the introduction of a late night levy for additional policing after dark (associated mostly with pubs and clubs) on the basis that their BID was already providing that service as part of its Purple Flag-accredited scheme. Moreover, a recent report by British BIDs showed that half of the 305 BIDs operating in the British Isles are currently involved with their local DMOs and expect to see growth in this sphere of work related to the visitor economy. The hospitality sector needs to retain its rightful place at the centre of this. More importantly, as specialists in the experience economy, hospitality professionals should provide a higher level of leadership in these developments to enhance the competitiveness of places and, in doing so, that of their hospitality businesses.



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