



The Impact of Establishing the University Centre Oldham on the Development of the Oldham Brand

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Abstract

Branding is key to organisational success. Effective branding helps create appropriate product or service associations which enhance the profile of an organisation and its products. The University Centre Oldham is part of the University of Huddersfield which was established in Oldham in August of 2005 to takeover the Higher Education provision in the Oldham borough. Prior to this development the provision of Higher Education in Oldham was a makeshift arrangement of the Oldham College in conjunction with the Oldham Council and the Oldham Sixth Form College. These three institutions do not have degree awarding powers nor are they Higher Education providers. The result of this scenario was an array of validation arrangements with a multitude of degree and diploma awarding institutions. This was a complex situation which was very difficult to implement. This study concluded that the establishment of the university in the borough has created new hope in skills development, investment attraction and above all infrastructural development. The impact on the branding of Oldham is significant and it augurs well for the future. This development mirrors renowned university cities and towns where the establishment of a university has been the driver for development. The University of Huddersfield has made a significant difference in the town of Huddersfield and following on from the same experience in an economically depressed area the concept of "Towns like us" by which the strategy to establish the two university centre of Barnsley and Oldham were created is already starting to make a significant difference in Oldham just like the University of Huddersfield did in the town of Huddersfield.

Keywords: Education, Development, University, Branding, Market positioning, Place marketing and Oldham

1. Introduction

The *Oldham Beyond*, strategy document clearly states the significance of education in the renewal of the borough:

An educated population, the University Centre is the jewel in the crown in the transformation of the educational threshold of the community and raise the skills of the borough.

The Oldham borough is changing in its appeal to the community in the Northwest of England, the broader UK community and the international stakeholders because of significant developments over the years that have changed both the social standing, business investments and the infrastructure of the area. The events of 2001 that saw the borough embroiled in ugly violent scenes sent a message of chaos, instability and despair about the area as international headline news. The promotional manual *Think you know Oldham? Think again..!* encapsulates what the corporate message is emphasizing in using phrases as *Great People, Great Place, Great Prospects*. Significant efforts are being made to create a new image and a new brand. The University Centre Oldham was borne out of the desire to boost skills in the borough as part of the broader regeneration strategy.

The regeneration efforts as laid out in the blueprint for the future of Oldham, *Oldham Beyond* has cast high expectations on the future of the borough. One of the key developments captured in the strategic plan of the borough is the University Centre which is pivotal to the successful regeneration of the borough. In the meantime a huge debate has engulfed the borough. There are consultations going on in the borough that seek to address the branding of Oldham. An article in the Oldham Advertiser newspaper titled, *anyone for a name change?* Suggestions are being made about the possibility of changing the name in order to create a better appeal. The seriousness of the borough's desire to improve the brand is demonstrated by the fact that £50 000-00 British pounds (approximately USD 100 000) has been made available for consultancy to be carried out by Hemisphere – a marketing and design consultancy – to create a "strong and positive brand for Oldham" to look into means and ways of re-branding so that it can attract investment and give a positive feeling about the area (<http://www.oldhamadvertiser.co.uk/news>, accessed 27.09.07). The total cost of

rebranding as reported by the BBC came to £100 000 (approximately USD 200 000), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/manchester/7351420.stm>, accessed 5 December 08.

The sign of a university in a town or city could make a significant impact on how the town is viewed. Common knowledge about cities suggests that cities like Oxford in UK the home of the highly reputable University of Oxford are critical to the economic performance and general progress of the city. In the case of the University of Oxford the basic statistics of the university's finances are that, "In 2005–6, the combined income of the University, Oxford University Press and the Colleges amounted to £1,294 million. Within that £1,294 million, the University's income amounted to £609 million, a 14.8 per cent rise on the previous year's total." http://www.ox.ac.uk/about_the_university/facts_and_figures/index.html#aoxford_colleges, accessed, 2.01.08. While the University Centre Oldham is not a huge institution it is logical to speculate on the positive effect it has in creating confidence in the borough and also the potential investors. Mutual cooperation between the University Centre Oldham and various organisations in the borough augurs well for development. Equally the idea of a sign in the town centre that suggests the existence of a university says a lot to both the people of the borough, visitors to the borough and potential investors. If names as Harvard Business School, University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, University of Manchester, London Business School among others should be such household institutions in their cities and attracting so much resources it is not out of context to speculate that there is a level of economic impact associated with a university in a city.

1.1 Objective of the Study

This paper seeks to make an assessment of the effects of establishing the University Centre Oldham on the brand of the town and the borough at large. The study will evaluate the effects of University Centre Oldham on the community aspirations, widening participation and the investment drive in tandem with other efforts meant to change the image of the borough. Ultimately the study will put into perspective the impact universities have had in other towns and cities and extrapolate that into the scenario of University Centre Oldham in the Oldham borough.

2. Branding and Perceptions

Chernatony and McDonald (2003 : p 25) suggest that, "A successful brand is an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant, unique added values which match their needs most closely. Furthermore, its success results from being able to sustain these added values in the face of competition". It is important to re-emphasize the ability of the item, place or service to meet expectations as a critical aspect in brand building. The ability to satisfy will determine whether or not customers are satisfied. Oldham has a character shaped by the people who live in the area, the infrastructure, social cohesion, shopping facilities, appearance of commercial and residential buildings, the tourist attractions in the area and the leadership of the borough's messages about where the borough is going. The key is the answer to the question, "What does Oldham stand for?"

Hankinson (2004 : p7) argues that "In an increasingly competitive market therefore, destination marketers must seek a fuller understanding of the nature of images held by both individuals and organisations in order to build more favourable brand images and thereby enhance a destination's attractiveness and economic development. The marketing of many destinations does not begin from a zero base. It frequently begins with a set of negative or positive attributes established over a long period of time based through communication processes largely independent of marketing's control. " Therefore the associations of Oldham have far reaching effects on the making of its brand. Ultimately the stories, the investments and any related developments in the town centre and its surrounding areas impact on the brand and that includes the University Centre Oldham among other institutions. He further asserts that in the case of a tourist destination self-congruity is a major factor in determining favourable destinations for visitors. In the case of branding of a place...things like progressive, cheap, opportunity etc may make a difference. In looking at the aspects of the place it is important to take into cognisance that the place is a bundle of attributes, very much like the age old story of the description of an elephant by ten blind men who would describe depending on the part of the elephant they touched.

In the re-branding and repositioning of Oldham it is important to take into cognisance the fact that "... in the UK, cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, Cardiff, Bristol and Bradford, and towns such as Huddersfield, have adopted regeneration strategies that include strategies to promote creative industries. Within these initiatives it is common for city centres to become the symbolic and economic focus of rejuvenating city-regions. In many localities, this also includes the agglomeration of creative and cultural industries and particularly the development of 'quarters' (Bell and Jayne, 2003 :p 126). The Oldham town centre is the hub of both social and economic activities in the borough, thus confirming the assertions by Jane and Bell. The regeneration of Oldham has changed the face of the borough in many respects, ie repositioning and re-branding the borough. The face of the town centre has some educational beacons that say a lot in both the perception and physical structure of the institutions in the form of The Oldham College (TOC), The Oldham Sixth Form College (OSFC). The message suggests that Oldham town centre is an education hub and it does not need a sophisticate to argue the case for education being a drive for modernity and

development and obviously there are so many industries that thrive on education that are benefiting from the existence of educational institutions.

Hankinson (2005: p25) puts forward three key points on the unique characteristics of place marketing as follows:-

- First, places exist both as holistic entities or nuclear products and as collections of contributory elements or individual services and facilities. The job of the destination marketers is to select a portfolio from these individual elements to form the basis of a destination product.
- Second, the place product can be assembled uniquely by each visitor from their experiences of a chosen set of individual contributory elements as referenced from Ashworth and Voogt (1990).
- Third, places are multi-functional. The same place can offer historical buildings, shopping facilities, sports facilities and entertainment venues.

Oldham has a rich and diverse history with multitudes of scenarios that paint different pictures of hope, dominance, dilemma, dilapidation, chaos, war and renewal. The current standing of Oldham is a state of renewal from an economic slump and gloom. The events of 2001 when the town went into smoke with race confrontation that made major headlines the world over helped shift the attention of the national government and Europe to channel resources in a regeneration programme that has become the centrepiece of the renewal of Oldham. While more still needs to be done the prospects for Oldham are bright and the communities are more hopeful and constructive. Communities are shifting in their lifestyle and attitude towards development. The coverage in the local press of the establishment of the University Centre was big news suggesting that Oldham had established its own university, no wonder some locals refer to the university centre as the “*University of Oldham*”. The bottom line is that the university centre has contributed to the improving pride and confidence in the prospects of Oldham.

3. The Oldham Branding Scenario

In the main the vision for the borough captures the phenomenon of Oldham at three levels, Oldham Before, Oldham Today and Oldham Beyond.

Below is a brief discussion of the ten key ideas as espoused in the vision document, the *Oldham Beyond*:-

- **New business**, concentration of business in two areas Hollinwood off a major motorway and the Mumps Roundabout near the city centre.
- **A creative borough**, capturing the talents and nurturing them in Oldham for utilisation of such talents in Oldham
- **The mills of Oldham**, a number of them have already been converted into creative workspace and more is in the pipeline
- **An intercultural borough**, the unique aspects of the ethnic groups and their uniting factors should help spearhead multitudes of activities that should enrich the borough.
- **An educated population**, the university centre is the jewel in the crown in transformation of the educational threshold of the community and raise the skills of the borough.
- **Smart communities**, better, safe communities will create a better place to live in through housing renewal.
- **Regeneration web**, by linking the many places that make up Oldham with attractive places and features will make the whole borough a better place.
- **Common ground**, by creating more favourable common meeting areas, in particular the town square it would create more integrated communities.
- **Sustainability**, what is done within the borough should not jeopardize the environment, socially and economically.
- **Many places not just one**, the borough is made up of many communities which are well integrated and the whole borough is part of Greater Manchester.
- The Oldham Town Centre Partnership (2006) which is core to coordinating the work of a variety of stakeholders states its mission as:

“To create the conditions for a major step change in the growth and competitiveness of Oldham Town Centre and to maximise its life, vitality and commercial viability as a sub-regional destination in Greater Manchester”

The aims of the Oldham Town Centre Partnership business plan April 2006 –March 2009 (2006: p 11) are laid out as follows:-

- To improve the IMAGE of the Town Centre and promote it as a sub regional
- shopping, leisure, tourism and commercial destination

- **Aim 2**
- To further enhance the COMMUNICATION and CO-OPERATION within the Town Centre and between all Town Centre organisations and individuals
- **Aim 3**
- To encourage and facilitate improvements to the PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT of the Town Centre and to ensure high standards of maintenance
- **Aim 4**
- To continue to improve and promote the SAFETY, SECURITY and ACCESSIBILITY of the Town Centre to all its users
- **Aim 5**
- To promote the Town Centre as a focus for COMMUNITY COHESION and encourage ownership of the Town Centre as ‘common ground’ for all sections of Oldham’s community
- **Aim 6**
- To aid the process of INWARD INVESTMENT into the Town Centre
- **Aim 7**
- To MONITOR the performance of Oldham Town Centre and the Town Centre Management Initiative
- The aims of the plan which are communicated to any interested party by virtue of this being a public document are meant to create a sense of progress in the city centre. The aims provide assurances that the borough has a lot happening that should lead to a more appealing image. The messages are clearly an expression of well founded aspirations in the transformation of the town centre and the borough at large. These claims or stated objectives come with multitudes of obligations in respect of the use of land, the development of the infrastructure, raising people’s aspirations and the general provisions for society.

While the objectives of the Oldham Town Centre Partnership do not explicitly state the critical importance of education in the transformation of the borough there is no doubt that a lot of the developments mentioned benefit substantially from an educated population. Moreso, if the population of Oldham becomes more educated that also helps change their aspirations for prosperity and is working well for the reputation of the borough and also for the borough. The existence of the University Centre Oldham should be seen as a catalyst in development in a number of ways, firstly the university centre attracts certain industry, a certain type of consumption by the student population, provides employment for people coming from beyond the confines of Oldham and above all creates new aspirations in the community to seek education at higher levels to enhance prospects in life.

4. Think You Know Oldham? Think Again!!! (A summary of the Key arguments)

Oldham Metropolitan Borough (2006) in a document by the Oldham Partnership, ie., The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which brings together public, private, community and faith sectors to coordinate their input in development believe they are on top of the situation. The message implies that there are misconceptions that need to be cleared about the image of the Oldham borough. The top cover has a subheading with three key attributes of Oldham clearly declaring *Great People, Great Place and Great Prospects*. The message is meant to create favourable perceptions about Oldham and thereby attract tourism traffic, inward investment flows, reduce the loss of local skills to other areas, attract a highly skilled workforce and improve the borough. The Oldham Partnership has been availed £400 million of government funding to drive the agenda for development in Oldham with the focus being on:

- *Building Safer and Healthier Communities* – This would entail crime reduction, increase in life expectancy and improve the local environment
- *Transformational regeneration*- This incorporates flagship initiatives for University and the Colliseum Theatre, improvement of local housing conditions and the revitalisation of the town and district centres.
- *Inspiring Enterprise and Economic Development*- This will require improvement in employment, encouragement of new business growth and improvement of adult skill levels.
- *Investing in our Children and Young People*- This would mean improvement in health and educational attainment.
- The brochure starts by laying out the background to the borough by highlighting the diversity of the geography of Oldham, the cultural diversity of its people, the hardworking nature of the people, proximity to buzzing Manchester city and Leeds that Oldham is where the industrial revolution started and is now undergoing another revolution quietly. The brochure clearly states the aspirations “So this is Oldham today. The past was good, but

the future will be even better. Could you be part to it.” (Oldham Partnership, 2007: p7). There are clear signs of a developmental momentum that has started in the transformation of the borough. There are many advertisements in the brochure by companies that are based in Oldham which are identified with the changes taking place in Oldham.

The transformation has replaced the defunct household textile business of Oldham with modern business as electronics to usher in a new revolution. The brochure reports that the people of Oldham identify themselves as being in Greater Manchester, being in Lancashire or just Oldhamers. Oldham is within the proximity of the buzzing city of Manchester which is the hub of commercial activities in the Northwest of England. Oldham has one of the most beautiful scenery in England and that should help in attracting tourism into the area. The transport network makes it easier to travel around the borough as there is a good road, good rail network and the respective infrastructure is in good shape. Oldham has space equivalent to 33 football pitches for development and that gives scope for attracting more investment. The Tommyfield market attracts people beyond the confines of the borough and the education levels and standards are rising with the advent of the establishment of the University Centre Oldham (UCO) which is a part of the University of Huddersfield. The university centre is expanding in order to accommodate the increasing numbers the university centre has to cater for. The brochure also claims that Oldham has a number of attributes similar to Paris which puts the borough in a very strategic position given the hub for attracting business and tourism into the area.

These developments in Oldham as already alluded to follow the years of success when Oldham was the leading textile city in the world. The subsequent dilapidation, economic degradation and ultimately race confrontations in 2001 tell a story that looked irreparable. The situation had deteriorated badly before the developmental upsurge made possible by the riots which triggered a new wave of investment, EU funding and government financial support to banish the bad patch in the history of Oldham. The state of affairs in terms of infrastructure, social cohesion across different racial groups, the general flow of inward investment and human capital would not change into a great place in less than ten years. Certainly with the university there is scope for development because the educated community will go into business as well as provide the emerging industry an educated workforce. Those reasons augur very well for attracting major investors from Manchester and Leeds.

5. Oldham’s Community Strategy –Planning for Sustainable Communities 2005-2020

The long term plans of the borough serve as the explicit expression of intent and help project the aspirations of the borough. In the main the planning process serves as a barometer for achievement expressed in different measures and tends to be very objective in their assessments in the form of a SWOT analysis. On page 4 of the strategy document the vision for 2020 is clearly centred on, *“The world will see the Borough as a transformed place.”*

Page 3 of the strategy document states the mission as follows:-

Our Values, on which we will build a better future, will continue to shape everything we do:-

- *We believe in good, safe, living environment for everyone present and future*
- *Oldham, a place where everyone is proud to leave*
- *We believe in an inclusive and openly democratic Oldham*
- *We oppose all forms of unfair discrimination*
- *We believe that everyone has rights and also responsibilities*
- *We believe in an open Oldham in which all benefit fairly*
- *We believe in a multi-faith, multi-cultural and multi-racial society*
- *We believe in the worth of every person in Oldham*

The mission clearly puts forward the case for community cohesion which embraces identity, equality and engagement in the advancement and rebuilding the borough, comprising the seven district centres. The borough has strategically aligned itself with the Northern Way agenda (ie, the development of a significant national contribution in the Northwest of England) and the fifteen year Housing Market Renewal programme in order to change the face of Oldham and to cement the borough’s position in the drive for economic development.

The key themes of the community strategy are:-

- Community Cohesion
- A Strong and Vibrant Economy
- Health and Well-Being for All
- Safe and Strong Communities
- Well Educated and Highly Skilled People

- Children and Young People – Our Future
- An Improved and Valued Environment
- A Place of Culture
- Decent Homes for All
- A Thriving Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector

One of the key themes of the community cohesion strategy is *Well Educated and Highly Skilled People* which confirms the importance of education in driving the development agenda of the borough. The execution of the borough's agenda is driven by the availability of people who can execute functions or tasks that help realise the various objectives of the borough.

6. Conclusions

The OMBC has gone through a strategic transformation aided by the regeneration programme that has repositioned and re-branded the place. The establishment of the University Centre Oldham has added to the impetus for development. The image of a ghost city in dilapidation took a turn for the better. The town centre has taken a new shape, a city reinvented in terms of both the structures and occupants, a people reborn and recreated in both aspirations and opportunities. While the heinous events of 2001 tainted the city as a riotous poor city in dilapidation the subsequent regeneration programme that has seen massive amounts of money expended on Oldham have gone a long way in improving the image of the borough. The face of OMBC especially the town centre has been uplifted and continues to improve. The various documents that have been produced to inform policy such as the Ritchie report and the Cante report have emphasized the need for community integration in a bid to harness the energies of all the stakeholders in an effort to change the prospects of the borough for the better. The people needed education on the value of race cohesion and skills for development and prosperity.

The various strategies and tactics that have been employed in the regeneration and renewal of Oldham have been complemented by strategic corporate communications which were meant to create a favourable perception in the minds of the various stakeholders. The Oldham Chronicle, the local print mouthpiece of the borough has covered a lot of different phenomenal developments in the borough. The OMBC's development wing in the form of the Oldham Partnership in conjunction with the borough's marketing department has published a brochure titled *Think You Know Oldham! Think Again; Great Place, Great People, Great Prospects* which seeks to emphatically put the case for development across to the stakeholders. These developments cannot take place with the overarching drive that comes through an educated populace. In the main there is clear evidence of the borough's phenomenal turnaround from dilapidation to hope and prosperity but there is still a long way to go to attain greatness as the brochure would seek to portray.

The University Centre Oldham provides a great promise for the prospects of the future labourforce in Oldham. The university centre suggests that the future workforce will be educated and that there is potential for a young population to role into Oldham for good education. The infrastructural developments in the borough are going to enhance the movement in and around the borough and the links with major cities as Manchester and Leeds are convenient given the proximity of the major roads leading to these cities and rail network in connecting to those areas. The establishment of the University Centre Oldham has a huge impact on the transformation of the borough. Ultimately the Oldham brand will be a reflection of the amount of the exploitation of education and the exploitation of relevant skills for its agenda for development and the closer to home the education hub is to the borough the easier it is to exploit the resource. Therefore in view of the glaring cases of the significant impact of universities in many towns and cities it can be argued persuasively that University Centre Oldham can help turnaround the already improving Oldham brand.

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