

Branding Nonmetropolitan Illinois: A Normative Decision Analysis

Abstract

An ongoing challenge for rural Illinois is how it gets marketed. At root is the contested idea of what constitutes a “rural” identity or brand. It can be given a utopian gloss when discussed as a Jeffersonian, rural idyll, where yeoman farmers serve as the backbone for American democracy. On the other hand, the countryside is denigrated concept when rural residents are portrayed as rubes, living in “fly-over” country. The complexity of rural place identity is usually ignored and this chapter attempts to counter this tendency by asking residents in specific communities to report how they perceive their community.

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Introduction

An empirical fact about rural communities is that they tend to be branded by state officials as “escape destinations” for urban residents tired of city living. For instance, the positioning statements of rural Illinois include themes such as, “There's a Place outside Chicago called Illinois”, and “Illinois: A Million Miles from Monday”. Since this practice ignores the complexity of rural place identity this chapter utilizes residents’ perceptions to brand rural communities.

A common definition of branding is that it involves attaching a label (for identification) and meaning (for understanding) to a product, person, or a concept (Kotler and Armstrong 2008; Park, Jaworski, and McInnis 1986). This conceptual definition suggests that the understanding or brand meaning could differ among market segments (for example, brand loyal customers, new users of the brand, etc.). Hence, branding rural Illinois or non-metro Illinois involves identifying relevant market segments, exploring the mental associations that rural Illinois, as a brand, invokes in the minds of the market segments (Smith, 2002), and (re)positioning the brand at a particular location within the segments’ perceptual product space (Dillon, Donzal and Madden 1986).

In the following pages, we utilize the functionalist paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) to structure the task of branding nonmetropolitan Illinois. The objective is to explicate strategies to influence target market segments to categorize counties in non-metro Illinois as an instance of a category (for example, safe, friendly, etc.).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 highlights the market segment that is the focus of the study. Section 3 presents the theoretical basis of the study: the development and /or maintenance of brand-meaning. Section 4 presents the empirical aspects or the methodology of the study, and in the following section (Section 5) the results of the research are discussed.

Market Segments

Sociological theory suggests that non-metro counties could focus on two market segments: residents, and visitors (Cohen, 1984). However, a closer look at the two segments suggests that the utilities derived from living / visiting a non-metro county do not differ between the groups. To elaborate: consider the concept of “consumption” in tourism (Ryan and Page 2000). It is based on categorizing tourism demand into “pure” and “mixed” tourism products. Pure tourism products refer to goods and services consumed only by visitors (for example, hotel rooms) whereas mixed tourism products indicate goods and services consumed both by residents and visitors (for instance, public transportation). Since non-metro counties primarily serve the interests of residents and visitors by providing, universal, mixed category services such as preservation-of-life services (police, fire, sanitation), and general welfare services (streets and transportation, parks and recreation, etc.), we contend that county-initiated-customer-value management do not differ between residents and visitors. Technically, the counties are product specialists: products are for sale to any customer (resident or visitor) who can buy (Pride and Ferrell, 2008).

This kind of reasoning leads us to focus on county-level activities that shape the perceived value of the products experienced in the community. We develop this reasoning further in the next section.

Theoretical Framework

Branding a community involves three inter-related decisions: (i) a macro-level decision about the category in which the community should belong, for instance, recreational community; (ii) deciding on one or more benefits to highlight to the resident, for example, sports, live theatre, etc. - a meso-tier decision, and (iii) decision about attributes that underlie or correlates with the benefits, for instance, a fresh-water lake stocked with sports fish such as the Bass - a micro-level choice (Rossiter and Percy, 1997).

The prescription for the macro, category decision is that a community should position itself either centrally or differentially. A central strategy is recommended if the community is a prototypic one. Conceptually, a prototypic community would provide all required services to its members and thus would have a large population (cf. Tiebout, 1956). An example of this would be Cook County in Illinois which boasts a population of around 5.6 million people, and offers comprehensive public services ranging from Animal Control to Veterans' Assistance (see <http://www.co.cook.il.us>). A central strategy is also recommended for a "me-too" community that offers all the benefits of the market leader at a lower cost. For instance, DuPage County in Illinois would qualify for a me-too status since it is similar to Cook County in public service provision but has lower taxes (see <http://www.city-data.com/>). A differentiated strategy is recommended for all other communities. For instance, Carroll County in Illinois labels itself as a recreational county. According to the county's web site, "Its history, myriad points of interest and inherent natural beauty are just part of a wondrous, hidden treasure" (see <http://www.gocarrollcounty.com/>). The Carroll County's description of its natural and scenic beauty supports our viewpoint that communities are not market specialists: they don't offer

whatever products that residents want, rather they possess a set of characteristics and use these to attract visitors and retain residents (product specialists).

Once the macro-level decision is made, it is necessary to decide on one or more benefits to emphasize (the meso-level decision). This involves analyzing the motives that drive a person to live in (or visit) a community. Briefly, if a person resides in community x because it offers public transportation, then the person's decision is based on the reasoning that living in the community would remove commuting problems. On the other hand, if opportunity for retail shopping is the benefit sought, then sensory gratification could be the motive for visiting the community. Note that motives dictate the type of benefits sought in the community. Put another way, motives are the "whys" of living in a community and benefits are "what" the resident wants. Thus, for branding purposes, it is essential to identify the motives of the residents and the benefits that they seek from the community.

Finally, we focus on one or more attributes that underpin the benefits to highlight the "features" of the community. This is because when a person moves to or visits a community, the benefits are not yet forthcoming hence they are intangible. In this scenario, attributes, which are the objective features of the benefit, should be highlighted to the resident (visitor) to positively reinforce her community choice (Thompson, Hamilton and Rust 2005; Park, Lawson, and Milberg 1989).

Altogether then, we note that branding a community involves explaining why a resident or a visitor, with a particular motive such as social approval, should choose this particular community. The process begins with a "macro" location decision. Specifically, the decision is to locate the community in customer's perceptual space either centrally as one that offers all the

benefits or differentially as a niche community. The next decision involves community-level benefits to emphasize in communications. Finally, the attributes that underlie or correlate with the focal benefits should be identified and highlighted in marketing communications.

Methodology

In order to understand the macro location-strategy of non-metro counties, we content analyzed county web sites to infer location strategy(s). For instance, the Lee County web site (<http://encounterleecounty.com/>) highlights that it is located 90 minutes west of Chicago, and 60 minutes east of the Quad Cities. Therefore, we infer the macro-location of the county as a “hub” county which would benefit from a me-too location strategy. Next, we assessed the appropriateness of the classification using an external criterion. This criterion was derived from the postulates of categorization theory (see for example, Estes, 1995). Briefly, the theory states that one decides whether or not an object belongs to a category by assessing the object’s similarity to the concept of interest. Applied to the problem at hand, we need one or more “features” that are relevant for central and differentiated strategies. The Beale codes (ERS 2003) were considered useful for this exercise: the Beale code enables one to determine whether a rural county is within commuting distance to a metropolitan area. If it is, then we categorized the county as a “me-too” or a central-strategy county. If the county is not adjacent to a metropolitan area, then we classified the county as a differentiated one. Correlation between the results of the content analysis and the Beale codes is expected to provide evidence towards the validity of the content analysis.

Measures related to motives, and county-specific attribute perceptions were obtained from a sample survey of residents in nonmetropolitan Illinois. The target population was all households

in the nonmetropolitan counties. A simple random sampling procedure was employed to select 2,000 households from a mailing list purchased from a commercial database marketer. The mail survey procedure used an alert postcard informing potential respondents that a survey is being conducted and that they will soon be mailed a survey instrument, followed by a first mailing of the questionnaire with a cover note requesting cooperation. Then a reminder postcard was sent followed by mailing a second questionnaire to those who did not complete and return the first.

Table 1 lists the operational definitions of measures and provides examples of measures used in the study (Carnap, 1946). While measures related to the motives are self-explanatory, the choice of attributes to assess benefit perceptions needs some explanation. Briefly, Peterson (1981) posits that local governments are unable to manipulate in any significant way such contextual variables as air pollution or scenic beauty. Hence the focus is on changeable variables such as allocational or developmental variables (Nelson, 1999; Peterson, 1981). Allocational indicators include essential, but often economically neutral, services such as police, fire, and sanitation. On the other hand, developmental services aim to improve the economic position of the community. Some examples of developmental variables include education, and roads.

In research on local governments in Alabama, Baker (2003) identified a set of allocational and developmental variables considered essential for quality living. The list included items such as police, cable television, and public transportation. The relevance of these variables for rural Illinois was assessed by an expert panel of academics (mostly rural sociologists and community economists) affiliated with a publicly funded rural research center. While the expert panel retained most of the items highlighted in Baker's study, the panel recommended including the following additional items in the questionnaire: Head Start programs, daycare services, senior

centers and services, basic medical care services, mental health services, retail shopping, restaurants, and entertainment.

Insert Table 1 about here

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire survey yielded 640 usable responses. A majority of the respondents were female (53%), aged between 35 and 65 years (55%), with a household income not exceeding \$50,000 (67%).

Macro Location Decision

In which category should a nonmetropolitan county belong? Specifically, should a county position itself in customer's perceptual space either centrally as one that offers all the benefits or differentially as a niche community? To address this question, we examined county web sites for themes or associations that they emphasize. As shown in Table 2, the emphasis ranges from cozy, hub or bedroom community, to historic and recreational county. We assume that hub, cozy, and bedroom communities want customers to perceive them as offering comprehensive services – centralized strategy. Other themes such as recreation are assumed to denote strategies to differentiate the county. In terms of frequencies, centralized strategy was emphasized by 46% of the counties; differentiated strategy by 29% of the counties, and 10 counties (25%) neither had a web site nor provided information about their location decision.

Insert Table 2 about here

To understand the basis of the macro location decisions stated in the communities' web sites, we cross-classified web site themes with Beale code indicators of location. As mentioned earlier, if a county is within commuting distance to a metropolitan area (Beale codes 4, 6, and 8), we categorized the county as a "me-too" or a central-strategy county. If not, then we classified the county as a differentiated one (Beale codes 5, 7, and 9). While 63% of the counties that emphasize centralized location strategies are adjacent to a metropolitan area, a similar percentage of counties (60%) that emphasize differentiation strategies are also closer to a metropolitan area. In other words, the cross validation suggests that the themes stated in the county web sites do not correlate with the Beale-codes based classification. One plausible explanation is that the themes abstracted from the content analysis are invalid. In other words, the methodology of the content analysis is suspect. However, since we followed established principles of content analysis such as: (i) using frequency counts to identify words of potential interest, and (ii) utilizing the keyword-in-context approach to categorization, we presume that methodological error in content analysis is nil or negligible (Riffe, Lacy and Fico 2005).

A theoretical reason for the anomaly would be that these financially-strapped rural counties, on average, do not think about macro location strategies but focus more on meso and micro level strategies. For instance, the product specialist nature of the counties may influence them to focus on their niche (see the Carol county example discussed in Section 3) rather than be everything to everyone. Warner and Hefetz (2008) provide empirical evidence in this direction.

Meso-Level Motives-Benefits Analyses

What motive connects a county to the market segments? In other words, is it “drive reduction” (negative reinforcement) or “drive increase” (positive reinforcement) that energizes customers to seek a community to live / visit? County-wise analyses suggest that 15 of the 35 counties (43%) should focus on benefits related to drive-increase motives and the rest (20 counties or 57%) should focus on benefits related to both drive increase and drive reduction.

Since motives dictate benefits sought, we analyzed benefit perceptions for each of the two groups separately using dimension reduction techniques. Specifically, a principal component analysis of the allocation / development attributes revealed that preservation of life, and general welfare are the benefits sought by customers seeking positive reinforcement. On the other hand, customers who act on both positive and negative reinforcers desire quality of life that includes both public enlightenment and happiness.

Counties, Benefits, and Attributes in Residents Perceptual Space

Figure 1 shows the perceptual map of the 15 counties that are viewed by respondents as positive reinforcers. The map depicts the two factors or benefits (preservation of life and general welfare) and each of the 15 attributes is plotted as a vector in the plane. The locations of the 15 counties are also shown. The distances between counties indicate similar benefit perceptions. Thus, La Salle and Bureau are perceived to offer similar benefits while Vermilion and Christian are perceived to be dissimilar in benefits delivery. Overall, Christian County is perceived as offering better general welfare benefits; Christian, Douglas, and Saline counties are thought of to be better preservation-of-life (service) providers.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Finally, we focus on perceptions relevant for both the drive reduction and the drive increase motives (Figure 2). The figure highlights the need for communities such as Effingham and Fulton to reassess their branding strategies. Specifically, it is suggested that each of these communities emphasize its best or unique benefits, mention its equal benefits, and trade off or omit its inferior benefits (Bettman, 1979).

Consider the case of Jo Davies County. It has a positive ranking in the “preservation of life services” dimension (Figure 1). Therefore, the County should emphasize, that is, focus at least 2/3 of its communication with the residents (Rossiter, 1996), about the goodness of preservation of life services in the County. What should Jo Davies County do with “inferior” benefit perceptions? It should focus on attributes that drive those benefit perceptions. Specifically, attributes in which the County performs well should be highlighted as evidence of good benefits in the deficient areas.

To elaborate, an examination of attributes associated with the general welfare dimension suggests that the state of repair of streets is important for “general welfare” benefit perception. Jo Davies performs well in streets facilities when compared to other counties in the region. This differential performance suggests that the County should follow an attribute-to-benefit approach in highlighting its general welfare benefits. In other words, communications should highlight the following:

To residents:

Jo Davies County is a residential haven that offers excellent preservation of life services and streets.

This type of communication would facilitate vigilant processing of information about the “street” attribute, not the overall “general welfare” benefit (Lane and Keaveney, 2005). Our prescriptions are based on the assumption of a “passive” resident-audience. In other words, since residents are experiencing community services continually, they become habituated or passive recipients of service. In this situation, exposure to marketing communications would impact and rearrange cognitive structures easily (see Smith and Swinyard, 1982; Sujan and Bettman, 1989; Pham and Muthukrishnan, 2002 for evidence in this direction).

Insert Figure 2 about here

Conclusion

This paper highlights that branding a nonmetropolitan county involves recognizing what is perceived by the residents, not necessarily what is. While the perceptual analysis offers insight into branding rural Illinois, it also possesses limitations. To begin with, the analysis is confined to existing residents. If the interest is in attracting new residents, then the approach has to be extended to potential residents or visitors to rural Illinois. In other words, it is recommended that the approach employed in this paper be implemented at various target groups such as the “young”, and the “elderly” who are potential residents.

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Table 1: Measures of Motivation and Attribute Perceptions

Concept	Definition	Examples of Measures
Positive Reinforcer	Behavior that results in “rewards”. This is called drive increase in behavioral learning theory.	Family ties and friendships make this community special to me. Measured on a 5-step “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree Scale”
Negative Reinforcer	Behavior that provides relief from negative mental state (also called drive reduction in behavioral learning theory)	I can think of no other place to live where I could feel safer. Measured on a 5-step “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree Scale”
Attributes: Allocational services	Resident perceptions about community services related to economically neutral areas such as police and fire.	Please show the extent to which you believe that your community provides _____. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Law enforcement • Parks and recreation Measured on a 5-step “Not at All” to “Absolutely” Scale.
Attributes: Developmental services	Resident perceptions about services aimed at improving the community’s economic position.	Please show the extent to which you believe that your community provides _____. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail shopping • Entertainment ... Measured on a 5-step “Not at All” to “Absolutely” Scale.

Note: See Appendix 1 for a list of attributes used in the study.

Table 2. County-level Brand Associations

County	Position Emphasized in county website	Website visited
Bureau	cozy county	http://www.bureaucounty.us/community.php
Carroll	recreation county	http://www.gocarrollcounty.com/
Christian	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Clay	recreation county	http://www.claycountyillinois.org/
Coles	cozy county	http://www.co.coles.il.us/
Cumberland	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Douglas	None provided	http://www.douglascountyil.com/home.html
Edgar	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Effingham	cozy county	http://www.co.effingham.il.us/
Ford	cozy county	http://www.paxtonil.com/fordco.html
Franklin	recreation county	http://www.fctb.com/index.shtml
Fulton	recreation county	http://www.fultoncountytourism.org/
Hancock	cozy county	http://www.hancockcountyil.com/
Iroquois	hub county	http://www.co.iroquois.il.us/
Jackson	None provided	http://www.jacksoncounty-il.gov/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1
Jefferson	hub county	http://www.southernillinois.com/
Jo Davies	cozy county	http://www.jodaviess.org/
Knox	hub county	http://www.visitgalesburg.com/
LaSalle	None stated	http://www.lasallecounty.org/
Lee	hub county	http://www.encounterleecounty.com/
Logan	cozy county	http://www.co.logan.il.us/
Macoupin	bedroom community	http://www.macoupincountyil.gov/
Marion	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Mason	recreation county	http://www.masoncountyil.org/
McDonough	education county	http://www.macomb.com/index.html
Morgan	historic county	http://www.morgancounty-il.com/
Randolph	historic county	http://www.randolphco.org/gov/index.cfm
Richland	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Saline	recreation county	http://www.shawneetourism.com/
Stephenson	hub county	http://www.stephenson-county-il.org/
Vermilion	recreation county	http://www.co.vermilion.il.us/
Warren	cozy county	http://www.warrencountyil.com/

Wayne	Web site not available (see http://www.statelocalgov.net/state-il.cfm)	
Whiteside	hub county	http://www.whiteside.org/
Williamson	hub county	http://www.wctb.org/

Note: Two judges independently coded the web sites. The results of the coding process revealed an 88% agreement between the coders (n= 35). Inter-coder reliability based on the I_r index works out to 0.89 (Perrault and Leigh1989). The 95% CI bounds for the I_r are .91 and .87.

Figure 1. Perceptual Map: Positive Reinforcement Motive.

Dimensions: 1 = Preservation of Life, and 2 = General Welfare

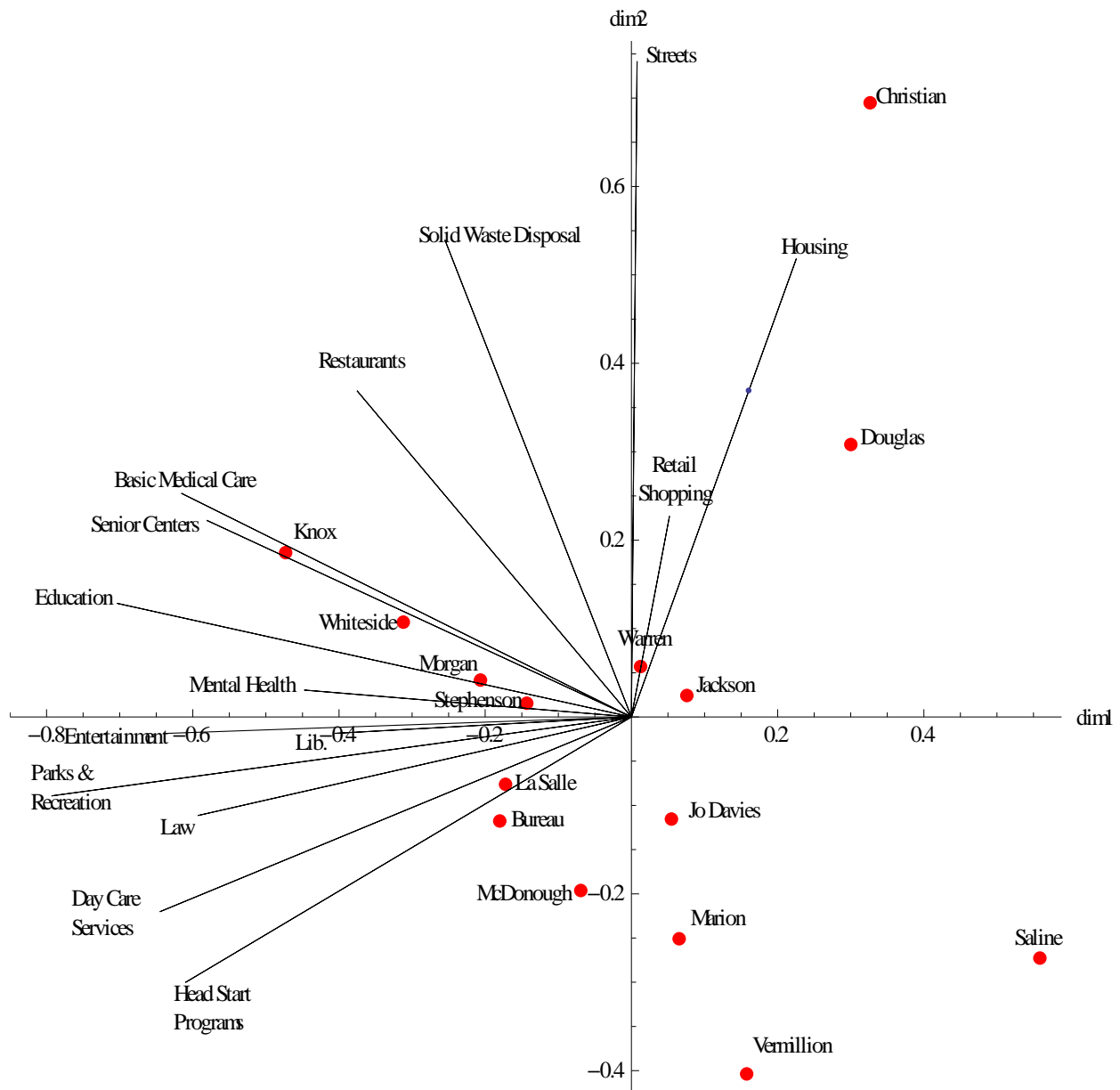


Figure 2. Perceptual Map: Positive and Negative (Reinforcements) Motives

Dimensions: 1 = Overall quality of life, and 2 = General Welfare

