Jasper Eshuis, Erik Braun, and Erik-Hans Klijn have written a thought-provoking article, “Place Marketing as Governance Strategy: An Assessment of Obstacles in Place Marketing and Their Effect on Attracting Target Groups.” I am pleased to note the similarities between the municipalities within their research market and the one that I work in, which is half a world away and in a different hemisphere.

Place marketing will always have its obstacles, and those impediments are familiar to any economic development practitioner. What can increase the challenge, however, is the difficulty of measuring successful strategies.

I agree with the authors’ analysis, in particular with reference to the size of the municipality and the respondents’ varying positions, as these two items will always have a major bearing on potential place marketing initiatives. My experiences also corroborate the concept of “turf wars” between government departments and their views and aspirations for a region.
In response to the authors’ three conclusions—(1) the political obstacles relating to citizen support, (2) classical marketing obstacles relating to the content of marketing campaigns and reaching target audiences, and (3) administrative obstacles with large loadings on difficulties in municipal organization—I offer some insight into strategies to overcome these obstacles.

A potential remedy for these obstacles is to develop a strategic plan using any or all of the following three mechanisms:

1. Stakeholder engagement to increase “buy-in”
2. Determining what “your place” has to offer
3. Constant communication with stakeholders as well as the target audience

In my opinion, the most important aspect of place marketing is a clear and well-supported strategic plan. While this may sound obvious, the method of developing this plan is somewhat unique. Most successful organizations engage in some sort of strategic planning; however, I believe it is crucial to have input from as many stakeholders as possible, both external and internal, at the very beginning of the process. This form of engagement assists practitioners in gaining support for their place marketing plan.

The engagement can come in a number of different ways: a questionnaire, qualitative interviews with key personnel, or a workshop, the last of which I have found to be most effective. This interaction enables individuals to put their points of view across and helps alleviate what the authors refer to as “turf wars.” This range of opinions helps stakeholders understand all points of view that are relevant in place marketing. A well-organized workshop and carefully developed questionnaire will help the practitioner form an understanding of certain goals for a region that can be incorporated into the strategic plan.

People and agencies will inevitably have different points of view within these workshops. It is important that these views be aired and that, before the completion of the workshop, the attendees reach some consensus as to the top priorities for that region. This can be done through a simple voting method, where participants are asked to vote for the top three ideas that have been put forward for the day. This type of engagement is significant because participants can clearly recognize these priorities within the finalized strategic plan and understand, regardless of their personal opinions, why the priorities are included.

The second valuable lesson from conducting this stakeholder engagement is to determine what “your place” has to offer. I believe that very few municipalities are the same and that each has different offerings. Therefore, it is vitally important to determine a region’s unique strengths, which will then help determine the framework for place marketing implementation. For example, there is no point in marketing a region as a tourist destination if there is no private enterprise tourism product available. Similarly, it is unwise to promote a region as a viable option for young couples and families if no new land development is available and not enough schools exist to accommodate the resulting increase in children. Thus, these workshops assist in breaking down the barriers of turf wars and provide government with an understanding of what a region requires from other stakeholders.

Finally, once a strategic plan has been developed, it needs to be sold to the stakeholders. Constant communication is vital in this endeavor. Because the stakeholders were included in the early stages of development, ideally, many of them will be supportive of the plan and serve as a megaphone for communicating the message. Simple things such as a launch party for the place marketing strategy and inviting all of those participants along can be extremely beneficial. From then on, any key milestone events should be communicated to the participants so that they are kept up to date with the proceedings of the strategic plan. In my experience, this minor communication technique greatly assists the broader marketing platforms. The use of social media can also be a very simple and cost-effective platform for continual transfer of information.

It is almost impossible to reach consensus in place marketing efforts, and I agree with the challenges highlighted by the authors. However, I have discovered that by employing these simple tools and techniques, you can sway the crowd to a more favorable point of view.