



## **The Branding of Almaty, the Oasis of Central Asia**

Dr. Patrick Low Kim Cheng  
Dr. John Taylor

### **Abstract**

Once the capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty is fast growing and becoming a popular center in Central Asia. Through a series of interviews, focus groups and literature review, the authors suggest ways and various strategies in branding the city. The model they used branding this Central Asian city of Almaty is simple yet effective. They apply the RAW model... read on! This paper was first presented by Dr. Patrick Low Kim Cheng in the plenary session 'Strategic Urban Management for Almaty' at the 5<sup>th</sup> KIMEP International Research Conference (6 – 8 October 2005) under the title: "City Branding/Marketing".

### **Introduction**

To begin with, it is critical to stress that ideas are important; they can determine future direction, sales and revenue. Ideas can also grow markets and brands.

The questions next are: Can anything be branded? Can we brand a city? Branding is not only limited to companies or products, but in this age and time, everything can be branded (Low, 2005b). Clearly, brands supply key benefits to consumers, companies and even countries (Keller, 2003). Countries can get high tourist visits and gain tourists' revenues. When people recognize a brand



and have good knowledge about it, then they do not have to engage in a lot of additional thought or more information processing to make a product decision, that is, visiting the place or city.

Imagine Paris without its Eiffel Tower. Can it be identified as Paris then? The researchers recalled a photograph of Paris in the 24<sup>th</sup> century in the science fiction television serial, "Star Trek"; it included the Eiffel Tower in spite of its 'futuristic buildings'.

Fundamentally, most cities have their icons or symbols. They have anchor buildings for which they are famous. Chicago has its imposing Sears Tower while Kuala Lumpur has its impressive Petronas Twin Towers.

### **Every Country Should Have Its Own Icons, Identities & Inspirations**

Some images in which Kazakhstan can use as its national symbols include camel, snow leopard, *Tien Shan* Mountains and many other common yet significant Kazakhstani symbols.

When one speaks of the Statue of Liberty, images of America are conjured. New York, until September 11, 2001, had its very unique twin towers, the World Trade Center. Indeed, the Taj Mahal conjures the images of things Indian and the Indian Moghuls' great architecture! Paris is famous for its Eiffel Tower and pictures of the Eiffel Tower on French products remind buyers of France (Low, 2005: 26).

### **Objectives of the Paper**

Almaty, the former capital of Kazakhstan is growing. Naturally Astana, being the capital of Kazakhstan will compete seriously with Almaty, 'the city



of apples'. Astana already has a number of beautiful and new buildings such as its famous dollar-shaped Ministry of Finance building. But more importantly, other Central Asian capitals and cities such as Bishkek and Tashkent are also growing and certainly will compete with Almaty. The aim of this paper then is to make recommendations and suggestions for improving the amenities as well as the overall outlook of Almaty so that it strengthens and further brands itself as the Southern capital of Kazakhstan.

### **Definition of aABrand**

"A brand stands for a certain personality; it evokes certain feelings, builds goodwill and carries emotional attachments" (Low, 2005: 26). A brand has assets. A branded city can thus attract tourists, much economic activities, and bring better quality of life to its residents.

### **Literature Review**

In the year 2000, for the first time, most of the world's population was living in the cities. Cities are also growing and competing with each other. Increasing urbanization has, in fact, showed no signs of slowing (Badcock, 2002).

Employment opportunities and living conditions are bound up with the prosperity and branding of cities. As a city grows, it also needs to brand itself. Indeed, there is also growing competition and rivalry between cities and regions for roving global investments (Badcock, 2002).

Hence, to paraphrase Bedbury and Fenichell (2004: 14), a city needs to differentiate itself from its competitors. The city brand builds on the city's character, and the city brand too needs to do that better than anything else.



"All brands need good parents" (Bedbury and Fenichell, 2004: 21), hence as long as Kazakhstan the country as a brand grows, Almaty the city brand will also grow. The government can also help to facilitate to grow the country's and the city's brands. It can also help to build the country's infrastructure and amenities (Low, 2005).

The modern history of Almaty begins in 1854 with the building of Zailiyskiy fortress in the Almaty region beyond the Illy River. The fortress was named Verniy and it was known as Alma-ata from 1921 to 1994. The word 'Almaty' means 'apple abundance' from the Turkic word 'alma' meaning apple tree. Almaty was the Kazakhstan capital from 1929 to 1997. Currently, it is the financial, scientific, cultural and transport center of Kazakhstan ([http://www.sky-eagle.kz/uk/about\\_kaz.html](http://www.sky-eagle.kz/uk/about_kaz.html) "About Kazakhstan"; <http://migrant.sobkor.ru/kazakhstan/aata/> "Alma-ata").

## Research Methods

Interviews were held with marketing and brand management postgraduate students. Three (3) focus group meetings of ten members were held. The sample size of this study is fifty (50). According to Sekaran (2000: 296 - 7), "sample sizes between 30 and 500 could be effective... and appropriate for most research... Qualitative studies typically use small sample sizes because of the intensive nature of such studies". The sample size of 50 was decided because of various aspects including costs, time accessibility and limited personal resources.

The interviews helped to prepare questions to be asked of the focus groups. The questions focused on the how to brand Almaty and opportunities to improve the city were discussed.



This study was conducted using an interview-cum-focus group methodology to systematically question, "talk and probe" individuals (Low, 2002: 60) commonly used in marketing-research contexts (Morgan, 2002; Blackburn & Stokes, 2000; Fontana & Frey, 1994). The focus groups were held from 16 April to 15 June 2005.

The focus groups were useful in brainstorming and coming up with helpful tips. However, it is only in analyzing the data that one of the researchers came up with a simple yet effective and creative model called the RAW model. The input was then organized in that fashion.

Interestingly, further and subsequent interviews with the interviewees confirm the focus groups' data. Interview sessions were held from 12 August to 11 September 2005.

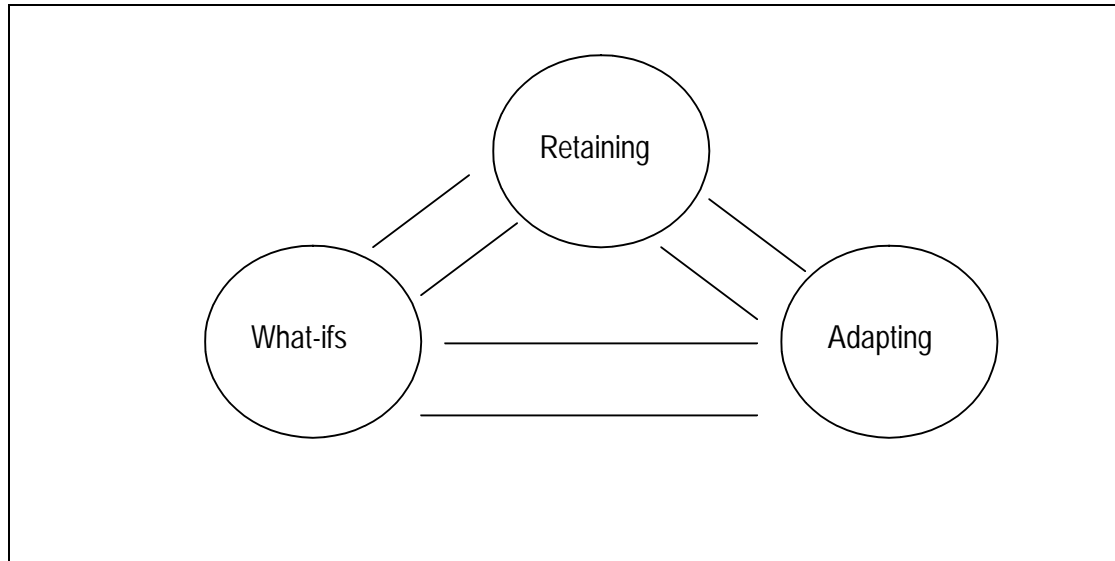
### **Analysis & Discussion: Applying The RAW Model**

Albert Einstein once said that "imagination is more important than knowledge"; the researchers believe that marketing and branding should be creative and besides, marketers have to "see the bigger picture, ...the creative goes to imagine what has not yet been thought of" (The Marketer, 2004: 9; [www.shapetheagenda.com](http://www.shapetheagenda.com)), "think the unthinkable and explore what seems impossible" (Ronay, 2004: 5), and work it out. Here, we will apply the RAW (Retaining, Adapting & What-ifs) model to the branding of cities such as Almaty (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**

The RAW: **R**etaining, **A**dapting & **W**hat-ifs model in working city-branding strategies.



Source: Low 2005c

### **Retaining**

The majority or 94 percent of the respondents voiced the view that the beauties of Almaty have not been fully capitalized, and their ideas were then captured and discussed under the "Adapting" and "What-if" portions of the analysis and model.

### **Promote the Greenness of Almaty**

"Almaty has many parks; there are many trees" "Almaty is certainly beautiful in the summer months; it is a garden city, very much better if not on par with Singapore" (several interviewees' and focus group members' input)



and Low (2005a) amplifies this. This is one aspect that should be retained and strengthened by the authorities.

### **Foster Cultural and Ethnic Diversity**

Another very positive characteristic of Almaty is its cultural and ethnic diversity. The city has a vibrant cultural life (ballet, music, circus, etc.) and "a variety of ethnic communities that really contribute to life in the city". "This diversity should also be retained" (several interviewees' and focus group members' input).

Bedbury and Fenichell's (2004: 21) work echoes this when they say that, "humans bring brands to life". There is so much richness in terms of the arts, jewelries and various aspects of the cultures of Kazakhstan. In fact, Low's (2004) study shows that diversity directly affects foods and dishes. There are Ughurs' *lakman*, Uzbeks' *mantee*, *Kim chi* (Korean pickled cabbage), Turks' *Bastirma*, Turkish delights and a host of many others; the focus groups spoke of "mutual enrichment". Low's (2004) study also reported the "assorted meats", "lots of varieties of salads" including "Korean salads"; and that Kazakhstani foods are indeed enriched because "we take the best from every ethnic group".

Interestingly, food can also help to boost the brand of a city. Take for example, one report indicates that, "New Yorkers lap sights, sounds and tastes of Singapore at street festival" (Mitton, 2004: 6). It became a selling point for the city-state, "giv(ing) them a chance to actually taste and smell Singapore right here in New York" (Larry Jack, Director of Colonial Travel, quoted in Mitton, 2004: 6). The foods of Almaty can also be organised in street festivals in various other cities and/or countries.



### **Promote Soviet-styled Architectural Structures**

In most countries, key buildings and monuments are floodlit to bring out their unique and beautiful features. The old charms can be brought in too (Loh, 2004) and marketers may want to evoke emotions (Farrell, cited in The Marketer, 2004: 42). Romanticism of the Soviet era can also be promoted; after all as Suzanne Chazin once said, "all that is worth cherishing in this world begins in the heart, not in the head".

In Singapore, Malaysia and India, parliamentary and old colonial buildings are floodlit to showcase British and local architectural styles. Same also as in Almaty, key buildings such as the Kazakhstan Hotel, the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP), the Opera House, and the Kazakh Agricultural State University Buildings should be floodlit, showcasing such Soviet-styled buildings.

### **Adapting**

In applying the idea of adapting, the researchers believe "in find(ing) ways to improve it. Inch by inch, it's a cinch" (Low, 2002: 10) and besides, to quote Burnett (1995), "there is a paradise of improvement awaiting us if we search hard enough for it".

### **Promote the Icon of "Zolotoy Chelovek" or the Golden Man**

Almaty's New Square proudly displays the "Zolotoy Chelovek" or the Golden Man. Here, it is suggested that more needs to be done to get Almaty to be closely identified with the "Zolotoy Chelovek" or the Golden Man (Low, 2005: 26). Perhaps more of such icons or statues should be placed in Medeu and other places within the city.





### **Keep Almaty Clean**

Campaigns may be organized ala Singapore (Low, 2005a). Several interviewees expressed: "some public education should be held" and perhaps, "more litter bins be placed in the city so that litter is properly disposed of, let's 'Keep Almaty clean'". On eor two interviewees also suggested that from time to time, "community clean-ups of the environment" ought to be also organized.

### **Encourage National and Mountain Sports**

Some holiday centers also support sports, and each country has its national sports. Like other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is also famous for its ancient 'game of the people' – it is an equestrian game that boils down to the fastest or best rider picking up the carcass of a goat and bring it to the finish. In fact, when the Central Asian countries became independent, they started to revive this ancient game, and an international federation was set up, which was even joined by China and France (UA, 2003). New rules have been approved and international tournaments are held between national teams. Promoting such sports would, in most ways, promote Almaty and Kazakhstan as a whole.

If one looks at Pattaya and Phuket in Thailand, and Penang in Malaysia, these centers attract water sports enthusiasts as well as "braver souls in parachute contraptions sweeping the skies" (Loh, 2004: L5). So also, in Almaty, "mountain sports like skiing are to be further encouraged" (several interviewees' and focus group members' input). This may further promote tourism in Almaty. It should be kept in mind that Almaty has been short-listed or at least it is bidding for the 2014 winter Olympics.



### **Install International Tourism Signboards**

It is suggested that international tourism brown signboards be located in such places as Zhelyzony Bazaar (Green Market), Sarkhat Bazaar and other interesting tourist spots.

In addition, street signs should be placed throughout Almaty, using both Russian and English, to help tourists and foreign residents find their way around. Improved street lighting would also help liven up and make the city safer.

### **Improve Zhelyzony Bazaar**

Zhelyzony Bazaar building needs to be renovated with proper fire exits to promote safety in the bazaars. The cleanliness and the maintenance of the bazaar too need to be looked in.

### **Have Plaques In Interesting Historical Places**

When highlighting historical spots, plaques can be installed to indicate interesting details of these places. An interesting Overseas example to cite is Singapore where a plaque is placed on the spot near the Orchard Road YMCA as the building was used as a Japanese war office during the World War 2 days when Singapore was "Syonan-to". Plaques can also be placed in interesting historical buildings in Almaty such as the Academy of Science. At the time of writing, the authors noted that a *yuk* (a tent) was constructed close to the entrance of the Academy of Science building. This is indeed good as it gives the institute a Kazakh touch and a national flavor.



### **Encourage Visits to Nature Reserves and Mountains**

Tour companies and agencies in Almaty may encourage visits and organized tours to the various nature reserves and mountains around Almaty such as Turgan, Chagrin Canyon, the Singing Sands and others. Indeed so, these may attract tourists as well as serving as oasis of quietude, rural calm, gentle breezes and relaxation, appealing to Almaty's residents who have migrated from the rural areas into modernized Almaty.

### **What-ifs: Be MAD!**

Here, creativity is needed. One 'zags' while others 'zig' so that one can be 'MAD: Make A Different', leading one's creative powers to differentiate one's products and be better than the competition. Besides, finding the "purple cow" is the other P in marketing (Godin, 2004: 12), and branding allows one to create or add an attribute to the product that distinguishes it from others (American Marketing Association, cited in Keller, 2003: 3).

### **Have Almaty's Very Own Mega-structure**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that most people associate Almaty with the physical, natural landmarks; they associate Almaty with Medeu, the Tian Shan mountains, Turgan Gorge and the nearby Chagrin Canyon (see also [http://www.sky-eagle.kz/uk/about\\_kaz.html](http://www.sky-eagle.kz/uk/about_kaz.html) "About Kazakhstan"). When it comes to buildings and man-made structures, true, Ramstore at Firmova Street is quite a building, but Almaty really needs an imposing or a very attractive building that stands out or at least reflects the character of Almaty. Astana, the Capital of Kazakhstan, has its new governmental complex, various Ministerial buildings including the S-shaped Ministry of Finance Building, and the



imposing 97 meters Bayterek Tower, it really gives Astana its character (Low, 2005b).

Take another example, the Sears Tower in Chicago which really gives Chicago its very character. Sears Towers, with its Metropolitan Club at the 67<sup>th</sup> floor serving gourmet food to its members, is really a unique building (NGC, 2005). Kuala Lumpur's Petronas Twin Towers is also a branded Malaysian building very much like the Eiffel Tower in Paris (Low, 2005b). One possible suggestion is to build an anchor complex in Almaty that is really an exceptional attraction for both residents and tourists alike. It could be an imposing emporium selling many handicrafts and other merchandise from throughout the Central Asian region. It could be housed in an attractive and impressive building (mega-structure). It could have an association back to the days of the Old Silk Road, and become a real symbol for Almaty (Taylor and Low, 2005).

If we apply such a "what-if", it can add to the betterment of Almaty when implemented. Almaty's image and brand can also be enhanced when it is being made into a financial hub for the country. Capitalizing on the vast area available, techno-parks or IT parks are established in the Almaty and nearby Alatau region (Moorthy, 2006). The Government can also assist to setting up of such parks and it can offer incentives to company that can include: no corporate tax status, value-added tax (VAT) and other incentives.

### **Limitations and Benefits**

One of the limitations of the study is that it would certainly be better if the sample sizes were bigger. Nonetheless, the benefits of this paper are that the issue was brainstormed, many ideas were floated and besides, they represent creative opportunities to the city planners, government officials and policy makers to learn and avoid 'certain threats' – or "simply demolish the old and the existing" (interviewees' input), and improve on what they have.



One strong benefit of the RAW model in city branding is that it attempts, and indeed can be applied to supply a structure for making 'rational' action steps yet it also taps on gut-feel and experience, and in doing so, it is hoped the old and the new are tapped while that gut-feel and experience are incorporated and appropriate.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Marketing, in essence, is about "making something, something new, something different, something better and something unimaginable" (The Marketer, 2004: 50) and to benefit the customers. And this is what the RAW model attempts to do for the branding of cities.

In constructing and applying the "RAW" model to Almaty, urban planners and marketers could develop several concrete ideas to further improve cities, as Leo Burnett (1995: 37) put it distinctively, "ideas alone enable a man to survive and flourish", so here any city can be further improved, and its brand enhanced.

Besides, in advancing these specific ideas, we need to propose a "brand" which really suggests Almaty's personality. Perhaps the "New Silk Road Emporium" is such a concept – it would also enhance Almaty as a hospitable and friendly city image.



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