Santa Monica Travel and Tourism Summit
Rick Cole on "The Santa Monica Brand"
May 3, 2016

I understand that Santa Monica Travel and Tourism's brand promise is celebrating its ten-year anniversary. So this morning, I think it makes sense to reflect on its meaning and future . . .
"Santa Monica…the best way to discover L.A.; an unforgettable beach city experience filled with eye-catching people, cutting-edge culture and bold innovations. It's the essence of the California lifestyle."

Santa Monica Travel & Tourism was one of the first agencies in the country to develop a destination brand strategy. Obviously identity of a real place represents more than just the logo mark and tagline or even the brand promise. A community, a city, a place can't be fully captured by mere words or images. There is always more than meets the eye, more than can be captured in even a powerfully memorable brand promise.

Yet the way human brains work, we know the value of the memorable. We live in a time when record numbers of people around the world are searching for memorable places, but never has there been so many forgettable places. In his book, *Invisible Cities*, the Italian writer Italo Calvino captured this paradox when he wrote about the imaginary city of Trude:

"If on arriving at Trude I had not read the city's name written in big letters, I would have thought I was landing at the same airport from which I had taken off.

The suburbs they drove me through were no different from the other, with the same little garnish and yellowish houses. Following the same signs we swung around the same flower beds in the same squares. The downtown streets displayed goods, packages, signs that had no changed at all.

Why come to Trude? I asked myself. And I already wanted to leave.
"You can resume your flight whenever you like, " they said to me, " but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by the sole Trude, which does not begin, nor end. Only the name of the airport changes."

So ten years on, our challenge is not just how well Santa Monica is conveying our brand promise to the world. The most crucial test is: how well we are living up to it here at home?

The dilemma is captured by a Trip Advisor article on Santa Monica:

> *"Santa Monica culture is a mish-mash of everything - there are mountains and the outdoors, arts and entertainment, intellectuals and hipsters...you can pretty much find anything you want or need here."*

Leaving aside the mountains which share our name but actually stretch up the coast starting in Malibu, the Trip Advisor isn't doing us any favors. It's not important that we capture everything in 8.3 square miles. What's important is whether in our diversity, there is a memorable essence of who and what we are – first to ourselves and then to the world.

So let's think together about what's memorable about Santa Monica.
An unforgettable beach experience…

It's possible to imagine, of course, a version of a beach at Disneyland or Universal Studios or Las Vegas. It would never be cloudy, the sand wouldn't stick between your toes and the surf would always be up. But a Disney or Vegas beach could never replicate the sheer vastness of the Pacific Ocean and its constantly varying faces, nor the authentic feel of its breezes and smells and the innumerable ways to experience it from Palisades Park, at the Annenberg Beach House, at the end of the pier or biking along the beach path. Santa Monica truly delivers that laid-back California beach vibe whether you stay at a world-class hotel, come for the rides at Pacific Park or just catch a glimpse of the shimmering blue or gray horizon while strolling through our vibrant Downtown. The draw of that experience is what makes Santa Monica "One of the Top Ten Beach Cities in the World" according to National Geographic and among USA Today's list of best urban beaches – and makes the Santa Monica Pier one of the top ten most Instragrammed sights on the planet.

Clearly, there is more that is memorable about the beach experience than just sea and sand. The New York Times' *36 Hours in Santa Monica* travel piece captures the memorable essence of what separates us from other stretches of Southern California beach:

> "WHEN Angelenos think of the perfect beach town, they think of Santa Monica. Venice (to the south) has its countercultural charms, and Malibu (up north) is celebrity central, but only Santa Monica feels <u>homey</u>.

This "homey-ness" is key to Santa Monica's desirability. The article goes on:

> "Residents enjoy cultural institutions, athletic facilities, and stores and restaurants of the highest order."

Note the reference to residents. Tourists are comfortable in herds. But discerning travelers are looking for real places with real people. That's why our urbanity works. This is not a town overrun with visitors, although it can sometimes seem that way on summer holiday weekends. Santa Monica is a real place with cool people who call this place home. Of course everyone in this room has a different definition of what that means. Which is one of the defining characteristics of Santa Monica, we're a place where there is no single standard for what's cool.

It's why the Third Street Promenade and Santa Monica Pier are such universal draws. Not because a single corporation has created a synthetic environment, but because we are a *<u>real</u>*, *<u>organic</u>* city next to a beach delivering *an unforgettable beach experience*.
Let's talk about Cutting-edge culture…

Trip Advisor is right about Santa Monica's diverse and plentiful cultural amenities. We have the Twilight Concert Series, Tongva After Dark, world-class performances at The Broad Stage, the Bergamot galleries, art house movies at the Laemmle and the Aero, and a year-round kaleidoscope of other shows, exhibits, festivals and street performers.

But how much of it is cutting edge? Sometimes we mistake edgy for cutting edge. Cutting edge doesn't have to mean pushing the boundaries of what's healthy and acceptable. It can also mean fresh and authentic in the way that Frank Gehry's first buildings redefined the way we look at building design and materials or how Santa Monica's Farmer's Market reshaped how we look at what we eat and where it comes from. With respect, I think the work Evan Meyer is doing covering blank walls in neglected commercial areas is more promising for unique place-making than bringing well-known artists to the walls of museums.

Which brings me to the third element in the brand promise that I want to reflect on:
Bold innovations…

When this brand promise was written ten years ago, Silicon Beach didn't exist, but the spirit of innovation did. Santa Monica continues to be a seedbed of innovation in the arts, education, food, medicine and caring for our earth.

I can rattle off an impressive roster of institutions fostering innovation in our tiny corner of the Los Angeles metropolis. Santa Monica College with its first ever four-year degree in digital design; Hulu, which has changed how we watch television; Rand, doing groundbreaking public policy research; Agensys, developing leading cancer therapies; the Milken Institute hosting global thought leaders; Headspace, delivering zen meditation as an app on your phone; Cornerstone on Demand shaking up the staid world of human resources . . .

The list goes on and on: UCLA and St. John's Medical Centers; Heal the Bay; Activision; TrueCar; not to mention a growing array of co-working spaces and accelerators incubating the innovative household names of the future. It was no accident that President Obama chose Cross Campus as the location to spotlight the promise of Silicon Beach: *"This environment is reflective of what's best in America, because it shows the kind of energy and entrepreneurship, the dynamism, the creativity and innovation that's always been the hallmark of the American economy."*

Why did President Obama pick Santa Monica to deliver that message? Because nearly a quarter of the top 100 most innovative tech employers in our region are based here and 5 of the 10 most notable venture capital firms in Los Angeles are in Santa Monica. The tech and creative sectors now account for nearly a third of our city's total employment. That's not just making a local impact, that's making a global one.

So as we look back on ten years of your work to convey Santa Monica's unique brand promise, I think we can agree that we do offer an u*nforgettable beach experience; that we foster cutting-edge culture; and we remain a center for bold innovation.*

But as I said a couple of months back at the annual State of the City gathering, we can't afford to sit on our assets. A place that's built around being unforgettable, cutting-edge and innovative must continue to be bold and visionary.

So let me offer a bold thought. It's this: Santa Monica's future lies not with bigger, but with better.

Not long ago, three eye-catching hotel projects were proposed for Downtown Santa Monica. The Fairmont was to be rebuilt as a 21 story tower complimented by high-end condominiums. A nearby hotel project designed by Frank Gehry was to be even taller at 22 stories. And on City-assembled land a few blocks away, there would be a mixed-use project including a hotel rising just 12 stories, but its striking design would dramatically reshape the historic heart of our community.

Any of the three might have generated controversy. All three of them, along with the proposed mixed-use Hines project on the other edge of town, spawned a furious backlash that continues to reverberate.

I don't want to dwell on the political aspects of this argument. I want, instead, to talk about the economic ones.

In business, there is always the temptation to push for more of the same. But ultimately, the most profitable path is not more, but better. Think of an iconic brand like Ferrari -- arguably one of the most valuable and most recognized brands on the planet. Surely there were pressures to exploit the brand with mass production or introducing an SUV with the prancing horse logo. That would have increased sales, but cheapened the value of the brand.

We need to be equally passionate stewards of Santa Monica's brand promise. We are not a sleepy beach town, but neither are we Miami Beach. We are "*an unforgettable beach city experience filled with eye-catching people, cutting-edge culture and bold innovations."*
Let's be true to that brand. It has served us well and it has enduring value.

As City Manager, I want to ensure we have a public sector that mirrors that brand promise. I can say that many of our city services today are *cutting-edge* and *innovative*. The Pier is a public asset and the Third Street Promenade is a public space. Main Street and Montana Avenue are public streets. Our Farmer's Market is publicly-run.

Note how we rank. Fewer than 10 cities in California have AAA credit rating; Santa Monica is one of them. Just two library systems in California get five stars in the annual ranking by Library Journal magazine; Santa Monica is one of them. Less than a dozen California Fire Departments earn a Class One rating from the insurance industry; Santa Monica is one of them. No other city in Southern California boasts the strength and coverage of our free public wi-fi system or delivers gigabit speed Internet to 150 corporate business customers; our Big Blue Bus carries 16 million passengers a year and boasts a fleet of 200 100% clean-burning fuel busses. I could continue with the superlatives. But a city government that strives to match our community in being cutting edge and innovative can't sit on our assets either.

That's why the City Council has identified five game-changing Strategic Goals. These are not one-time projects or ongoing services. These are top priorities for the next 3-5 years, aimed at making a transformative difference to improve the quality of life for Santa Monica residents.

The Council wants to preserve the soul of Santa Monica, which means ensuring we don't become a homogenous Beverly Hills by the Sea. We want to continue to be a diverse and inclusive community that people from all walks of life can enjoy. That's why we continue to pursue an aggressive affordable housing strategy, including funding to replace redevelopment dollars. It's why the Council was a leader in forging a consensus to raise the minimum wage in our city which had statewide impact.

We are equally committed to creating a new model of mobility. Two weeks ago, the LA Times headlined our strategy on page one, spotlighting our comprehensive efforts to "broaden the way people think about how they travel, to get them to contemplate alternatives to their bumper-to-bumper car journeys."

In the same way, we are reshaping the future of the Santa Monica Airport which has outgrown its role as a transportation hub and has a bright future as a great park and tech center. Council is also dedicated to tackling homelessness not as a local problem but as a regional opportunity to bring our city together with the County and City of LA and our other neighbors to put an end to people living on the streets. Finally, we are rethinking the way we measure success in the public sector, not just as a means for delivering services, but as a partnership to deliver community-wide outcomes of learning and thriving, defining our purpose as the wellbeing of our residents.

Santa Monica's official Latin motto is evocative of this quest. *Populus felix in urbe felici*. Essentially it means a happy people in a successful city. That's an unforgettable aspiration and it amazes me every day how much we have to be thankful for in Santa Monica.

But as John Kennedy said in his final State of the Union message, "We cannot be satisfied to rest here. This is the side of the hill, not the top."

So much rides on our striving -- and our success. The visitor industry which you represent is a catalytic driver of so much that makes Santa Monica unforgettable. Yet success ultimately derives from the authentic experience of a real place, not a synthetic one. That means you are a key element in all the aspects of community life that ensure that we deliver this city better than we found it. Not bigger. Better. More unforgettable. More alive with eye-catching people and cutting edge culture. To do that we must continue to pursue bold innovation. That is not only the essence of the California lifestyle. It is the source of the California Dream.

Thank you.