

## **“Soul, influence, and sense of place”: Kingston’s brand evolution**

This article is based on a presentation delivered to the Economic Developers Council of Ontario, October 2024.

### **What is place branding?**

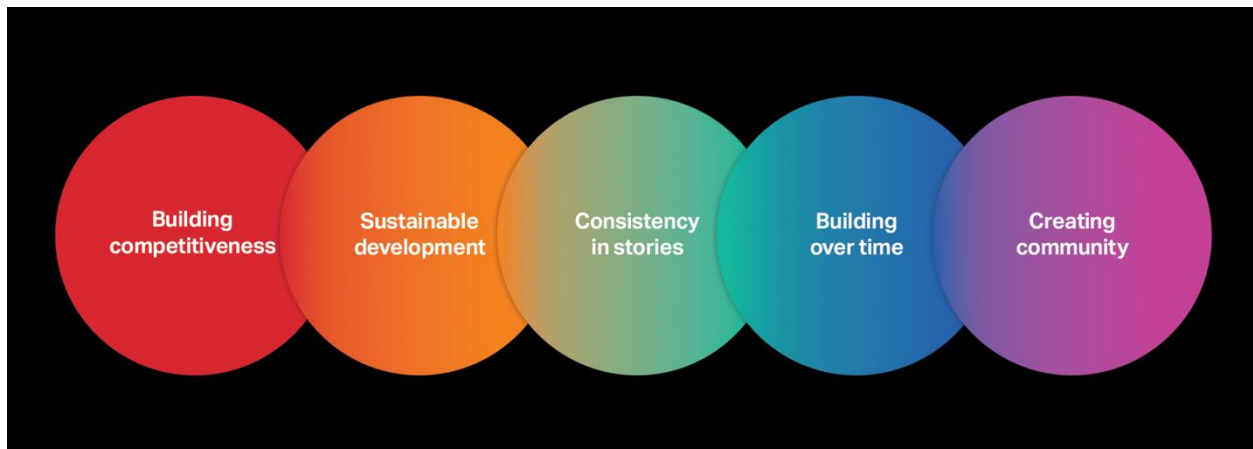
“In a world where the movement of people, capital, and ideas is more fluid than ever, a strong place brand is more important than ever.”

–Resonance Consultancy, a global place-branding agency.

Brand, branding, marketing, advertising: these terms are often used interchangeably but they are not synonymous. While each is critical for strategic communications and building loyalty, none is more crucial than the brand. The brand is the essence of a product or place, a set of defining and differentiating characteristics that engender positive feelings and associations. While the most compelling brands are built thoughtfully and intentionally, they must be rooted in truth and cultivated over time to be effective.

Brands can feel intangible because they are. They are not the sum of their tangible parts (logos, advertising, stories) – they are substantially more. Brands are anchored by how they make people feel and react, and the ability to create and recreate these feelings reliably and repeatedly.

Place branding is not unlike other types of brands in its ability to nurture connection and loyalty, but it is also multidimensional and far richer. A place brand is deeply linked to the historic, cultural, and socioeconomic dynamics of a city, region, or country, and its success depends on engaging diverse audiences including residents, visitors, investors, and other stakeholders such as government and businesses. A place brand is the story of a destination, shaped and communicated compellingly and consistently. While many brands focus on defining and motivating a narrow audience, a place brand flourishes when it can connect – and move – many.



The attributes of a place brand. Alphabet Creative & Twenty31.

So, what is branding if not a brand? Branding, or visual identity, is an outward representation of a place brand, guided by strict adherence to fonts, colours, placement, and language. Over time, the brand's core characteristics come to be recognized in these visual signifiers, but the visuals alone are not the brand – and never can be. Similarly, marketing or destination marketing, in the case of tourism, serves the place brand, communicating its core truths and benefits through strategic campaigns and tactics to drive awareness, engagement, and revenue, but it also is not the brand.

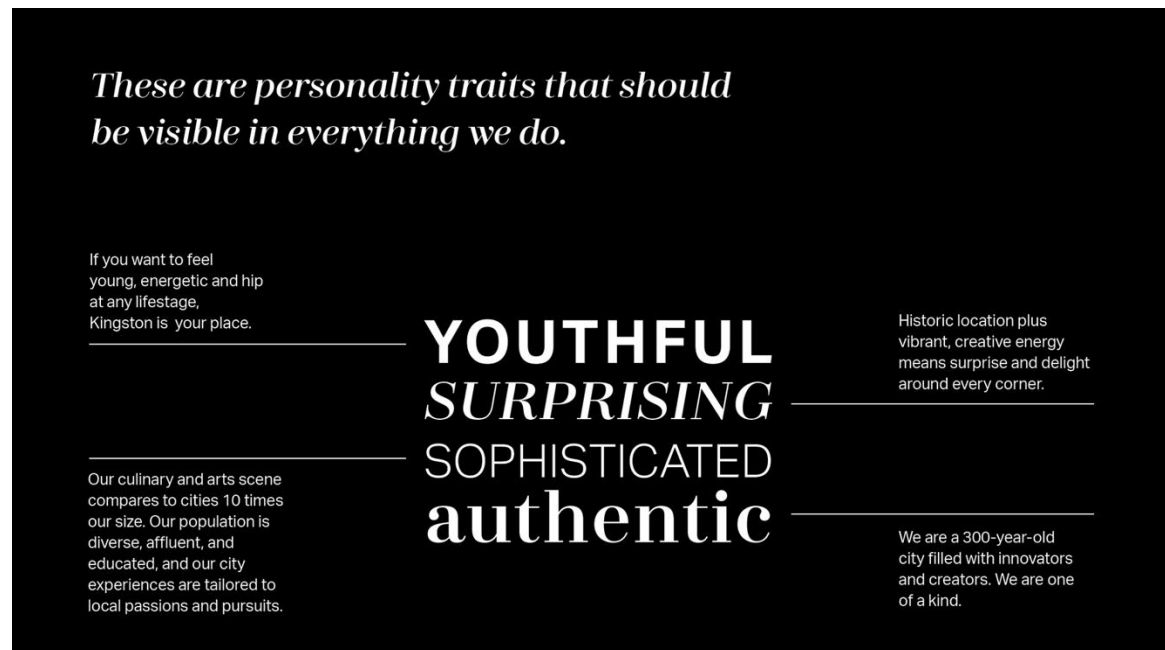
### **Building the Kingston brand**

More than a decade ago, Kingston Accommodation Partners (KAP), the local hotel association, embarked on a brand development process. They recognized their greatest asset was not their individual properties or amenities, but the destination in which they operate, and that a shared brand would benefit the whole. This work predates the establishment of the Municipal Accommodation Tax by the Province of Ontario in 2017. At the time, KAP represented a group of accommodation properties that opted to collect and remit a levy on hotel stays to support destination marketing.

Guided by Alphabet Creative and Twenty31 (now Skift Advisory), KAP undertook extensive local stakeholder engagement, meeting with municipal government, economic development, the downtown business improvement association, tourism businesses, and the education sector, among others. It was clear that Kingston had strong tourism product and a sector ready to align around a shared brand.

What also came to the fore were legacy associations such as “Canada’s First Capital,” military history, and academic associations tied to the city’s three post-secondary institutions (Queen’s University, Royal Military College of Canada, and St. Lawrence College). Kingston did not have a single defining and uniting positioning. What it had was deemed “skim milk” – too dilute and with no substance.

Yet the city is rich with cultural experiences, history and heritage, incredible artists, and curators. It has a cool small-town vibe while offering urban amenities. It is often described as “punching above its weight” in cultural facilities, green space and waterfront, and quality of life for residents. And it is a smart city, due in part to Queen’s University and because it is home to several government institutions. Queen’s, as one of Canada’s top universities, also affords an Ivy League-like reputation.



Kingston brand guidelines: brand personality.

All agreed that these core truths define Kingston: it’s authentic, youthful, smart, discerning, and creative – and the city blends old and new. It’s a youthful, vibrant city that never stops surprising. These fundamental attributes are critical ingredients of Kingston’s brand positioning, Fresh Made Daily: where ingenuity and creativity are celebrated, creators and entrepreneurs thrive, and new ideas are born every day. Together with our brand pillars, this positioning forms the foundation of all communication, though it’s rarely presented in its full form.

### Sharing the Kingston brand

Between 2015 – when the Kingston brand was established – and 2020, the brand was primarily a destination marketing platform used to promote the city and generate tourism. In 2018, tourism marketing and sales functions were separated from the city’s economic development office, leading to the creation of Tourism Kingston as the city’s standalone destination marketing and management organization (DMO). This laid the groundwork for the city’s first Integrated Destination Strategy: a multi-year tourism development plan created the same year.

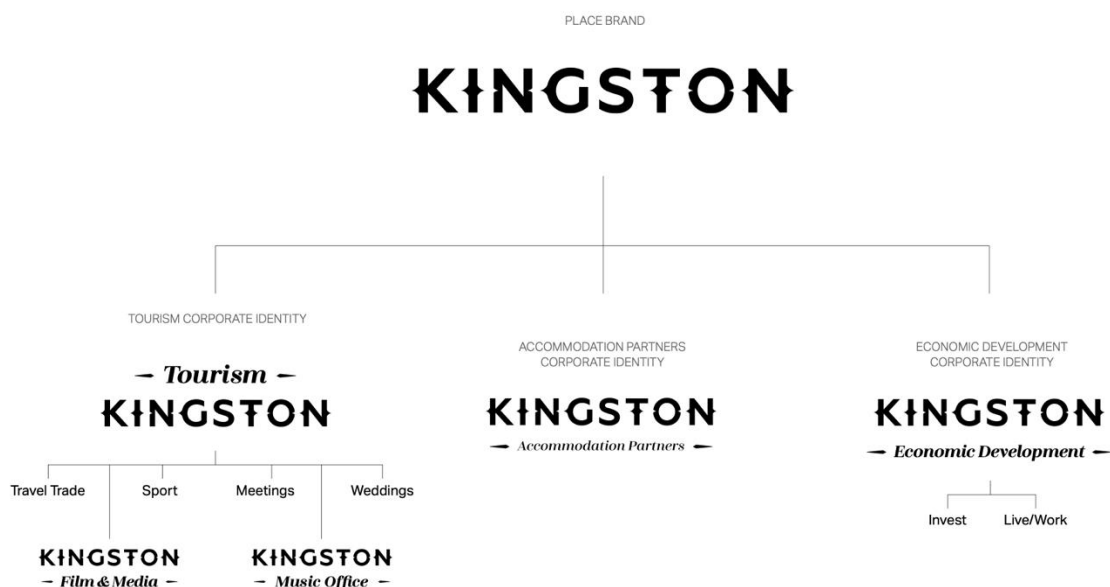
The Integrated Destination Strategy identified Kingston’s tourism brand as a key asset, noting, “continued communication needs to take place to effectively articulate the brand value to

municipal stakeholders, accommodation providers, tourism industry operators, and residents. In the absence of this, the brand will fail to realize its potential to effectively position the city relative to competitors.”

To achieve this, the Integrated Destination Strategy recommended: “Effectively define Kingston’s tourism brand positioning and fully launch the one voice vision...As the DMO, Tourism Kingston should be empowered to lead the brand articulation and rollout to city stakeholders and tourism businesses.”

Similarly, Kingston Economic Development’s Integrated Economic Development Strategy, created in 2020, recognized the strength of Kingston’s tourism sector and the value of the existing brand, recommending: “Align Kingston branding among key partners and stakeholders.” Until this point, the Kingston brand has been leveraged for both municipal and economic development campaigns on an ad hoc basis, but outside of destination marketing, the brand was not used consistently.

With these strategies aligned, Tourism Kingston led the evolution of the Kingston brand from a tourism brand to a place brand. This involved a review of key audiences, positioning, brand pillars, and visuals to ensure that all marketing and communication were grounded in the brand and connected effectively with the sectors’ unique stakeholders and audiences. In 2022, Tourism Kingston and Kingston Economic Development aligned under the place brand with Tourism Kingston continuing to lead and steward the brand.



Kingston brand ecosystem.

Alongside Kingston Economic Development’s adoption of the brand, the City of Kingston began engaging the Kingston brand for key campaigns, city assets, and place-making activations. This includes campaigns around workforce development and the creative arts, branding of the local

airport, a waterfront beautification project, and place branding throughout the city's downtown core and gateways into the city. Destination signage along the Highway 401 corridor was rebranded, transitioning from the city's corporate identity to the Kingston place brand. The Kingston brand is also used for competitive bids, proposals, and funding requests, leveraging existing awareness and familiarity.

Tourism Kingston has also expanded use of the brand, evolving an integrated and comprehensive approach to brand stewardship, applying it to everything from souvenir merchandise to environmental design, local street art and placemaking activations, product development and stories pitched to media. Simply put: the brand is at the core of all we do, always.

### **Investing in the Kingston brand**

Along with recommending a "one voice" vision and expansion of the Kingston brand, the Integrated Destination Strategy also proposed that enticing shoulder and winter tourism products and a tourism investment attraction plan be established. As the tourism sector reopened following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021–2022, Tourism Kingston made concerted effort to deliver against these recommendations and support the hard-hit local tourism community.

In 2021, the DMO launched [Kingstonlicious](#), a multi-week culinary festival featuring prix fixe menus and special events. First launched to promote takeout and virtual food and drink experiences, the program was built to evolve to an in-person festival when permitted, and envisioned as a legacy winter-season experience that could also raise profile for Kingston's vibrant culinary scene, supporting tourism year-round. The program supports more than 35 food and drink operators in the city as well as local hotels and inns (through overnight packaging) and generates more than \$1.6 million in visitor spending in February and March each year. The program has attracted both federal and provincial grant funding, and has been recognized with multiple awards, including an Ontario Tourism Resiliency Award and an Economic Developers Council of Ontario Award of Excellence.

In 2023, Tourism Kingston developed a series of [self-guided talking tours](#) that celebrate the city's rich film, music, and literary histories. Supported by the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario, the Creative Kingston Walking Tours are hosted on the DMO's website, [visitkingston.ca](#), keeping them easily accessible for visitors. Nine separate tours (three for each theme) are presented in English and French, showcasing the city's vibrant arts community, history and heritage, local personalities, and walkable downtown and nearby Queen's University campus. The project was recently recognized as Best in Category for consumer website by the Summit International Marketing Effectiveness Awards.

In 2024, Tourism Kingston leveraged the [total solar eclipse](#) that occurred in April to drive shoulder season tourism, unite tourism partners under the Kingston brand, build profile through significant media coverage, and create a cohesive and welcoming branded experience

for the tens of thousands of visitors the city welcomed. Planning for this event started more than a year in advance and brought together the DMO, tourism operators, the municipality, and academics from Queen's University. Supported by the Ontario Cultural Attraction Fund, the multi-month campaign and multi-day event attracted more than 74,000 visitors, generated a \$25 million economic impact, and has earned Tourism Kingston multiple national and international awards.

These projects attracted investment at the provincial and federal level through grants. Tourism Kingston, through its travel trade, business events, sport and wellness, and creative industries portfolios, seeks to attract investment to create new and revitalize existing tourism infrastructure. Projects currently in the investment pipeline include a multi-sport turf field; a new film studio and separate animation studio; investment in a deep-water dock to welcome Great Lakes cruise ships; and working in partnership with the City of Kingston and KAP to see a 1,000-person conference centre built in the city's downtown core.

Each project will create opportunities for residents through job creation and capacity building for local organizations, as well as attracting new residents to live and work in Kingston and generating tremendous economic impact. Investment attraction supports the triple bottom line of tourism, encouraging sustainable tourism with economic and socio-cultural benefits for visitors and residents. The city's attractive place brand creates a halo affect for all community economic development activities, enticing and enabling investment in the city.

## **Conclusion**

In 2022, Kingston was recognized by Resonance Consultancy as among Canada's best small cities. The report noted the city's captivating essence, "Few Canadian cities—large or small—have the soul, the influence, and the sense of place of Kingston."

A strong place brand is recognizable, trustworthy, and aspirational. Residents feel a sense of pride. Visitors seek connection to the local community. Investors see a place for their ideas to flourish. All of this makes tourism and economic development more effective and efficient, powering investment that enriches the quality of life for residents. Kingston's brand captures the city's soulful sense of place and articulates a community home to creativity and possibility, nurturing civic, economic, and socio-cultural vibrancy.