

Oslo International Advisory Board (IAB)

Note from meeting 23rd to 24th of March in London.

Present from the IAB: Mateu Hernandez, Geerte Udo, Martin Boisen (chairing in the absence of Greg Clark)
Present from the Oslo Region Alliance: Øyvind Sâtvedt, Mari Strømsvåg, Merete Agerbak-Jensen
Present from Oslo Business Region: Siw Andersen

Summary

During the meeting of the International Advisory Board, several important topics were discussed:

Progress of the Oslo identity and visibility. Oslo has become more visible, but is still lagging behind it's Nordica rivals, Stockholm and Copenhagen. Developments in architecture, growth in tech companies, green policies as well as a relatively successful handling of the Covid pandemic have contributed to a strengthening off Oslo's identity. Hospitality for talent still remains a major challenge for Oslo's international reputation.

The strategy enjoys strong legitimacy. The values identified in the place brand strategy are still enjoying a strong level of legitimacy and are being broadly recognised by both insiders and outsiders. Sometimes, the broad recognition of the brand values of Oslo is even reflected in the fact that more and more initiatives are intuitively on-brand.

Recent developments in the region. The territorial-administrative reforms in Norway had a large impact on Oslo Region Alliance. First and foremost, the 2020-merger of Norway's 19 'fylker' (counties) into 11. In the turmoil of the restructuration, knowledge of and support for Oslo Region Alliance dwindled, meaning that the new emerging counties decided not to be members of Oslo Region Alliance. There were also mergers on the municipal level, meaning that Oslo Region Alliance now have 64 municipalities as members, instead of the original 5 counties and 74 municipalities. This, of course, had significant financial consequences for Oslo Region Alliance (40% budget cut), but it also means that there's less territorial integrity behind the brand work. The IAB finds this an area of utmost importance. It should be top priority to get the counties to back Oslo Region Alliance again. However, as the IAB has come to understand, some of the newly founded counties might decide to split up again, meaning that the period of turmoil might be prolonged.

Projects and campaigns during the pandemic. Due to the loss of funding, Oslo Region Alliance had to focus on fewer areas of importance. The main work has been done on the issue of talent attraction and retention with several well-received initiatives to boast. The fact-based work aiming to help bridge the gap between companies (how they recruit, who they need) and the actual talent (the barriers they face, where and who they are), is commendable. However, the IAB did make a note of the unclear roles of Oslo Region Alliance, Oslo Business Region, and others with regards to talent attraction and retention that doesn't seem to have an organisational 'home'.

Capacity and Organisation. The team of Oslo Region Alliance consists of four people, of which one is lend out from another organisation. Next to this, the branding of Oslo is but one of the broad and important tasks of Oslo Region Alliance. Whilst the IAB is impressed with the work carried out, it is also dumbfounded by the lack of resources put towards the fulfilment of these important coordinating tasks that Oslo Region Alliance carry out.

The way in which Oslo Region Alliance work with the Oslo brand - specifically - means that it coordinates, initiates, and supports a much broader range of projects and activities than its small

team should be able to handle. It also means that most of the effort of the organisation is spent at facilitating partnerships and meaningful projects, and less time is available for advising third-parties or building a stronger basis for working with the brand of Oslo.

Oslo Business Region and Oslo Region Alliance. It is clear to the IAB that Oslo Business Region is a very important partner of Oslo Region Alliance when it comes to working with the Oslo brand. Oslo Business Region apply the brand values to all their work and help the business community in Oslo achieve amazing results, with seven unicorns as the flagship achievements of the later years, and Oslo Innovation Week as the flagship business event.

Given the importance of the start-up environment in diversifying the Oslo region away from traditional industries and oil, it is only logic that Oslo Business Region also launch initiatives aimed at talent-attraction and -retention. And although cooperation is sought with Oslo Region Alliance, the IAB previously noted that there's unclarity about the roles, and it seems like there's no lead problem-owner with regards to talent attraction and retention in the Oslo region. No-matter how good the cooperation, this is going to lead to loss of productivity, visibility, and recognition.

Oslo and the post-COVID world. The IAB discussed the implications of the post-COVID world for Oslo at length. A couple of points are summarized below:

The pandemic until now (March 2022):

- Oslo's (and Norway's) high-trust society proved its worth. The faith in the society meant that people conformed to restrictions and behaved in a way that protected the community. The health system worked wonders, and support from the government was possible due to the extensive welfare state policies. As such, Oslo (and Norway) lived up to part of their brand promise. This is a society that looks out for its people, and its people look out for the society and its institutions in return.
- Patterns of residential location and mobility in and around Oslo changed a lot. Of course due to working from home, but also deeper than that: Whereas Oslo had seen a movement towards the (inner) city for the last decades, confined to their homes and with many facilities of the urban environment closed, people started moving out of the city again. This temporarily slowed down the population growth of the city.

The post-COVID world:

- Reiteration of quality of life in the urban environment; the value of good public spaces
- Welfare systems that have proven their worth (and systems that have done the opposite)
- Strong economic growth in a partly de-globalising world
- Fear for a lack of talent in the transition of the economy
- Talent likely to be more focus on the quality of life and society, than pure monetary gains
- Visions about a new green industrial age seems within reach
- Re-industrialisation due to robotics and other high-tech production systems
- More focus on sustainable tourism (both from supply- and demand-side)
- A return of large-scale armed conflict in Europe creates a new geopolitical context
- Fear of energy deficiency due to instability and due to the energy transition

Without knowing what the future holds, the IAB concluded that Oslo seems to be in a fortunate position to enter the post-COVID ready and able to cope with most of these challenges. The main challenges in terms of the brand work, will be to get what Oslo offers across to both talent and travellers in a meaningful way; that highlights Oslo's strengths, without coming across as boasting, arrogant or self-indulgent. This challenge is especially relevant given the fact that Oslo's values are

partly ideological (for example: a strong welfare society, focus on socio-economic equality, and transparency of and trust in the government).

Main recommendations of the IAB

1. Reiterate why the reputation of Oslo is of strategic importance to the stakeholders:

Launch collaborative initiatives to showcase Oslo's achievements and values, both to international, national, and local audiences. The State of the City report is an example of such an initiative, but the IAB would like to see more storytelling about the storytelling itself. This will both help highlight the importance of Oslo's reputation to the stakeholders but is also likely to increase both the understanding and the appreciation for the work done. Show *and* tell.

2. Revisit the original 'Oslo model' for place brand management:

The IAB believes that the initial version of 'the Oslo model' - as described in 'The Oslo Region Brand Management Strategy'-document (pp 90-91) and as adopted on March the 2nd 2015 - is still a good model for place brand management in the Oslo Region.

The strength of this model is to build a place brand management governance based on the existing organisations and their existing tasks and mandates, but to make these organisations committed and co-responsible for the implementation of the brand work. However, the weakness of this model, is that it requires the leadership of each of those mandated organisations to always understand and support the brand work. And that if they do not that their stakeholders tell them to. Keeping place brand management working well for Oslo therefore require a continuous effort in educating, informing and dissemination of the results. This is, of course, even more of a concern when leadership or the stakeholder-composition of those organisations change.

The IAB commends the work that has been carried out, but also comments that the current brand management structure is too dependent on Oslo Region Alliance and that Oslo Region Alliance isn't receiving sufficient resources, nor sufficient political and managerial support to do the work needed. Also, the cooperation between the organisations - except for Oslo Region Alliance and Oslo Business Region - seems to have dwindled rather than have expanded in the recent years.

Therefore, the IAB recommends reiterating 'the Oslo model' and trying to gather renewed support on political, managerial and stakeholder-level for this shared place brand management work.

3. Re-establish 'the (Greater) Oslo Brand Alliance':

Initially, Oslo Business Region, Visit Oslo and Oslo Region Alliance formed an 'Oslo Brand Alliance' with the shared purpose of strengthening the brand of Oslo. This joint effort is, unfortunately, no-longer in operation. The IAB strongly recommends re-establishing this organisation, and expanding it with more governmental, public-private, and private partners. This might contain elements of what was called 'The Club of 100' in Amsterdam and of Barcelona Global. Possibly, calling this 'the Greater Oslo Brand Alliance', might instigate a sense of commonality and ambition at once. Make sure that operational work is always carried out elsewhere, this should be a vehicle for coordination of strategy, effort and support, not a new entity to launch projects with much the same objectives as existing organisations.

4. Create a world-wide 'Oslo-politan-network' of ambassadors:

The IAB recommends establishing a world-wide network of Oslo ambassadors, based loosely on similar initiatives in Lyon and Barcelona, and combined with the talent attraction and retention initiatives. The idea would be to have a network of 'alumni' in Oslo and around the world modelled on Only Lyon's long-lasting programme of this sort. Ideally, the global part of this network should consist of people (Norwegians or otherwise) who for whatever reason feel emotionally and personally attached to Oslo and would like to retain and express his attachment (this could be modelled on a recent initiative from Barcelona Global). The IAB also suggest exploring which services

Such a network could be an important vehicle in getting the story of Oslo out into the world, but also in getting the world into Oslo. Therefore, the IAB suggest making talent attraction and retention part of the objectives of this network.

5. Improve the coordination of initiatives aimed at talent-attraction and retention:

The IAB proposes that Oslo Region Alliance and Oslo Business Region take the lead in developing a business plan ("startup-style") for an entity that can become 'problem-owner' with regards to talent attraction and retention in the region; in much the same way Visit Oslo and Visit Oslo Region take this role with regards to tourism.

The struggle for talent has long begun, and it is time that Oslo Region steps up to this challenge and gets (more) organised in this domain. Projects and initiatives - however good they are - are not going to be up to a structural and systemic challenge like the lack of young people with the required skills for the transition of the economy of the Oslo Region. Otherwise, the businesses and institutions in the region are probably sufficiently capable of delivering on a lot of their potential in the near future. This makes this issue of the utmost importance for the future of Oslo Region.

In addition to the recommendations in the above, the IAB recommend Oslo Region Alliance to consider using the IAB actively to speak to the key decision makers about the importance of the work being done, and the governance and resources (mainly fte's), required to strengthen the place brand management work being done. Pointers as to what direction the governance should develop are already highlighted in a previous note from the IAB based on lessons learned from Amsterdam, Barcelona, and The Hague.