Executive Summary

Paris. New York. Las Vegas. What comes to mind when you think of these cities? For most, these places conjure up a range of images and ideas: the City of Lights, the Big Apple, Sin City. For as long as cities have existed, there have been monikers and mottos to describe and differentiate them. In marketing, harnessing the power of these identities is a part of a practice known as branding. Today, cities are increasingly applying branding strategies as a means of enhancing and promoting their economic, cultural, historical, or aesthetic value.

A growing focus of marketers and city managers is the study of how branding can shape and influence the way a place is perceived. This report investigates the topic through a literature review and the study of place branding characteristics found on 16 Canadian municipal websites. Municipal websites are the focus of this analysis, as they are often the first point of contact for stakeholder audiences, particularly those located abroad (Florek, Insch & Gnoth, 2006). Overall, this exploratory study aims to answer the following questions:

- What is place branding and how has the marketing of cities evolved over time?
- Which characteristics of place brand identity are most widely used in Canadian municipal websites?

Together, the lessons learned in exploring these questions are used to make recommendations to municipalities for developing and communicating their city's place brand through their municipal website. The research findings presented in this report demonstrate that Canadian municipalities *are* engaged in promoting their cities through their websites. However, a large degree of variation is discovered in the efforts expended by cities promoting their place brands. While some cities embrace the Internet as a channel for promoting and communicating a clear identity for their

municipality, others simply used the World Wide Web as a medium for providing basic information to existing city residents. Overall, it appears that the municipal websites are somewhat more engaged in providing information and services to an internal audience (those who live in the city), as opposed to creating and promoting a unique place identity to the municipality's external audience (prospective residents, visitors and investors). Based on the research findings, five recommendations for the improvement and development of municipal websites are established:

- Consistency is key – Elements of brand design should be employed consistently throughout the website in order to create a memorable image of the city.

- Differentiate the brand – Highlight the city's unique features and employ creative web design to create a memorable experience for website users and develop positive brand associations.

- Tailor information to the needs of the target audience – Better engage with a target audience by segmenting information for residents, visitors, businesses and other target groups.

- Adopt new communication channels – Build place brand awareness through new means of communication and ensuring the accessibility of information to a broad audience.

- Establish and enhance partnerships with relevant agencies – Coordinate branding activities between agencies with the common goal of promoting the city, such as economic development and tourism organizations.

In an age of intensified competition between cities attempting to attract prospective residents, investors and tourists, investing in place branding is an effective tool for identifying, developing, and promoting the unique characteristics of a place.