

Location is big part of food brand message

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Mudgee, in the NSW central west, has had a 51 per cent rise in overnight tourism since last June, 2020

A spreading stimulus for regions is place branding, for which tourism is complementary to local produce and manufactured goods. It is more than pitching destinations to actual and armchair travellers and is a way of coping with the pandemic ups and downs.

The concept is as old as peanut farming at Kingaroy, but is becoming more sophisticated and widely used. Distant consumers as well as visitors are targets for region-specific products, some eponymously named such as Mudgee honey in NSW or Coffin Bay oysters in South Australia.

Wines are generally known by regions as well as grape varieties, but increasingly so are other products, in shops and online. Some of this is being driven by local agencies of the federal network Regional Development Australia.

Tasmania, which counts as a region in the RDA network of more than 50 agencies, has the Brand Tasmania organisation, established by state parliament, with a lavish website and a Buy Something Tasmanian offshoot promoting more than 1200 businesses.

South Australia's vast Eyre Peninsula, which includes Coffin Bay, more than a decade ago adopted the Australia's Seafood Frontier branding, figuring that was the best hook for all stakeholders even though meat and wheat are also important products of the peninsula, as well as Whyalla metals processing, in its \$4bn-plus sales out of the region, which produces most of SA's seafood output.

The Australia's Seafood Frontier brand "continues to drive visitation and sales in and beyond the region", according to the chief executive of Regional Development Australia for the Eyre Peninsula (RDAEP), Dion Dorward.

"The brand has connected many Eyre Peninsula businesses and producers to new markets and direct business-to-business sales on the east coast of Australia and overseas," he says.

"In recent years it has underpinned (SA Tourism Commission), local government and industry marketing of the region, including the self-drive 'seafood trail' market.

"Prior to Covid, visitor spend in the region peaked at \$400m a year, 470,000 overnight visits and in excess of 3000 jobs.

"During Covid several seafood companies accessed more of the Seafood Frontier marketing collateral to assist them with reaching out to new customers and markets to offset Covid-related market issues," he says.

Melbourne-based branding agency Truly Deeply developed the Eyre branding by pulling together a diverse group of stakeholders, agency founder David Ansett says.

Building a platform to promote the region's businesses and their products was the primary branding objective, he says.

"Tourism ends up playing a small part for this particular region," he adds.

"It's a diverse and eclectic part of Australia, so a key part of the project was bringing together beef producers, wheat and oyster farmers, fishermen, cannery manufacturers and vineyards, and to have them agree on a direction that wasn't trying to be everything to everyone and ending up being nothing to anyone.

"The group understood that putting them on the map as the seafood frontier would give them a much stronger stage to then export everything else."

Tasmania's King Island beef and tourism is another example, he says. Ansett says the Eyre branding has two elements: seafood and the frontier, which was a decision to "capture the sense of pristine ruggedness in a similar way to the King Island and New Zealand place brands. The businesses in the region were able then to leverage off that successfully."

Asked to name a model for regional place branding, Dr Clifford Lewis, senior lecturer in marketing at Charles Sturt University, points to nearby Mudgee and its surroundings, for which a website, visitmudgeeregion.com.au, lists more than 170 local products.

Mudgee also appears to be an example of the Covid swings in domestic tourism. Mudgee Region Tourism chief executive Cara George says the area in the NSW central west had a 51

per cent rise in overnight visits from June 1 last year until the current NSW lockdown. George says the agency, sponsored by the Mid-Western Regional Council and local businesses, is working with the community on a “fresh rebound campaign to keep Mudgee region top of mind for those wishing to travel after lockdown for fresh country air and wide-open spaces”.

Mudgee Region Tourism collaborates with more than 350 small family-owned local businesses, and George says they are “striving to strengthen appeal and awareness of the region as a much-loved tourism destination”. It has viticulture, produce, nature, art, music, festivals, heritage villages and “contemporary country charm”.

CSU’s Lewis, based at nearby Bathurst, says regional branding is also about convincing people to come to the region and live there. “That’s where you get the economic development. It’s the reverse of brain drain, people coming in with their skills and talents. It’s about engaging the local community to engage and make the community a bit more vibrant,” he says.

“Mudgee has carved itself as this beautiful niche for a country experience and that experience includes wine, food including local farmers’ markets and the aesthetics of a beautiful country town.

“We are moving with branding to a destination that is multi-faceted. You can think of it like a painting, with different colours coming together.

Covid restrictions have encouraged creativity in selling a regional product online. “Once they got online, producers realised they were making more sales than they had anticipated.”

Further north, Goondiwindi on Queensland’s Darling Downs normally makes the most of its border location on the Newell Highway with NSW. Despite the NSW lockdown across the divide, intrastate visits are continuing. Ironically perhaps, in August it was thought to have become the town with the highest Covid vaccination rate in the nation.

Farm tours are on its itinerary and family businesses such as the clothing seller Goondiwindi Cotton have made an online market far beyond its borders in the Darling Downs.

The Mayor of Goondiwindi Regional Council, Lawrence Springborg, says the advantages of branding are important and complementary to the region’s established rural economy. “We’re developing and growing in that area,” he says.

Late last year and earlier this year, between lockdowns in parts of the country, “we just saw an explosion of people coming through our area, particularly self-drive visitors seeing their country”, he says.

The Goondiwindi crops and livestock region has acquired a reputation as the most Covid-vaccinated community in the nation, is already estimated to have more than half the council area’s population fully vaccinated and has new centres still opening. Springborg says he wouldn’t be surprised if the town itself is first to hit 80 per cent.

“That’s the nature of our community, it’s just the most collegiate sort of place.”