

Nation Branding Part 2: Putting Forth the Right Image

The recently concluded Rio Olympics turned all of the world's attention to Brazil. While the games proceeded smoothly despite worries and warnings of logistical and security problems, polluted water, crime and the Zika virus, the image of the country that has emerged after the curtains have come down is a mixed one. On one hand, Brazil's ability to play host to the summer Olympics, and before that, the 2014 World Cup, is an indicator of the nation's arrival on the world stage, having navigated its way through nearly a decade of sound economic growth. In fact, Rio managed to pull off a spectacular show that was better than what the world expected. On the other hand, being the centre of global attention has also highlighted the extent to which Brazil is plagued with political uncertainty, endemic poverty and infrastructure and sanitation problems. Brand Brazil has inadvertently also taken a beating.

Contrasting Rio to the London Olympics, where the latter was universally acclaimed as among the best games ever, it calls to question the factors countries need to consider as they try to put their best faces forward to the eyes of the world. The London Olympics successfully showcased Great Britain as organised, friendly, grand and efficient, and moreover, far from on a

decline that many feared would emerge out of its recent economic malaise.

Whether countries like it or not, they already have a brand image, whether positive, negative or a bit of both. World sporting events like the Olympics, put countries in the spotlight and thus become opportunities to manage their image and influence how external audiences view them.

Perceptions of a country come from various sources, including:

- Exported products and services
- Politics
- Campaigns
- National stereotypes
- Sports Performance
- Behaviour of citizens
- Notable personalities
- Word of mouth
- Personal experiences

While countries may not be able to completely brand themselves from scratch, they certainly can adopt strategies of nation branding. The concept 'nation branding' was first popularised in the late 1990s by Simon Anholt, considered to be the guru of nation branding¹. The concept arose partly as a result of increased homogenisation of markets on one hand and in the increasing need for differentiation and national identity on the other. In a competitive global economy, nation branding emphasizes the desire to "stand out"

¹ Simon Anholt, "Nation Brands of the Twenty-first Century" in *Journal of Brand Management Vol 5 Issue 6*, July 1998.

and be attractive in the eyes of foreign audiences.

Just like companies try to attract customers and sell their products, ideas and services to people in other countries by communicating their differentiating value, countries are doing so as well. There is a recognition that a nation's image is largely made up of its perceived value, and that value can consist of intangible as well as tangible elements.

Countries that choose to engage in formal nation branding activities do so because they realise that a strong national brand is a strategic asset that brings with it many rewards, both financial and non-financial, particularly the following seven:

- Inward investments
- Enhanced value of exports
- Global influence and partnerships
- Reputation and respect
- Attracting top talent
- Attracting tourists
- Building patriotism and national identity

It is virtually impossible for countries to brand themselves from scratch, as they would have already created some form of legacy impressions without it being deliberate. However, making a concerted effort to actively develop and manage the brand of country means that the image of the country would not be left at the control of others. Some countries may have acquired negative images due to various historical factors, and some do adopt strategies to shed such negative brands. For example, Columbia and Serbia both have conflict-ridden histories but also new contemporary potential as investment destinations. Both are now gearing up to show their new faces to the world.

Even countries that have enjoyed favourable perceptions in the past may find that those perceptions are no longer relevant or beneficial

moving forward. Great Britain's image of being conservative, serious and steadfast is gradually being consciously steered towards one of innovation, modernity, creativity and friendliness.

A concerted effort

In adopting strategies of nation branding, governments, trade bodies and businesses must work in concert and take steps to ensure that their nation brand is strategically suitable, well-aligned, properly managed and monitored in order to maximise its benefits, minimise damage and respond appropriately in situations of crisis.

Traditionally, many countries used tourism as a means of putting forth their brands. As seen on numerous marketing campaigns, these involve the use of slogans and logos. The following are some well-known ones: *"Amazing Thailand"*, *"100% Pure New Zealand"*, *"Incredible India"*, *"Wonderful Indonesia"*, *"Imagine Your Korea"*, *"Canada - Keep Exploring"*, *"Taiwan - The Heart of Asia"*, *"Your Singapore"*, *"Costa Rica – No Artificial Ingredients"*, *"Malaysia Truly Asia"*.

These tourism-driven slogans have become so common that it is not always easy to discern or differentiate between what is on offer. Some however have been very effective, for example, New Zealand's "100% Pure" campaign aptly highlights its scenic, natural and rugged landscapes as New Zealand's unique value proposition. The "Malaysia Truly Asia" campaign has likewise been very successful in attracting visitors who are drawn to the multicultural profile of Malaysian society that makes Malaysia an enticing option for those seeking a rich cultural experience in one destination.

Yet, tourism-marketing campaigns do not sufficiently qualify as nation branding and while they can be a brand-builder, they need to be integrated into a larger, more holistic brand strategy incorporating other sectors as well.

According to global brand strategy and marketing expert, Dr Paul Temporal, there is a downside to

nation branding if done on an industry by industry basis without holistic management, as a great deal of mixed messaging tends to propagate together with a multiplicity of logos, slogans and other brand communications.² Doing this runs the risk of conflicting messaging, confusion, duplication of resources and even unwanted competition between the various brands inside the same country.

Dr Temporal also rightly advocates that given the complexity of the branding process, there has to be a firm structure designed to give direction and manage activities across the public, private and non-governmental sectors.³

No short-cuts

Short cut tactics are usually those that involve slogans, logos and campaigns. Slogans, logos and campaigns do have their role in the brand building and brand management process, however, they are mainly “cosmetic” marketing-communications tools. The slogan “*Malaysia Boleh*” (Malaysia Can) was adopted as Malaysia’s rallying call to greatness and possibilities, and was used as a communications device during the heyday of Malaysia’s economic boom, where it was viewed as a model of a successful Asian country as well as an exemplar in the Muslim world. There were other slogans that have unfortunately since lost steam as well as relatability, like “*Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah*” (Clean, Efficient and Honest) of the 1980s, that was geared mainly towards the citizenry in order to develop a positive work ethic.

It is important to always have a solid strategy as the basis for other “cosmetic” or tactical marketing devices. This includes a vision, overarching objectives and underlying values as well as a comprehensive implementation plan.

Nation branding needs to capture the essence of a nation and represent national identity. As such,

² Paul Temporal, *Branding for the Public Sector*, (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2015), pp. 27-28.

³ Ibid. p.28.

strategic branding dictates that the brand must be acceptable, relatable and have the buy-in of all quarters. Without this, tactical devices like slogans coined by the government may not or may no longer resonate with various audiences or with the reality on the ground. When a brand is not explained or does not have the support of the people, it can quickly become a source of cynicism.

The biggest problems with nation branding arise when there is conflict between the politically chosen brand messaging and those that resonate with the private sector, civil society and the citizenry. This then leads to lack of coordination of branding efforts, misrepresentations of national identity and propaganda critique.

According to Simon Anholt in his book, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*, spending public money on branding campaigns aimed at logos or taglines is unlikely to generate any significant change in brand image or place reputation.⁴

Building a strong nation brand

In reality, it takes many generations and much hard work and visionary leadership to build a strong brand image and reputation for a country. The key to achieving a positive brand image and a favourable reputation is by combining sound strategy with actually implementing (and not just promising) policy and delivering actions and tangible results.

If taking such a rigorous approach, best practice suggests that branding should be institutionalised within state structures by creating governmental and quasi-governmental bodies that oversee long-term nation branding

⁴ Simon Anholt, *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

efforts.⁵ There should be one responsible body with links to relevant industry and stakeholder groups, including the private sector and civil society organisations (and perhaps, in Malaysia's case, to include links to the National Transformation Programme). The responsible body should drive the initiative guided by a solid knowledge and training component.

The effort should first of all begin with a vision. There must be a crystal clear understanding of what the brand stands for – how is it different, how is it better – as well as defined objectives for the desired perceptions by various audiences.

Secondly, it must sufficiently include global research, market and competitor analysis in order to accurately define areas of competitive advantage. There must then come the formulation of an umbrella brand strategy, including brand values and identity.

Fourth, there must be prioritization of key industries that will support the branding initiative. Fifth, there must be activities to get buy-in from all stakeholders, as well as activities to ensure alignment and complementarity.

Sixth comes the actual implementation of the selected nation branding activities, including construction and complementary marketing and communications devices.

And finally there must be systems to monitor the nation branding performance, which will feed back into the cycle of research, planning and implementation.

A significant component of portraying a nation's image has to do with being introspective. For the nation brand to be authentic, any inconsistencies or contradictions to the desired brand that exist in the structure or within organisations must be dealt with first.

⁵ Examples of such bodies include the UK's Public Diplomacy Board, established in 2006, and of which Simon Anholt is a member and monitoring and evaluation

Even in the commercial world, powerful brands are much more than their great advertising, attractive logos and memorable slogans. They are powerful because of the product or service behind the brand, which has delivered or exceeded on their promises thus earning them trust and respect.

Likewise, the nation brand can only be powerful if the components within it deliver or exceed on expectations. Of course, this is much more complex than in the commercial sphere as no single body, political or otherwise exercises the kind of control over the national 'promise' the way corporations control their products.

Hence the reason it should be given increased focus, contemplation and effort.

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Chief Editor
Dr. Hamidin Abd Hamid
Chief Executive Officer
Razak School of Government

Writer
Karen Chand

specialist; South Korea's Presidential Council on Nation Branding, founded in 2009; and the International Marketing Council of South Africa, established in 2002.