
 PAPERS

Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities

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Officials of IAA Romania, the main association of the marketing and communication industry in Romania, will assume the mission to put up a country brand for Romania . . . The self-called 'coalition for a country brand' aims at creating a document for the political class, in order to draw attention and interest towards the subject.

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As illustrated by the case of Romania, nation branding is in. Or is it? While there is growing interest in the phenomenon and its potential, there is also a lot of frustration with its *raison d'être* and management:

Two parallel universes seem to have collided: 1) the universe of country states, rich in history, culture and traditions, economic trade, statecraft, diplomacy and nobility; and 2) the marketing universe, rich (some may argue poor) in recognizing needs and wants, obsessing about consumers and their satisfaction, articulating promises, persuading for a

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profit, developing technical jargon and formulating “new” concepts, and fixating on iconic images and their professional management.¹

The traditional boundaries of our geopolitical-economic world maps are being challenged. We have entered an era of hypercompetition and globalization when the new frontier is found and won in our mental and emotional spaces. The above “Branding Romania” initiative is a clear and timely reminder of this profound shakeup. For Romania, it is the second attempt in just a few years to orchestrate a campaign that will put the country on the brand map of the world. These efforts are characterized by a dual sense of urgency and skepticism. The failure of the first project has been blamed on the lack of political interest and support for the initiative. Without a strong will, resources are lacking and nothing of substance gets done. Many have concluded that, paradoxically, nation branding must start at home before it can be done abroad as intended.

Indeed, what Peter van Ham has coined the “Rise of the Brand State”² is not without critics and skeptics. But why these doubts and sources of discontent? Wally Ollins argues that much of the reported antagonism may just be a matter of ignorance, snobbery, and semantics: “If instead of using the word ‘brand’ and other corporate expressions like ‘straplines’ in this piece I had used words like identity, national image, national identity and so on, no well-educated person with any historical knowledge would have raised an eyebrow.”³ In spite of the differences of opinions and controversies on the subject, today the relevant question is not whether to pursue nation branding, but rather how to do it right. At the risk of being left behind, many countries have jumped on the bandwagon of nation branding with a sense of urgency, many of them without great marketing savvy or success.

Therefore, it is the aim of this article to advance our understanding of this phenomenon by focusing on the interplay between marketing and public diplomacy. We will first present some fundamental brand management concepts as they help explain nation branding and clarify the role of public diplomacy under the greater scheme of a nation image building. Then, we will address a set of important research questions and areas of consideration raised by an expert audience on the debate of the role and appeal of nation branding in light of traditional public diplomacy. While this reflection is exploratory in nature, it aims at drawing further scholarly research attention on the topic and at encouraging collaboration among practitioners of the art and science of image building.

RECONCILING NATION BRANDING AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: A MARKETING PERSPECTIVE

Brand Anatomy and Premises

In a paradoxical way, the image a nation projects can be both simple and complex at the same time. The image can be expressed through general perceptions and reduced to a simple gestalt-like set of attitudes that trigger an overall positive or negative reaction. In a slightly more detailed and reinforcing way, stereotypes provide an articulation of simple judgments and mental associations. In both its most primitive and intermediate forms, a nation image is the end result of a complex convergence of forces and impressions. Psychologically, nation images correspond to cognitive and affective knowledge structures. Like complex molecules, these structures can be decomposed into elementary strings and fundamental elements. The composition, geometry, and valence of the structure can evolve or mutate over time.

The underlying structure of a nation image is highly complex since it incorporates elements from numerous sources: history; sciences and arts; religions and philosophies; natural wonders, human structures and artifacts; ecological and human habitats; cultural traditions, languages, and value systems; legal, political, ideological, military, and economic orders; and past and contemporary civilizations, people, and events.⁴ In the end, a nation image is a reflection and consolidation of these numerous uncontrollable factors. Philip Kotler and David Gertner echo this view by pointing to the extensive and diverse nature of image drivers:

A country's image results from its geography, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens and other features. The entertainment industry and the media play a particularly important role in shaping people's perceptions of places, especially those viewed negatively. Not only are product categories such as perfumes, electronics, precision instruments, wines, cars and software strongly identified with certain places, but so also are societal ills such as Aids epidemics, political riots, civil rights violations, attacks on the environment, racial conflict, economic turmoil, poverty and violent crime. All these have been repeatedly and strongly associated with certain locales.⁵

Thus a country's image is a reflection, sometimes distorted, of its fundamental being, a measure of its health, and a mirror to its soul. It speaks to the way a country exists in people's minds and hearts as well as to the

position it occupies in relations to other countries. For marketers and government officials alike, it is important to differentiate brand image from brand identity.

The nation/country image is the mental representation of a country, the sum of beliefs and impressions people hold about a certain place. Every nation has an image that can vary across time and space to a greater or lesser extent. This image colors consumers' perceptions of a country's products and services, investors' perceptions of the country as a place in which to do business, tourists' expectations, and the attitudes of the public at large. The nation/country identity, on the other hand, is what a country believes it is (or wants to be). That identity is projected onto the rest of the world through branding and communication efforts to attract tourism and foreign direct investment, boost exports, and carry out effective public diplomacy.

Thus brand image refers to the current perception of the country in the "marketplace" while brand identity corresponds to the perception the country seeks to create. In terms of managerial mindset and orientation, identity has an internal and production focus while image has an external and market focus. Creating or reshaping an identity is an attempt to sway the image. The gap that may exist between identity and image reflects a disconnect between original intent and perceived reality. When monitored over time, it helps a campaign stay on track. For the purpose of crafting a communication campaign, a nation identity should stress a reality that resonates with people, both within and outside the country.

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To understand a brand and its anatomy, it is helpful to map its various elements, characteristics, and associations on a simple continuum comprised of attributes, benefits, and the essence of the brand. This continuum reflects a progression from tangible to intangible, multiplicity to singularity, concrete to abstract, experiential to cerebral and emotional. In this brand mapping exercise, the essence of the brand emerges as a core value, easily understood and appreciated by targeted audiences;⁶ it corresponds to the unique personality of the brand, its heart and soul. Ideally, for communication purposes, the brand essence should easily translate into a clear, simple, differentiated, and motivating offer—a meaningful Unique Selling Proposition.

Increasingly, branding is about establishing relationships with “consumers” on the basis of personality or human-like characteristics and emotional values. The brand essence and its representation must deliver on this front. David Aaker further argues that this brand personality can be a great strategic asset for creating a differentiated identity, guiding communication efforts, and building brand equity.⁷ Brand personality also helps decipher people’s attitudes towards a specific brand. In the context of nation branding, brand strategists will also be well-served by exploring the essence and personality of the nation brand. Switzerland, for instance, has identified 14 core values in its nation branding program. They fall into three categories reminiscent of the brand Attributes-Benefits-Essence template introduced above: 1) Appearance (i.e., Alpine habitat, the people, the Swiss flag, and the colors red and white); 2) Accomplishments (i.e., stability/sustainability, security for the future, balance, self-determination, international hub, and efficiency); and 3) Values (i.e., authentic, trustworthy, self-respecting, curious, and refreshing).

As seen, there are many themes and concepts that can help anchor the core values of a brand. But few have the potential to strike a distinct emotional chord or to raise some affinity with a particular personality type in way that is truly unique, believable, relevant, and sustainable. In the nation branding process, delineating a brand personality that can band together each branding space—tourism, exports, foreign direct investment, and public diplomacy—remains one of the most challenging tasks.

Brand Architecture: The Four Dimensions of Nation Branding

Increased globalization, geopolitical rivalries, and economic competition have created the need for nations to actively brand themselves in an integrated way on what we consider the four pillars or critical dimensions of nation branding: public diplomacy, tourism, exports, and foreign direct investment. We have also referred to these dimensions as nation branding spaces. Certainly, other meaningful dimensions exist and broader typologies have been advanced. For instance, next to government, tourism, exports, and investment (bundled with immigration), brand work on Switzerland and South Africa has relied on two additional dimensions: people as well as culture and heritage.

Regardless of the number of pertinent dimensions in nation branding, it is clear that most countries only brand themselves intentionally for tourism purposes. This explains why tourism branding tends to be mistaken for nation branding. At the same time, countries that do brand themselves

on other dimensions tend to do so without any coordination across. The saliency of each dimension will vary depending on the country's brand essence and source of competitive advantage.

Public diplomacy is a term that was first used by the United States Information Agency in the early 1960s. The U.S. Department of State defines public diplomacy as "engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences."⁸ Public diplomacy covers a wide range of activities and interactions conducted by a government with its foreign counterparts, nongovernmental organizations, and the public at-large. The stated goal of public diplomacy is to enhance a country's image and reputation through mutual understanding. It goes beyond traditional diplomacy and extends to the general public.

Public diplomacy requires managing overall perceptions of the country as well as developing durable relationships with key individuals and organizations. The government of Romania, for instance, announced recently the launch of a new €7.8 million communication campaign, "Romanians in Europe," aimed at improving the image Romanians have in the European Union, in Spain and Italy more particularly. Public diplomacy can be construed as a way to exercise soft power. It gives developing nations a chance to raise public awareness and appreciation for the country. In turn, public diplomacy can become a source of pride and unity in these countries, empowering citizens to become active ambassadors.

Nation branding for tourism is not new, but its importance has grown dramatically as tourism has become one of the world's largest industries.

According to the World Tourism Organization, worldwide tourism revenues in 2007 reached \$856 billion. With most destinations boasting superb facilities and services, claiming a unique culture and heritage, asserting unparalleled scenery and wildlife, contending to have the friendliest people, and also competing on price, the need to find a niche and to differentiate from competitors is more critical than ever. With 10 countries accounting for nearly 50 per-

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cent of the market share of international tourist arrivals, active branding has become a necessity for many countries. Ideally, tourism branding should be spearheaded and coordinated by the National Tourism Authority in cooperation with industry associations under the overall country branding strategy.

Typically, in developed countries, individual exporters and industry groups are responsible for the vast majority of the marketing and branding efforts. Governments limit their role to that of an information and coordination provider—for example, organizing trade fairs or arranging a country week via the network of trade offices overseas. Brands and products from a given country play a role in shaping the image of that country abroad—for example, Volvo, IKEA, and even ABBA for Sweden, as well as Nokia for Finland. Conversely, through a so-called country-of-origin effect, a country image can influence perceptions of quality or prestige of a product and, thus, can impact pricing policies, sales volumes, and profitability. Possibly, the two can be intertwined over time when using the country name as part of a trademark as with the case of *Café de Colombia*. In addition to coordinating activities with other agencies and institutions responsible for nation branding, a country's export promotion agency should be a leader and resource in the pursuit of quality control, commercial intelligence gathering, and innovation. This is particularly vital for developing nations.

Branding a country to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) is usually carried out by a promotion agency—for example, the Thailand Board of Investment—which is also responsible for providing information and specialized services to prospective investors. Investment promotion activities and services relate more to personal selling than mass marketing—for example, investment missions and handling of individual investors by government agencies.⁹ Like tourism and export promotions, branding for FDI is not new, but it has greatly intensified in this globalization era. Branding can play a significant role in building awareness, providing message reinforcements and establishing credibility in conjunction with traditional incentives such as tax incentives, infrastructure investments, government grants, and labor laws exemptions, which can be easily imitated by other countries and whose costs may exceed the benefits sought.

In designing a successful and effective nation brand strategy to attract FDI, countries must first define industries to target in the hope to build industry clusters. Companies interested in investing tend to look for networks of interconnected organizations—producers, suppliers, contractors, and research and development institutions—and highly skilled labor that increase productivity and foster innovation.¹⁰ On this basis, China and India have succeeded in capturing the lion's share of offshoring and outsourcing activities that are becoming increasingly higher value-driven. Communication strategists can rely on various image building techniques to change perceptions of a country as a place to invest—for example, through advertising in general, financial, and industry-specific media; in-

vestment exhibitions; and general information missions and seminars on investment opportunities.¹¹

Thus, under this proposed brand architecture model, public diplomacy is viewed as a critical, but not singular, component of nation branding. In terms of controllable factors, it is its combined effect with the FDI, exports, and tourism dimensions that helps shape and reshape the image of a country.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While nation branding has attracted considerable attention lately, much remains to be understood in this area. Research, in particular, is still in its infancy; it is largely descriptive and relies on case studies. In this regard, the “Nation Branding” session held during the 100th Anniversary Edward R. Murrow Memorial Conference at The Fletcher School was instrumental in uncovering promising research directions. We shall now turn to six probing questions lingering in the minds of session participants.

How to Structure and Manage Nation Branding Efforts Optimally?

Pointing to the complex nature of designing, implementing, and sustaining nation branding programs successfully, this rich and multifaceted area of investigation deserves greater attention as it relates to performance and best practices. The design element of a meaningful brand identity and

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strategy rests on a sound understanding of the brand architecture and structural elements of nation branding. It must take account of the moderating effects of cultural, organizational, and political idiosyncrasies. Furthermore, the proper stewardship of nation branding calls for management expertise in a broad range of process areas and operations.

As with any other strategic initiative, brand building efforts must rely on a systematic and comprehensive

strategic plan. Partial roadmaps and ad hoc initiatives are invitations for disaster. Brands that are constantly repositioned due to halfhearted or rushed efforts suffer; they can never truly establish a strong, unique, and credible basis for differentiation. Some countries seem eager to reinvent themselves more frequently than others. A formal plan must mobilize, inspire, and

encourage forward and systematic thinking; clarify goals, objectives, and policies; identify and assemble all key stakeholders; improve coordination of organizational efforts across agencies and sectors; set specific performance standards for control; develop greater awareness, flexibility, and responsiveness in the face of change; and lead to greater efficiencies and cost advantages. The strategic plan must ensure that the expert orchestration of the required brand building activities meets the budgetary, timeline, and human resources constraints imparted on the project.

When planning, one must be aware of the pitfalls of an internally focused mindset. It is risky to rely simply on internal views and opinions as they are tradition-bound and tend to be biased and limited. Beyond the influence of well-connected insiders, self-declared experts, or eager officials, what is needed is an open and objective assessment of the overall situation, the current brand image, competing brand identity models and positioning strategies, and campaign performance. To escape institutional tyranny, it is vital to encourage external validation and reality checks, promote efforts to accurately track target audiences and truly listen to the world. Success here rests on an inspired vision, sustained guidance, and reliance on sound research.

An outward-looking orientation is also valuable for brand differentiation and positioning purposes. Positioning corresponds to the mental representations of a brand vis-à-vis its competition. This speaks to relative rather than absolute advantages. What is the basis for positioning a given nation? Is it truly distinct, significant, and desirable? Is there an authentic, unique, and valuable element of differentiation? Positioning often fails because of a lack of comparative foresight. For instance, some intrinsic attributes and claims are chosen because they are pleasing and accurate, while they ignore the competitive space in which the brand operates. Other brands may have also adopted a similar positioning strategy—causing a crowding effect—possibly with more credibility leading to a first mover or comparative advantage. For instance, several countries have claimed to be the “heart of Africa” or “true Asia.” Brand building activities must take into consideration both the actual perceptions and competitive reality of the world, not just what one may think or wish they are. A “market-focused” orientation should prevail.

The proper stewardship of nation branding rests on mastering the art of integration and orchestration. Integration starts early on at the planning stage by systematically reaching out and involving all relevant stakeholders. For greater consistency, synergy, and leverage, it is also imperative to integrate—or at least coordinate—the strategic approaches across the four key nation branding areas: public diplomacy, tourism, export promotion, and FDI. For brand building activities, the presence of unsynchronized

efforts and multiple positioning themes across sectors can only lead to a sort of brand cacophony, source of confusion, and brand dilution.

At best, economies of scale and scope are foregone; at worst, scarce resources are wasted in programs that end up being counterproductive. Spain, for instance, has had limited success in transferring the positive image associated with the country as a tourism destination to its export activities. Ultimately, the strengthening of one leg has the potential to weaken and even harm the other. In many instances, countries fail to integrate activities across areas, mainly because of turf battles and politics, bureaucratic mentalities, and organizational inefficiencies.

To succeed, nation branding campaigns require a powerful vision, a desire to unite and rise above, and a will to sustain the course. This calls for the presence of a brand champion, or team of champions, at the highest level. For instance, in a public address to his country regarding the launch of the new Botswana brand campaign in May 2006, Festus Mogae, then president of the country, agreed in unequivocal terms to become the “brand champion” for Botswana. President Mogae exhorted citizens to embrace the initiative saying, “I am pleased to be able to launch this process to develop a brand for our country. This is the beginning of a campaign that has been designed to ensure that every Motswana ultimately shares in the ownership of a new Botswana Brand.”¹² A brand champion is instrumental in engaging the various stakeholders and helping overcome bureaucratic divides and internal politics. He or she must be credible and trusted. To escape the “government knows better” mindset and its related pitfalls, the brand strategy should be entrusted to or co-developed with an external party that will instill state-of-the-art marketing expertise and ensure research objectivity in the assessment of country image and reputation.

Brand champions and marketing consultants must also address the issues of implementation and long-term strategy by focusing on the design of an institutional framework that can safeguard and bring management continuity to nation branding efforts. Nation branding can only live on, pass a novelty effect, if institutions are truly committed and equipped to deal with a real organizational mandate. In short, it means the presence of leadership, structures, and resources. Understanding these factors, drivers, limitations, and their interplay constitutes an important research imperative.

Umbrella Branding: How to Manage Meta vs. Micro Brands?

One intriguing yet challenging area of practice under nation branding concerns the integration of downstream and upstream branding initiatives.

Upstream branding is composed of regional blocks, political and military organizations, and economic unions—including the European Union, NATO, and the North American Free Trade Agreement—while downstream includes entrepreneurial governments of regions and even cities. Lack of integration on these various fronts leads to fragmentation and can be seriously counterproductive. How do simultaneous campaigns and branded messages such as “Visit Britain,” “Visit England,” or “West Midlands, the Heart of England” fit with one another? Are they synergistic or do they compete for resources and attention? What about other regions? In general, are national campaigns beneficial to all regions or, by default, do they tend to favor a country’s capital city and possibly a few other regions? When competing for FDI, why do some regions go solo, independently of any national efforts? How effective are these separate initiatives? How are national and regional interests best aligned and their respective marketing efforts integrated? As such, is there an optimal way to allocate marketing and communication budgets? If any, how much waste or gain is created through such internal brand competition? There are clearly many outstanding questions.

Lee Iacocca, Chrysler’s former CEO, used to ponder the fact that when it came to competitiveness, the U.S. as a whole had no industrial policy, but each state had one and it was to “screw the other states.” In a similar way, to be meaningful, nation branding cannot be fully decoupled from the branding activities of its subparts. In marketing jargon, umbrella brands refer to brands that cover a variety of products and services that are more or less related. The challenge with nation branding is to create an umbrella brand that will best serve the needs of the micro-brands of regions, provinces, and cities, as well as one that can be equally leveraged across its sub-brands. Commonly used are “made in,” “product of,” “invest in,” “land of,” or “visit.” On the upstream side, many pertinent questions exist as well. For instance, while several African countries have rolled out specific branding strategies, could there ever be a compelling pan-African brand? To what extent are resources allocated to the higher-order branding efforts trickling down to benefit each member nation? Under what circumstances are these meta-brands worth nurturing?

How to Implement, Control, and Measure Performance?

With branding and communication efforts, the devil is in the implementation details. The most creative and powerful concepts can flop and ambitious campaigns can easily derail. Poor execution and limited attention to monitoring performance are often to be blamed. Since first impressions

are lasting, the launch of a new campaign should not be rushed. All the elements of an integrated marketing and communications campaign must be flawless and rolled out in a timely fashion. Orchestration has to be precise. Today, many first impressions and repeat exposures are generated through the internet. The internet strategic component of the overall nation branding campaign must be sound and inspiring. It must reinforce the key themes and help showcase the various elements of the campaign. Sadly, just a few clicks will often lead to a number of outdated, barely operational sites that can only be source of negative impressions and image dissonance.

Nation branding should be viewed as an ongoing process. The execution of an integrated marketing and communications plan is not an end in itself but rather an intermediate step in a never-ending quest for brand enhancement. This requires continuous tracking of brand image, some flexibility to adapt to unexpected circumstances, and careful monitoring of competition. Adequate budgeting and resource allocation must factor in the needs that stretch beyond the more high-profile and immediate deliverables of a new campaign. Outcomes must be evaluated and performance appraised on a regular basis. Performance assessment can be tricky. First and foremost, it requires will. Targeted goals and objectives must be set at the planning stage; a control system must be built-in; objective and measurable indicators must be monitored; and feedback loops must allow for corrective actions. Second, performance standards can be ambiguous. For instance, what are the most dependable metrics to judge the success of “green” nation branding?

Beyond the present hype about nation branding, there is a true competitive reality for greater economic gains and political, if not ideological, advantage. There is a fundamental need to develop greater know-how in this area. Developing and managing nation branding activities rests on the delicate blend of marketing expertise and diplomatic savoir-faire. In the end, is image everything? When addressing this question, one should cautiously remember that nation brands, like other brands, must be able to deliver on their promise.

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Is Nation Branding Right for Everyone?

Many countries are jumping on the bandwagon of nation branding simply because of their neighbors’ well-publicized initiatives and the fear of being left behind. But is nation branding always desirable? Is the

context, timing, or formulation right? A number of caveats exist that need to be further explored. For instance, can a country adequately project its brand while continuing a policy that is controversial within the international community? How is a nation brand image impacted by corruption? Likewise, when looking at some of the poorest countries in the world that badly lack infrastructure, one may wonder whether or not it is really appropriate for all countries to pursue vigorous branding? Beyond the inherent chicken-and-egg question here, marketing theory suggests that it is problematic to develop a brand on a promise that cannot be fulfilled. When expectations are shaped on the basis of a clearly articulated brand promise, anything short of that expectation will lead to dissatisfaction. For instance, frustrated foreign investors, who may have been lured by a false sense of optimism and perceived economic/legal/political readiness, can turn vocal about their bad experiences and further tarnish the country's reputation, possibly beyond repair. If timing seems to matter, what other variables and conditions moderate the effects of nation branding? Likewise, are there ceiling effects, levels of nation branding efforts at which targeted audiences stop responding or—worse—start to respond negatively?

Does it mean that heavily stigmatized countries should refrain from engaging in active nation branding or, if active, should they fully disregard the source of their stigma? Not necessarily. Intrinsically, nation-states are in the trade of influences, the production of self-interest, and the selling of credibility. As such, marketing and communication imperatives always exist; they just need to be adjusted to the situation at hand. The genius is in the vision and execution. South Africa, for instance, heavily stigmatized by its history of apartheid and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, opted not to ignore these elements in its branding strategy. Instead, in a type of inspired verbal jujitsu, it cleverly repositioned itself by building a tagline that stressed the future, optimism, and opportunities: "South Africa, Alive with Possibility."

Stigma, the construct itself, is a promising focal point for future research. For instance, what are its most critical dimensions and manifestation of stigma—dominant ancient history, prevalent domain of expertise, wars, chronic poverty and corruption, organized crime, human rights violations, or popular beliefs and folklore? To what extent, and on what basis, can stigmatized nations be successfully rebranded?

When and How Should Brand Associations and Alliances Be Formed?

In the commercial and nonprofit sectors, brand alliances are ubiquitous. They are a powerful source of reputation and image spillover ef-

fects. In comparison, brand alliances among countries as well as alliances between a nation brand and a region brand—internal or external—are not as common. Still, there is much value to be extracted from these strategic associations. Often, the equity of the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. While there are surprisingly few cases of such nation brand alliances in general, some creative branding initiatives aimed principally at tourism in small, developing countries have emerged.

The geo-brand “Central America,” for instance, was launched in 2002 by Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. This international brand alliance involved numerous stakeholders across various sectors: the initiative was coordinated by the Central American Integration System and supported with the funds of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation. The Central American Tourism Agency, itself a public-private partnership composed of the Ministers of Tourism and the Presidents of the National Tourism Chambers from all seven countries, was headquartered in Madrid to target European and Asian markets. In addition the regional airline “Grupo Taca” agreed to showcase the brand “Centroamerica” on all its airplanes. Are there other unexploited opportunities for joint nation branding efforts? How should these brand alliances be structured and managed? Can these alliances strive over time or are they doomed due to visceral competitive stands among partners?

As seen, such brand alliances can involve and be extended to different types of players: strong and iconic brands from the private and public sectors; famous events—often through sponsorship agreements, performances, and movies through “product” placement; and famous spokespersons such as celebrity endorsement. These symbiotic relationships represent significant opportunities to raise brand awareness and strengthen brand positioning. Partly due to lack of control over a partner’s brand equity, brand associations are also vulnerable and subject to brand dilution and harm. In this area, much remains to be explored regarding what constitutes a good fit between partnering brands, how to manage dual brand equities and trajectories, and how nation brands can best extract value from their portfolio of partnering brands.

Can and Should Public Diplomacy Open Dialog with Marketing?

When it comes to nation branding, a certain degree of skepticism will prevail in some publics. Many diplomats and government officials reject branding point blank as just plain irrelevant, if not heretic. Others may see some value in it but only for tourism. It is clear that the term “brand”

polarizes opinions and discussions can become passionate and draw camps. Memories of recent and unsuccessful experimentations surface quickly as proof; professional and emotional scares of forced initiatives are displayed with resentment. This cannot be more visible than when talking to officials at the U.S. Department of State about their experience under Charlotte Beers' short-lived tenure as Under Secretary for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. Beers came as a successful marketing executive, a branding guru with a well-established track record on Madison Avenue, but there is a sense that she was never able to fit in the culture of the State Department. She raised a lot of skepticism and mistrust with her spearheading of the "Shared Values" campaign aimed at Muslims in particular regions of the world. Today, the painful memories are still vivid. The animosity and distrust engendered more than six years ago have carried over, making it very difficult to contemplate a productive dialog with the marketing profession and outside experts. Why are some countries more prone to this sharp divide while others seem to be immune and can even strive on the interplay? What are the exact root causes? How does and can this relationship change over time?

More generally, the grafting of branding and marketing material in public diplomacy raises fear of an irreparable genetic mutation, one that will lead to the commoditization of a noble call and service to the country. More than simply two domains of expertise, the confrontation is between two distinct traditions, two cultural heritages, two belief systems, and two elites and meritocracies. Many nation branding critics tend to focus on outcome matters—for example, the perceived triviality of a tagline or appropriateness of symbols. But often the true benefit of a branding initiative goes well beyond the outcome and deliverables themselves; it is about the process that generated them. Brand building activities have the potential to trigger virtuous cycles. The concerted and participatory nature of a branding initiative can successfully demonstrate, often for the first time, the power of integrating the voices of multiple governmental agencies and cross-sector partners. A frequent byproduct of a branding initiative is increased communication and the creation of a sense of unity and belonging across different parties. The decision-making process can create a successful precedent and build a foundation for other, more complex initiatives.

At the end, like Monsieur Jourdain in Molière's "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" who discovered that he had been speaking prose all his life and did not even know it, all along public diplomacy has been using branding strategies as well as marketing tools, concepts, principles, and approaches without the need, or desire, for attribution. Recognizing the

evidence and focusing on untapped opportunities may be the first step in a healthy intellectual rapprochement that can open minds to new thinking, proven best practices, state-of-the-art tools and techniques, and promising developments in the field. This must be construed as an exchange, not an imposition. Much is to be gained by having experts across sectors engage in an open dialog without preconceptions and fear of hidden agendas. If marketers know anything, it is that familiarity breeds liking. Maybe, then, it is time to create platforms and events that will be conducive to the meeting of the minds. ■

ENDNOTES

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- 2 See Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80 (5) (September-October 2001): 2-6.
- 3 Wally Ollins, "Branding the Nation: The Historical Context," *The Journal of Brand Management* 9 (April 2002): 245.
- 4 See Simonin and de Vincente, 45-57.
- 5 Philip Kotler and David Gertner, "Country as a brand, product and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective," *The Journal of Brand Management* 9 (April 2002): 251.
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- 11 Wells and Wint.
- 12 "President Mogae launches the Botswana brand process," *Mmegi* 23 (77) (May 24, 2006), <<http://www.mmegi.bw/2006/May/Wednesday24/413364776423.html>> (accessed August 15, 2008).