

Why Nation Branding does not exist.

Nation branding does not exist; it is a myth, and rather a dangerous one.

The idea that it is possible to ‘do branding’ to a country (or to a city or region) in the same way that companies ‘do branding’ to their products and services, is vain and foolish. In the fifteen years since I first started working in this field I have not seen a shred of evidence, a single properly researched case study, to show that marketing communications programmes, slogans or logos, have ever succeeded, or could ever succeed, in altering international perceptions of places.

In fact there is some evidence to suggest the opposite: between 2005 when the Anholt Nation Brands Index¹ was launched, and the latest study in October 2008, there has been no detectable correlation between changes in national brand value and expenditure on ‘nation branding campaigns’. Several countries which have done no marketing (apart from normal tourism and investment promotion) during this period have shown noticeable improvements in their overall images, while others have spent extremely large sums on advertising and PR campaigns and their brand value has remained stable or even declined.

It’s more accurate to say that ‘nation branding’ is the problem, not the solution. It is public opinion that “brands” countries – in other words, reduces them to the weak, simplistic, outdated, unfair stereotypes that so damage their prospects in a globalised world – and countries need to *fight against* the tendency of international public opinion to brand them. Governments need to help the world understand the real, complex, rich, diverse nature of their people and landscapes, their history and heritage, their products and their resources: in other words, to *prevent* them from becoming mere brands.

Since I first coined the phrase ‘nation brand’ in 1996, the idea has created some excitement in the public sector, thanks to the tantalising but illusory prospect of a quick fix for a weak or negative national image. Many governments, most consultants and even some scholars persist in a naïve and superficial notion of ‘place branding’ that is nothing more than ordinary marketing and corporate identity, where the product just happens to be a country, a city or a region rather than a bank or a running shoe.

The combination of the words ‘nation’ and ‘brand’ has so much resonance because there is an important truth here: the brand *images* of places are indeed central to their progress and prosperity. This was my point. Today, the world is one market; the advance of globalisation means that every country, city and region must compete with every other for its share of the world’s commercial, political, social and cultural transactions. In such an environment, as in any busy marketplace, brand image becomes a critical factor; the necessary short cut to an informed buying decision.

¹ The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index, launched in 2005, is a regular survey of around 20,000 individuals in 20 countries which measures, analyses and tracks perceptions of 50 countries. The Anholt City Brands Index performs a similar analysis of cities.

The effect of national brand image is plain to see. Countries, cities and regions that are lucky or virtuous enough to have acquired a positive reputation find that everything they or their citizens wish to do on the global stage is easier: their brand goes before them, opening doors, creating trust and respect, and raising the expectation of quality, competence and integrity.

Places with a reputation for being poor, uncultured, backward, dangerous or corrupt find that everything they or their citizens try to achieve outside their own neighbourhood is harder, and the burden is always on their side to prove that they don't conform to the national stereotype. Compare the experiences of a Dutch and an Iranian manager on the international job market, or the struggles of an exporter from Bangladesh with one from Canada. Compare the ease with which a mediocre tourist resort in a highly regarded country can gain glowing media coverage and celebrity endorsement, with the difficulties experienced by an unspoiled and unique destination in a country with a weak or poor reputation. Compare the way consumers in Europe or America will willingly pay more for an unknown 'Japanese' product than for an identical 'Korean' product that is probably made in the same Chinese factory. Compare how positively the international media will report on an ordinary piece of policy from the government of a country reputed to be fair, rich and stable, with the media silence or sharp criticism which greets a wise, brave and innovative policy from a country that's saddled with a negative image.

In short, nobody doubts that places have their brand images, and that those images are critical to their success in the global contest for products, trade, services, talent, finance, investment, culture, respect and profile. It's only when people start talking about *branding* rather than just *brand* that the problems start.

It would certainly make life easier for many governments if it were possible to brand places: it would conveniently reduce the success criteria for their economic and political competitiveness to having a big enough marketing budget and hiring the best marketing and PR agencies. But of course the reality is more complex; national images are not created through communications, and cannot be altered by communications.

One might well ask, if marketing communications work so well for products and services, why shouldn't they work for countries and cities?

The simple answer is that they *don't* work so well for products and services – or at least, not in the way that most casual observers suppose. Although great advertising, attractive logos and memorable slogans are strongly associated with powerful commercial brands, they aren't the reason why those brands are powerful: brands become powerful when the product behind them earns trust. This happens as a consequence of many *sales*, leading to many direct customer experiences, and a product that fulfils or exceeds its promise. The advertising campaigns generate the sales; they only build the brand indirectly.

Because countries and cities aren't for sale, the marketing communications campaigns associated with them can only be empty propaganda: instead of saying 'please try this product' they are basically saying 'please change your mind about this country', and the message misfires.

Brand management in the commercial sphere only works because the company that owns the brand has a high degree of control over the product itself and over its channels of communication, and so can directly influence consumers' experience of the product, and the way in which the product is presented to them through the media. A good company with a good product can, with sufficient skill, patience and resources, build the brand image it wants and needs and which its product deserves – but no more than its product deserves, because as the great adman Bill Bernbach famously observed, good advertising will only make a bad product fail faster.

Places are utterly different. No single body, political or otherwise, exercises nearly this much control over the national 'product' or the way it communicates with the outside world. The tiniest village is infinitely more complex, more diverse and less unified than the largest corporation, purely because of the different reasons why people are there. Places have no single, unifying purpose, unlike the simple creed of shareholder value that binds corporations together: a contract of employment is mainly about duties, whereas a social contract is mainly about rights. Of course, there have always been heads of state who attempt to run their countries like corporations and exercise control over the 'brand' by controlling the channels of information, but this kind of control through propaganda can only work within entirely closed societies. It is one of the positive side-effects of globalisation that in our media-literate and constantly communicating international arena, propaganda is not so much evil as impossible.

Another reason why national or city images can't be changed so easily is because they are so robust. National image, as the research demonstrates, is a remarkably stable phenomenon, more a fixed asset than a liquid currency. We all seem to need these comforting stereotypes which enable us to put countries and cities in convenient pigeon-holes, and will only abandon them if we really have no other choice. The relevance of foreign places to most people is limited, and if a person in Germany or South Africa or India only spends a few moments each year thinking about Holland or Amsterdam, it's not surprising if their perception of Holland and Amsterdam remains largely unchanged for years on end. Images of foreign countries are truly part of the culture of the country which holds the perceptions: Holland's image in Germany and Indonesia, for example, is part of the German and Indonesian culture, and vice versa.

National reputation cannot be constructed; it can only be earned; and imagining that such a deeply rooted phenomenon can be shifted by so weak an instrument as marketing communications is an extravagant delusion. As Socrates observed, "the way to achieve a better reputation is to endeavour to *be* what you desire to appear."

Whilst governments cannot hope to manipulate the perceptions of millions of people in distant countries, there are three important things that they can do about their national reputation:

- First, they can understand and monitor their international image in the countries and sectors where it matters most to them in a rigorous and scientific way, and understand exactly how and where this affects their interests in those countries and sectors,

- Second, if they collaborate imaginatively, effectively and openly with business and civil society, governments can agree on a national strategy and narrative – the ‘story’ of who the nation is, where it is going and how it is going to get there – which honestly reflects the skills, the genius and the will of the people.
- Third, governments can ensure that their country maintains a stream of innovative and eye-catching products, services, policies and initiatives in every sector, which keeps it at the forefront of the world’s attention and admiration; demonstrates the truth of that narrative; and *proves* the country’s right to the reputation its people and government desire to acquire.

More engagement, not simply more communication, with the rest of the world can enhance the profile of places, and higher visibility does tend to go together with stronger appeal.

The idea of national reputation isn’t important simply because people find it intellectually appealing. For the majority of nations, the need to study, to understand, and to think about ways of influencing their international reputation is no longer really a matter of choice: either one takes some control over one’s national reputation or one allows it to be controlled by public opinion and public ignorance. The catastrophic consequences of the latter are understood all too well by most African nations.

Not every government, and indeed not every population, treats international approval as an important goal, but when we speak of the brand images of places, we are talking about something rather more significant than mere popularity.

The only sort of government that can afford to ignore the impact of its national reputation is one which has no interest in participating in the global community, and no desire for its economy, its culture or its citizens to benefit from the rich influences and opportunities that the rest of the world offers them.

It is the duty of every responsible government in the age of globalisation to recognise that the nation’s reputation, one of the most valuable assets of its people, is given to it in trust for the duration of its office. Its duty is to hand that reputation down to its successors, whatever their political persuasion, in at least as good health as it received it, and to improve it if possible for the benefit of future generations.

There seems little doubt that if the world’s governments placed even half the value that most wise corporations have learned to place on their good names, the world would be a safer and quieter place than it is today.