

COUNTRY BRANDING

Bonus Chapter for *PR Today: The Authoritative Guide to Public Relations*

INTRODUCTION

International public relations is more talked about than practised. It sounds glamorous and contains many of the ingredients which attract people to PR in the first place, but in reality PR seldom travels well: what works in one culture often fails to do so in another. However, one area where there is a genuinely high volume of international PR activity is the realm of branding countries, cities and places. Usually this involves a judicious blending of PR activity originating within the place of origin with PR within the country of the target audience. In a globalised world, with freer movement for people, goods, services and investment, countries now have to compete ever more creatively for favourable publicity. Even countries with controlled media have to look to international public relations campaigns if they want to promote themselves internationally – or at the very least counter unfavourable coverage: however much power they wield at home they cannot dominate or censor all international media outlets. This section looks at the role PR can play in branding countries; similar principles apply to cities, regions and places of all kinds.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To understand what country (or nation branding and destination marketing) is
- To understand the key elements involved in constructing a country branding plan
- To understand what PR can contribute to country branding

Countries, cities or 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...

Places with a reputation – no matter how ill-deserved – for being poor, uncultured, backward, dangerous or corrupt will find that everything they do...is harder.

Simon Anholt, in *Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, 2008.

CAN PLACES BE BRANDED?

As we have seen (Chapter 4, *PR Today*) branding originally referred to the way the identity of commercial products was protected and promoted to the outside world: increasingly people no longer simply bought commodities such as soap, beer or chocolate but instead bought specific, branded versions of the same products. These were carefully packaged and advertised as separately identifiable brands by the companies which produced them. So popular has the idea become that the concept of branding is now applied to most areas of life. How relevant is it to countries and places?

Think of a country or city. If you know anything about it all, almost inevitably some words or images will spring to mind. They may be favourable or unfavourable, or they may balance out. They may even be ill-informed or unfair, but your emotional response to that place constitutes its brand value – at least for *you*. It may make you want to visit that place on holiday or to avoid it. It may make you want to go and study or work there, or even live there permanently. It may affect whether you wish to do business with that country or to buy its products. And, to the extent that all governments have to some extent to take into account public opinion, it may affect your government's relations to that country. Taken collectively, our responses to places matter, socially and culturally, but also economically and politically. This makes the increased attention paid to country branding understandable.

But countries – and indeed cities and other places – almost always fall short on the other ingredients needed for successful brand building. Commercial brand managers insist on tight control of their brands: they, and they alone, determine how their brand is promoted. Not so with countries, which are normally made up of millions of very different people who to a large extent are free to do their own thing (exceptions such as North Korea are hardly very encouraging!). Indeed the paradox of “branding” places is that often it is precisely that lack of tight control which makes them exciting: people want to visit places where there is variety and the unexpected may happen, and by definition the vibrant business and cultural life which entices people cannot be precisely pre-planned. Successful country branding has to live with these limitations, but that does not mean that PR cannot make an important contribution.

PEOPLE, PLACES, POSSIBILITIES

Our perceptions of a place are built around what are what we call the **3 Ps**: **p**eople, **p**laces and **p**ossibilities.

People include, most obviously, celebrities of all kinds. These may include sports stars, actors and singers but also other cultural figures, politicians, business people – even historic figures and fictional characters. It is difficult for people to grow familiar with a place unless they can associate it with actual names and faces. Sometimes the association might be more generic: a country might be associated with particular expertise in a field of work, or its leading academics might be pioneers in a particular field of research. But more broadly it includes the general public: people have ideas – often stereotypes – about what the people in another country or city might be like and this has a powerful influence on their attitudes. For example, when North Europeans are asked to describe Italians, they will often talk of them being fashionable, emotional and dark haired, brown eyed and olive skinned. The fact that many Italians are not at all like this does not change Northern Europeans’ overall perception of them.

Places. We cannot think of another country or place without thinking about what we might see there – its natural and its man-made environment. On the positive side this includes famous and historic buildings and monuments, dazzling examples of modern architecture, interesting city neighbourhoods, charming countryside or spectacular mountain or coastal scenery. It also includes workplaces, places of study and more. Of course perceptions of place can also be negative, or a country or city can just seem dull.

The head of a PR agency appointed to boost travel to Turkey in the North American market pointed out that one of the major challenges would be to carve out a distinct image for Turkey as a destination. “If something happens in the Middle East, Turkey is associated with that, but it’s a distinct place.”

Source: *PR Week*

Possibilities. Ultimately our interest in a place is about the possibilities it offers us and others – for example, to enjoy ourselves, to study, to buy property, to create an attractive lifestyle, to work and to make money. Possibilities involve people and places and are what bring together the other two Ps.

KEY QUESTIONS

The key questions you have to ask at the start of any country branding campaign are similar to those for any PR activity:

- Where are you starting from?
- Where do you want to get to?
- How are you going to get there?

These questions have to be answered in a hard-headed and realistic way. Few countries start from where they would wish to: they have to take into account negative perceptions and real problems. A country or place may be simply little-known – an

unpalatable fact which has to be faced up to. On the other hand well established images can be incredibly hard to dislodge: a surprising number of people around the world still associate London with dense fog, even though that problem was resolved around 50 years ago! On the other hand, huge events can be relatively quickly forgotten, raising doubts about the long term impact of one-off events on branding. (Without looking them up, see how far back you can go in remembering cities which hosted the Olympic Games – yet rest assured that for each of the cities it was a huge commitment which seemed to guarantee long-standing fame! Now try it with the Winter Olympics!)

Countries also have to be realistic about their ambitions – they can seldom transform themselves overnight nor is it likely that they can be all things to all people. Finally, the way you get there has to take into account the limitations of time and budget. PR can only achieve so much – at a certain point more substantive action, over and above what constitutes normal PR activity, may be called for.

The Bilbao Effect

When the Guggenheim Museum of Art in Bilbao, Spain, opened its doors in 1997 it was widely seen as transforming the fortunes of a hitherto run-down and little-visited industrial city in northern Spain. The combination of Frank Gehry's striking and innovative architecture and the Guggenheim collection's celebrated artworks transformed Bilbao into a destination for international tourism. Although the Museum's opening coincided with other improvements in the city, the Guggenheim's impact is often described as the Bilbao Effect – something which other cities have tried to copy, not always successfully.

Audiences and messages

Country branding messages can be addressed to very different audiences.

One key focus is often *tourism*, but even then there are very different categories of tourist: is the aim to attract large numbers of relatively low spending visitors or smaller numbers of wealthier tourists? (Too many of the former might well put off the

latter, and some countries have had to attempt elaborate rebranding exercises as they seek to reposition themselves as destinations for higher spending travellers.) Which age groups are to be targeted? Clearly the messages must be appropriate: the 3 Ps mentioned above are certainly relevant, but tourism does not imply any deep commitment. As a result some of the further-reaching concerns of other audiences (see below) are usually less of less concern.

Another common target is *inward investment*. If there are substantial amounts of money to be made business people are willing to try and overcome all kinds of problems – something which is amply demonstrated by the presence of international business people in all kinds of dangerous but natural resource rich areas of the world. Cheap labour also has its attractions. However, if all other things are equal investors will inevitably opt for stable, fair and efficient government, and an open legal system. Businesspeople are reluctant to make serious or long term commitments unless they can satisfy themselves that the likely benefits outweigh any likely risks. They will also be interested in the quality of the workforce and the infrastructure and, depending on their nature of their business, in the local or regional markets.

However business concerns cannot be wholly separated from the kind of criteria which influence tourists and more besides. Businesspeople and their families will be interested in lifestyle and leisure opportunities, property options, educational and medical choices, shopping facilities and so forth. Business orientated country branding has to deal with these realities.

Some countries attract large number of overseas students. Here the obvious focus may be the image of the places of learning where they hope to study, but in practice once again many other factors come into play: leisure facilities and the scope to enjoy oneself, a cosmopolitan culture and the country or city's popularity with other overseas students, plus opportunities to find work.

The fundamental requirement is to understand where your target audience is coming from – their starting point in terms of their knowledge and attitudes and their interests and desires.

WHAT CAN PR CONTRIBUTE TO COUNTRY BRANDING?

In the field of country branding, as in other areas of marketing communications, PR usually works hand-in-glove with other marketing disciplines, not least advertising. And, even more than in many other areas of PR work, PR cannot truly control the product. It cannot build new buildings, improve transport, or change the legal system. However there are significant contributions PR *can* make:

- It may not be able to transform the “product”, but through its dealings with the media and its understanding of wider public opinion PR people can advise those who do control such matters on the problems the country faces. Sometimes this will include the duty of relaying unpalatable but vital messages about current perceptions to very senior people.
- It can seek to encapsulate the brand’s key qualities – its unique selling proposition – in a strong slogan or through simple reiterated messages and images.
- Through media relations it can promote positive stories. All media are eager to secure good quality content, and this is particularly true for the travel media – newspaper supplements, magazines, TV programmes and websites – which can seldom finance their own work and are effectively reliant on the travel industry to fund their activities. An unacknowledged *quid pro quo* has grown up – the travel industry provides free facility trips and the media – usually – offers favourable coverage in return.
- It can advise on crisis management. Every country will from time to time suffer a crisis, be it a terrorist outrage, a strike or a natural disaster such as an earthquake. How the country is seen by the outside world to respond to such a crisis can be critical to its brand image...see Chapter 13 of *PR Today*.

Some of the factors that drive tourism

Iconic buildings, parks and gardens, scenery

Iconic products, shopping, fashion

Performing arts: music, theatre, opera, dance, comedy, festivals of all kinds

Other forms of culture: museums, galleries, literature

Clubs, pubs, bars and restaurants

Sport, leisure and outdoor pursuits, both for participants and spectators

Ceremonial events, celebrity spotting

Practicalities: cost, travel facilities, hotels, language

Weather

Some of the factors which deter tourists

Crime

Dirt

Expense

Overcrowding

Transport problems

Threats of terrorism, unrest or conflict

It is interesting to note that some hugely popular destinations such as London and Rome succeed despite their weaknesses.

Exercise

Think of a country, region or city which you know well. How would you promote it as a) a tourist destination; and b) a centre for inward investment to the relevant target audiences in a different country? Include an appropriate slogan in your answer.