EXPLOIT, NEGLECT, DEVELOP, LIVE - A TYPOLOGY OF COUNTRY IMAGE USE IN COMPANY BRANDING

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INTRODUCTION

Successful branding strategies form positive brand images in consumers' minds, which contribute to brand equity in the long run (Aaker, 1991). Much research suggests that the image of a product's country of origin (COO) can significantly impact consumers' brand image perceptions and buying preferences (e.g. Hsieh, Pan & Setiono, 2004; Wang & Lamb, 1983). However, little is still known about how country branding (a country's whole image, covering political, economic, historical and cultural dimensions), interacts with country product image (Fetscherin 2010). Switzerland has a strong country image and therefore provides a unique case (Yin 2003). Brand Switzerland governed by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs to oversee the communication of the country's image (www.imageswitzerland.ch). This department monitors the view of Switzerland overseas, and has determined that the key brand values should be *trustworthy*, *premium quality* and *authentic* with two secondary concepts of *secure future*, and *self-determination*. The objective of this study is to analyse the degree to which Swiss companies use these key dimensions of the official country image.

METHODOLOGY

To address this research objective, a sample frame of 297 Swiss SMEs was established. From this sample frame, two stages of data collection were used; a random sample of 10 companies with English language websites was chosen. Following Pitt et al. (2007), websites were downloaded to four levels down, and a search list of terms and words with connotations to the five Swiss country image dimensions. The websites were then content analysed at two levels; the first was a simple quantitative content analysis of associated words, and the second was an open ended coding undertaken by 2 independent researchers which included words, phrases, styles and images. 10 companies were then randomly selected to participate in short semi-structured interviews. These focused on the following topics: 1) The extent to which the company's brand has benefited from the image of Switzerland 2) The extent to which the company is concerned with presenting a 'Swiss' image 3) How the company can contribute to a re-validation of this country image. All data were coded and content analysed (Krippendorff, 1980) by two researchers in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings (Armstrong et al., 1997). Source and method triangulation was implemented by augmenting the resulting information with data obtained through secondary resources such as company reports, websites and other marketing material.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The telephone interviews gave a very consistent picture of the value that these companies attribute to Switzerland and suggested 90% support for the idea that companies should contribute to the perpetuation of this Swiss image. The combination of telephone data and web content analysis indicate a divide between organizations in the extent to which they believe a Swiss country image plays an important part in their branding strategy. We propose a 2*2 matrix to summarise the types of companies (Figure 1), against 2 criteria; their use of the COO image of Switzerland against the way in which they uphold and contribute to these values.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

The contribution of our study to the extant literature is twofold; first, we analyse the extent to which organizations use the existing country image for their own branding strategies and highlight some of the underlying reasons for their decisions. Second, this study suggests that a country image should be built upon solidly founded attitudes and behaviors already found within a country so that organizations "live the brand". When this is done, overt promotion of country images and logos is not required because the country brand reputation is continually being reinforced by action. This study provides an excellent example of how country branding impacts both local SMEs and potentially, the economic development of an entire nation by installing consistent messages and actions.

References available upon request.