Editorial

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The ‘great debate’ in place branding revolves around the question of whether national reputation is better influenced by operating on causes, or effects.

The ‘logos and slogans’ school of thought, deriving from the commercial selling arts, is premised on the belief that perceptions of places can be directly influenced by communications: in other words, that people can be persuaded through one form of rhetoric or another to alter their opinions about countries, cities or regions.

The ‘policy-based’ approach (as espoused by this author, and gently encouraged in the pages of this journal) holds that a purely communications-based approach is little more than futile propaganda, as countries and cities are profoundly different from products and corporations, and that the reputations of places can only be meaningfully influenced by addressing their root causes.

Much research suggests that the images of places are largely a matter of ‘reality with delay’, something rather solidly built over many decades, not something volatile and transient that can be pushed around at will by external agents.

People, naturally, like to own their beliefs and seldom take kindly to having them challenged or manipulated by others – perhaps least of all by foreign governments. The art of changing those beliefs, therefore, lies in altering the phenomena which give rise to the beliefs. In this way, the ‘audience’ will still own its own belief, and feel – quite

justifiably – that it has arrived at it itself, independently.

Believing that advertising or marketing campaigns can change international perceptions of countries is, in fact, just as naïve and just as lazy as trying to make somebody lose weight by massaging the parts of their body that look too fat. It doesn’t work because the fat is beneath the surface, and no amount of pummelling will get it out. One has to change the sources of nutrition that created the fat in the first place: diet and exercise are the only things that work, and they take time as well as effort, a sincere commitment to changed behaviour.

One of the few ways in which it is possible to change people’s opinions directly is through genuine dialogue, by means of persuasion. There is, however, no forum available to countries for such a dialogue: the international media, where most ‘place branding’ attempts are carried out, only offers one-way communication. In any case, even if a country can occasionally speak with something like a single voice, international public opinion can never and will never do so. Perhaps one exception to this rule is cultural relations, which can develop, with time and skill and patience, into a form of true dialogue between peoples: but it is slow, expensive and strictly limited by the number of people it can incorporate into its programmes.

Devising a brand strategy for a country is the easy part. Most people with a basic understanding of global trade, macroeconomics, international relations and a little imagination could happily

spend a few interesting hours dreaming up a 'visionary' strategy for any country, if they understand that country's aims, assets and challenges well enough. And if that person chooses to pursue a communications-based approach to executing the strategy, it is equally fun and easy to dream up a range of media campaigns to present the strategy to the world.

The policy-based approach is much more challenging, however, as implementation in this case consists of *proving* the vision, rather than simply communicating it. This invariably requires a substantial change of culture within and around government, vastly improved coordination between the private and public sectors, and creating a substantial commitment to change among the population of the country. Turning the strategy into an agent of change within the country is without doubt the most challenging aspect of any place-branding task.

Simplistic parallels with corporations and their efforts to encourage the workforce to 'live the brand' don't help much to resolve this dilemma. This author has in the past also been guilty of talking enthusiastically about the need for the 'whole population to live the brand' without really considering what this means in practical terms. It is hard enough encouraging the employees of a corporation to subscribe to the values, goals and desired behaviours of the organisation that pays their salaries, let alone doing this on a national scale, and under the aegis of a social contract rather than a contract of employment. If it were really possible for a political leader to unite a majority of the population into a common set of beliefs and a common pattern of behaviours without resorting to despotism and coercion, then all elections would be a foregone conclusion and democratic opposition would lose its *raison d'être*.

Nonetheless, it is clear that if a country is to change enough to alter its international reputation, this is unthinkable without the support of the population; and to understand the essential nature of the population is a prerequisite to eliciting its support. There is

a direct line between identity, behaviour and reputation: who you are determines how you behave, and how you behave determines how you are perceived.

But national identity is nearly always a vexed and elusive subject, especially in newer, poorer nations, or those with unresolved conflicts – the very nations that would benefit most from exercising some influence over their reputations.

In every country where I have worked during the last 10 years, I have met and debated for hours with writers, academics and philosophers whose principal subject is national identity; some of them have spent a lifetime studying the question; and yet they are often the first to admit that they are scarcely any closer to any firm 'answers' on the subject than the most casual observer.

In many cases, it is often more fruitful to 'change the subject' from these ultimately circular arguments, and attempt to find consensus – and, more importantly, inspiration and stimulation – in a national narrative that is based on a shared dream for the future rather than a shared interpretation of the past or the present. In other words, it is possible for developing nations to represent themselves in terms of the country they mean to become, the direction they choose and the values that this implies about their people: they can tell a story about where they are going, not where they have come from, or where they are now.

There is at least one distinguished precedent for a country 'branding' itself on the basis of its aspirations for the future, rather than its achievements in the past: the United States sold itself to the world as a project, indeed an experiment, for the best part of two centuries, and gained enormous admiration and goodwill around the world for doing so.

Time and time again, in my discussions with academics, politicians, business people and ordinary citizens in developing countries about their national identity, I find that people are always keen participants, but their manner is frequently agitated and troubled, their language conflictual and, if I am honest, relatively little progress is made during these discussions even

though the content is most interesting. However, as soon as discussions move on to the question of the country's future, the participants visibly brighten; their contributions become more constructive and imaginative, and it is obvious that their emotions and intellects are not just engaged but also stimulated and excited.

It is impossible not to conclude that many developing nations find themselves at an interesting, important, perhaps even a critical moment in their history at the close of this decade. The simple creed of economic development represented by the Washington consensus has provided significant momentum across many sectors of society in many of these countries, but as more people become more accustomed the fruits of their new wealth, a loss of certainty and a sense of disappointment have started to set in. Many of those who have benefited from the growth of the last decades now appear to be asking, 'Is material wealth really worth the sacrifice of so much quality of life?'

For those who have not yet achieved a measurable improvement in living standards and disposable income, the sense of impatience is palpable. Their question is: 'When are things going to feel different?'

There is often a commonly expressed view that many people have achieved a remarkable and palpable improvement in their lives but are somehow unable to acknowledge it. They've 'never had it so good' but their question is 'What am I struggling for?'

Many surveys have been carried out during the last few years, which seem to show that striving for wealth, and achieving it, does bring a sense of purpose and even happiness, but only up to a certain point. Over a certain level of income, happiness and fulfilment actually begin to decline; the struggle, the sacrifices and the constant hankering after a vague and ill-defined objective that forever moves further away ultimately outweigh the pleasures of anticipation and the satisfaction of what one has achieved so far. In many of the countries where I have worked during the last 5 or 6

years, in many sectors of society, this point appears to have been reached.

If one grows up in a society where accumulating material wealth is truly the cultural foundation of that society, the group creed, then this sense of emptiness is broadly tolerable, mainly because there's nothing much else. One could argue, however, that in a country where the creed of economic growth is a relatively recent foreign implant, which conflicts with other world views and values, that sense of unfulfilment is likely to be more prevalent and more troubling.

Leaving aside the question of economic growth as a 'national project' and the fulfilment or lack of fulfilment that it brings, most people need a scheme, a sense that they know where they are heading and what they are struggling for. Unless society has some kind of shared goal, and unless that goal is in some measure inspiring, it tends to drift, and disappointment, impatience, emptiness or even depression will unavoidably set in. All groups of people, whether one is speaking of a small company or a large country, need a sense of collective purpose, and good leadership is very largely about providing this.

Perhaps it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that the idea of nation branding or Competitive Identity is just what many developing countries need: a chance to 'change the subject' by focusing on their position in the world rather than the country's own meaning for itself, and a chance to build a new vision for a shared future, to define the country's goals not in terms of a culturally alien economic model but according to the values and beliefs of the population itself.

Growth for the sake of growth, as Edward Abbey famously said, is the logic of the cancer cell. It is wholly inadequate as a basis for providing social cohesion, common purpose, progress and meaning to people's lives. The current global financial and economic crisis has only served to emphasise the centrality of this question – and to underline the universal

significance of the dilemmas that so many developing countries are struggling with today.

The irony in all this is that many of the values and assets which so many developing countries are in the process of discarding because they seem irrelevant to the struggle for modernisation and growth, are precisely those values and assets which the 'first world' is finally beginning to value most: their respect for and closeness to traditional culture and values; their respect for and closeness to nature; strong family and societal cohesion; a real sense of the poetic in daily life; a respect for culture and learning.

To put it brutally, many third-world countries run the risk of becoming trapped in the role of second-rate, second-world country, still chasing the dreams of modernity and prosperity which the first world is just now beginning to question. Instead of playing to their strengths as a 'niche offering', many emerging nations are still running a very twentieth-century race which, truthfully, only countries with large economies, large armies and large populations could ever win.

One of the great benefits of globalisation, and the rapid transformation of the world from global battleground to global marketplace is that it enables smaller countries to find a profitable niche, and compete on the basis of their cultural, environmental, imaginative and human qualities rather than on raw power. We live in an age that, for the first time in history, provides real opportunities for developing countries, but those countries must learn to play by the new rules.

And the loss of identity isn't merely an unfortunate side effect of growth: for smaller

countries, it is the *indispensible means by which they will achieve growth*. Countries that aren't strong need to be interesting – they need to exercise some power of attraction if they cannot exercise compulsion, and the source of that attraction can only be their unique, individual identity, their culture, their history, their land, their traditions, their genius and their imagination. This is what place branding is all about.

Can a country achieve sustainable growth while reducing its carbon footprint and without harming its environment? Can a culture embrace capitalism without losing its moral compass? Can a society benefit from immigration without losing its distinctive identity? Can technology and poetry, art and science coexist and even collaborate in the same society? Can social justice grow even faster than the economy? Can a wealthy society feed the souls as well as the bodies of its people? Can a people grasp the benefits of modernity without sacrificing what it values most from its past? In short, can a country move forwards without leaving what it values behind?

These are the central dilemmas of modernity, and it is no coincidence that they are also the central questions of Competitive Identity or place branding for developing nations. Our age urgently requires a new model and a new ethos of development and progress: and the first countries that can prove the viability of such models are assured of gaining as much in reputation as they gain in prosperity.

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