Guest Editorial

Special Section: Place Branding in the Middle East

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The collection of articles in our special section of this issue of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* are designed to further our understanding on what brand activities and brand efforts have been done in the Middle East. For this special section, scholars and practitioners were invited to submit articles on place branding efforts conducted by different countries, regions and cities in the Middle East.

The Middle East has always had a relevant role in world affairs. It is home to the first civilizations and where the establishment of the first city has been documented. It is also the region in which the three most important monolithic religions were created.

The relevance of the Middle East in world affairs through the centuries was based on it being a center of development and innovation. The modern numerical system and the concept of zero are examples of important inventions that originated in the Middle East.

Although the Middle East encountered a period of declining importance, it has been experiencing renewed vitality since the second half of the twentieth century. The technology developed in the nineteenth century through today is highly dependent on oil as the main source of energy. Because of the Middle East being home to the largest known oil reserves in the world, its relevance in world affairs has, once again, substantially increased.

With the wealth obtained especially in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, some countries in the Middle East have started applying marketing strategies to enhance their reputation and to attract business, investors and tourists in a concerted effort to diversify their economies. This is important, as many, but not all, countries in the Middle East are rich in oil. Nonetheless, it can be said that all are culturally rich and this area of wealth can be a catalyst for diversification, especially within the tourism industry.

Dubai, an emirate in the United Arab Emirates, is a good example of the effort put in place to diversify its economy. Today, Dubai derives more business from tourism than from oil and is currently a commercial and financial hub in the Middle East.

Dubai had more incentives to diversify its economy because of its lack of big oil reserves in comparison to its neighbors. This prompted the emirate to look for alternative ways to attract investment in order to guarantee a successful and prosperous future. Therefore, the lack of natural resources in Dubai combined with the vision of its rulers was the right recipe for starting a successful brand-building project.

The effort to brand Dubai is documented by Govers in his article *Brand Dubai and its competitors in the Middle East: An image and reputation analysis*. His article explores the Dubai

brand image and compares it with the brand image of Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Bahrain. Dubai's branding strategy can be considered groundbreaking in the Middle East and of being highly innovative in their marketing approach. Because of the success of brand Dubai, other places started using marketing techniques similar to Dubai. This was even more accentuated once the financial crisis hit Dubai. Because of the crisis, other places now see opportunities to occupy Dubai's positioning and capture more of their market. However, just as Dubai realized with the financial crisis, other places have also realized that unexpected factors can badly undermine a place brand image. Social unrest, for example, as happened in Bahrain, imposed that the Formula 1 Grand Prix in 2011 was canceled and the 2012 was postponed.

A second article on Dubai, published by Coombe and Melki, explores Dubai's brand image with professionals in New York City, London and Singapore. This article aims to explain why Dubai gets prominent media exposure and how this exposure affects consumers' perceptions about Dubai.

The two other articles in the special section focus on the Abu Dhabi brand. The article by Reem analyzes the role of Saaduyat Island, the Cultural District, for Abu Dhabi's brand building. She argues that the role of Cultural District is not only to help establish Abu Dhabi as a cultural centre, but it is also a way to help promote the local culture. Therefore, the author concludes that Saaduyat Island is used to balance local culture with globalization. This is an important aspect as it can be seen as an effort to create something local instead of simply importing international artifacts with small connections to the local brand.

The fourth article by Sim focuses on how energy sources are being used by Abu Dhabi to

give meaning to its brand ambitions. Abu Dhabi is using its embrace of alternative energy sources (renewable and nuclear) to promote its' brand. By focusing on this aspect, Abu Dhabi's goal is to be recognized as a leader in energy issues and, in turn, become a key player in global affairs. Therefore, the energy sources are not an end in itself, but a tool for their brand image creation.

Interestingly, of the four articles published in this special section, two are from Dubai and two are from Abu Dhabi. The lack of articles from other Middle Eastern countries, regions and cities signals that there is still much work to do in the region with respect to the field of branding. It is my hope that this special section will be a catalyst for more research and more publications not only from the Middle East, but also from other parts of the world in regards to this region.

The Middle East is currently experiencing political strife. Nobody knows what changes will emerge, but it seems clear that the status quo is not going to be maintained. New possibilities will emerge, and Middle Eastern countries, regions and cities will definitely need to be using branding tools to clarify their positioning in the market and guarantee their futures in the market place.

On a final note, I would like to extend a personal thank you to all of the people involved with the publication of this special section. This would not have been possible if it were not for the contribution of several academics and researchers. Thank you to all for your effort and dedication in enhancing the field of place branding.

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