

BRAND PAPERS

Elastic brands

How far can you stretch the idea of 'brand'? Simon Anholt argues that marketing can bring added value to any area of human endeavour including international relations



**Simon Anholt is the chairman of Earthspeak, and the author of the newly-published *Brand New Justice*.
simon@earthspeak.com**

At a time when branding is coming under a good deal of public scrutiny, it makes sense to ask what the limits of branding might be. There is a tendency for people to use the word in a carefree way for anything connected with public perception – from TV personalities to countries, and governments to religions. It is sometimes used to describe people who certainly wouldn't have known what a brand was if it jumped up and bit them: I recently heard one speaker at a conference refer repeatedly and enthusiastically to the "Viking brand" – and he wasn't talking about mail-order stationery.

It may be justifiable to refer to some phenomena as brands even when the branding effect is unintentional (as is the case with the Vikings), because one is simply talking about the way their image is received and stored by the public (although in these cases, a better word might be 'perception', 'reputation', or 'image'). But a stricter definition requires that a more or less systematic attempt has been made to create or manage that reputation.

Defining reputations

Nobody doubts that cities, regions and nations fall into this category. The reputations of places have been built and managed by their leaders almost since the beginning of time, and those leaders have often borrowed expertise from others to augment their political skills – poets, orators, philosophers, movie-makers, artists and writers.

Only recently, though, has the marketing profession been judged to have something useful to contribute to economic or social development and international relations. But marketing is coming of age in many ways. As the developed world has become organised more along commercial lines, it has become clear that a science which shows you how to persuade large numbers of people to change their minds about things or part with hard-earned income has various interesting applications.

So it's no longer just businesses which recognise the usefulness of marketing: political parties, governments, charities, good causes, state bodies, even non-government organisations are turning to marketing as they begin to understand the profound truth about human endeavour which marketers have always known – being in possession of the truth is not enough. The truth has to be sold.

But the elevation of common commercial marketing disciplines to the dizzying heights of national strategy creates certain tensions – chiefly between what branding experts believe their discipline can

achieve, and what their clients in government believe it is capable of achieving. This may have something to do with the quality of people who customarily work in marketing, or it may not; it certainly has a lot to do with the 'brand image' of marketing itself.

We're not talking tourism promotion

At the heart of the issue is the old question of whether marketing is merely about communications or something altogether more strategic. Many politicians and statesmen – like most laypeople – don't understand what is meant by branding, and believe that it's simply a matter of designing a new logo for their country and possibly a slogan to go underneath it, often barely distinguishing between nation branding and tourism promotion.

It helps even less that there are so many communications agencies which, perhaps frustrated by the difficulty of selling pure strategy to governments, have fallen into the habit of pandering to this misconception and simply selling logos and slogans to any government prepared to pay for them.

Nation branding is, of course, a task infinitely larger and more complex than anything which marketing service agencies have ever had to tackle before. There is no area of commercial marketing which approaches the depth and breadth of a true nation-brand strategy, and its agenda of imposing creativity, consistency, truthfulness and effectiveness onto a wide range of difficult fields.

These range from the promotion of national and regional tourism, inward investment, recruitment and trade; the branding of exports; a national cultural management programme; international relations and foreign policy; domestic social and cultural policy; urban and environmental planning; economic development; membership of supranational bodies; diasporas; sport; media management to who knows what else.

In fact, it could be argued that the first and most critical component of any national branding strategy is creating a spirit of benign nationalism among an often divided and multi-racial populace (the exact public diplomacy equivalent of helping the employees of a corporation to 'live the brand') – hardly the kind of challenge which design agencies or PR companies are accustomed to facing on an average Monday morning. It does seem an odd place for the discipline of marketing, a humble commercial service industry, to find itself, in a sense, above national government.

Yet there is a clear and compelling case for the national branding strategy needing to direct, or at least embrace, the full gamut of political, economic, cultural and social development. After all, the argument for nation branding hinges on the acceptance that in a globalised world, all nations need to compete for a share of the world's attention and wealth, and that development is as much a matter of positioning as

anything else, so it makes perfect sense for governments to do everything possible to ensure consistency of behaviour in every area.

It also makes perfect sense to claim that any area of activity which doesn't fall under the remit of brand is therefore a weak link in the strategic chain, and will undermine the efforts and investment made in other areas. There is, for example, simply no point in investing in a brand strategy which portrays the country as a peaceful and beautiful tourist destination and an exporter of ethically-produced quality consumer goods if the government is busily oppressing minorities, polluting rivers or behaving belligerently towards its neighbours.

This basic need for absolute consistency of behaviour is, of course, another of the first tenets of marketing, and if there's no hope of achieving it, then there's no hope of building a brand. Just as the development of corporate and product branding has led to the conclusion that branding, if done properly, must affect every aspect of the corporation both inside and out, and become identical to corporate strategy, so the same conclusion applies to nation branding. Indeed, I have argued that brand management has become one of the primary responsibilities of governments in the modern world.

However, tension arises because the finely-trained strategic experts in government understandably resent having apparently underqualified private-sector 'consultants' trampling over their territory and presuming to tell elected politicians, diplomats – sometimes even kings and queens – how to do their jobs.

So how can this tension be resolved? Is it a question of the branding folk attempting to instil branding-aware behaviour and marketing-style strategy into the politicians? Should they work closely alongside them, and concentrate humbly on influencing their thinking? Should branding and marketing become a compulsory component of diplomatic and political training?

Mindset or body of knowledge?

Whether any of these approaches are the right ones really depends on whether we consider branding expertise to be a set of simple criteria – a way of thinking which can realistically be instilled in people and overlaid onto their existing expertise – or whether we consider it to be a vast body of technical knowledge which a busy minister could no more hope to learn than we marketers could learn foreign policy or macroeconomic management. In other words, is branding a way of thinking or a body of knowledge?

It is my view that for the purposes of nation branding, it's really a way of thinking, and is entirely separable from the technical expertise (like research, planning, brand theory, design, advertising and communications), which can easily be outsourced to experts, and which the senior politicians don't need to bother with any more than the CEO of a com-

pany should. The job of the nation branding consultant is to find ways of instilling the brand-oriented mindset into the key figures in government and industry, and ultimately into the population at large.

Sceptics will not be reassured by these arguments, and will continue to wonder what makes marketers imagine that their experience or discipline entitles them to dictate top-level strategic advice – or ways of thinking – to people who, after all, are supposed to be abundantly qualified in the area of high strategy, not to mention diplomacy and perception management.

I don't share this scepticism, because over the years I have become entirely convinced of marketing's eligibility to bring value to pretty much any area of human endeavour, up to and including national government and international relations.

I know of no other discipline which at its best – allows for the management of human enterprise: this unique marriage of empirical observation with visionary strategy. Marketing uniquely embraces scientific clarity of thought and rigorous observation of human psychology, culture and society with a deep sympathy for the mystery of creativity. It combines advanced knowledge management (as is found in the way the better brands are policed in all their complex variants) with sensitive intercultural management (as is found in the way the better brands are communicated worldwide). It is a clear set of universally-applicable rules for building successful endeavours. It brings commerce and culture together as a potent force for creating prosperity. It can harness the power of language and images to bring about widespread social change.

Good marketing, almost uniquely, has the humanism and wisdom to know that there is a difference between what makes sense on paper and how people actually behave – it has the intelligence of academia combined with the worldliness of practice.

Marketing, in short, is one of the great achievements of the Western world, even if it has usually been used for somewhat trivial ends, merely increasing wealth where more wealth is least needed. But that's another discussion entirely.

Nation branding is certainly one of the ways in which marketing can begin to realise its full potential, and provides an opportunity for marketers to demonstrate that they have something to contribute above and beyond that tired old litany of 'increasing shareholder value'.

There are many people who feel far from comfortable at the thought of marketers mingling freely with politicians and helping them determine the fate of nations. This conjecture is understandable but the influence of the art and science of marketing is surely a positive one. If it's good marketing, it will bring a much-needed dose of practical, rigorous, egalitarian, good-humoured, quick-witted humanism to an area where such qualities are all too often entirely absent.

Special 20% discount offer from Butterworth-Heinemann when you order *Brand New Justice* by Simon Anholt. Visit www.bh.com/marketing to place your order, quoting reference code: B301BMBA05. Offer ends 28 February.

