

## **Destination Branding**

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### **Introduction**

Today, every country, city and region on earth must compete with every other for its share of the world's commercial, political, social and cultural transactions in what is virtually a single market. As in any busy marketplace, brand image becomes critical: almost nobody has the time, the patience or the expertise to understand the real differences between the offerings of one country and another, and so people fall back on their fundamental beliefs and prejudices about those countries to help them make their decisions. Just as in the commercial marketplace that 'brand image' provides a short cut to an informed buying decision. Countries with a reputation for being poor, uncultured, backward, dangerous or corrupt will find that everything they or their citizens try to achieve outside their own neighborhood is harder, while countries that are lucky or virtuous enough to have acquired a positive reputation find everything easier. Their brand goes before them like a calling card that opens doors, creates trust and respect, and raises the expectation of quality, competence and integrity. In this way, the reputation of a country has a direct and measurable impact on just about every aspect of its engagement with other countries, and plays a critical role in its economic, social, political and cultural progress.

In destination branding there must exist a fit between the corporate image of brand and the image of the destination country. Consumers must trust on country laws, regulations, products, and sub categories like hospitality & infrastructure. One good example in destination branding is "Taj Mahal". A destination brand must possess several associations to the consumers' minds. "Taj Mahal" has a variety of such associations a symbol of romance, a historic dignity, and now-a-days a place to political alliances. Consumer loyalty to destination increases the positive image as public visits on and off such places and enhances its brand image.

For the travel and tourism industry, national image is fundamentally important. The tourist board needs to 'sell the country' to a vast international audience of ordinary consumers as well as a highly informed professional cadre of tour operators and other influencers, and the background reputation of the country ultimately determines whether that 'selling' process is easy or difficult, expensive or cheap, simple or complex – and whether it gets gradually easier and more efficient over time, or whether it remains forever a struggle. A country's reputation determines whether its messages are welcomed, and whether they are believed. This is the reason why the concept of destination branding has become so important. The idea of 'brand equity' sums up the idea that if a place, product or service acquires a positive, powerful and solid reputation, this becomes an asset of enormous value – probably more valuable, in fact, than all its tangible assets, because it represents the ability of the place or organization to continue to trade at a healthy margin for as long as its brand image stays intact. Brand equity also represents the 'permission' given by a loyal consumer base for the company or country to continue producing and developing its product range, innovating, communicating and selling to them.

### **Concept of Destination Branding**

It is important to understand what brand means in order to better utilize its marketing potential. A brand is an accumulation of characteristics that form a destination's image and identity. In simple words, branding is a promise to the consumer, an expectation of performance and a mark of integrity and reputation.

It builds up continuously in the minds of the destination's consumers and it is affected by experiences, memories (Deutsch and Real, 2002) and other visitors' comments. A brand reflects all the destination products and services, which are part of the destination's identity. A brand needs to have unique elements, which differentiate it from its competitors and establish an image in the mind of the consumer. After establishing an image, branding can further build upon other destination brand elements.

Destination branding is about combining all the attributes associated with the place (i.e. its products, and services from various industries such as agriculture, tourism, sports, arts, investment, technology, education, etc.) under one concept, which expresses a unique identity and personality of the destination and differentiates it from its competition.

### **Brand Positioning**

Brand positioning involves the management of the brand and the "manipulation" of the brand components to create an image, a position in the minds of the visitors that differentiates the destination from its competitors. The positioning of a brand is associated with the concepts of brand image and brand associations. A brand association is anything "linked" in memory to a brand (Aaker, 1991). Positioning a destination brand means to use the destination's strong points and build upon them. It is vital that the brand is believable and reflects some of the underlying features of the destination even though they might not be widely known. It is also important to understand the position of the destination in the minds of the consumers so that the pertinent positioning strategy is formulated.

### **Brand Equity**

David Aaker (1996) defines brand equity as "a set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand's name and symbol that adds to (or subtracts from) the value provided by a product or service to a firm and that firm's customers. The major asset categories are brand name awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality and brand associations." Ritchie and Ritchie (1998) define brand equity in more technical terms as "the total accumulated value or worth of a brand; the tangible and intangible assets that the brand contributes to its corporate parent, both financially and in terms of selling leverage."

### **Nature of Branding**

Destination branding is a complex kind of branding as it has in its components products, services and corporate brand activities. It is largely defined through its logos and slogans. Consumers decisions matters a lot in it as they collect information prior to consumption or purchase and then their ability to sort out that information to make a useful decision. As far as destination branding is concerned in making a worthwhile decision the main players are word-of-mouth, mass media, travel agents, and lastly personal experiences.

Destination branding has particularly three components such as Functional, Symbolic, and Experiential components. Functional comes under intangible, Symbolic comes under tangible, and experiential go to the route of personality and emotions. Moreover, brand image cannot be static. Brands with energy have the ability to adapt to customers changing trends and needs to do better than more static brands. Individual's personal experiences and perceptions particularly determinant in the brand image built up as far as destination branding is concerned. Hence consumers' motive is normally is to choose brands on the basis of its image in the society hence social brand linkages play vital role in destination brand tactics.

In destination branding symbolic properties of brands matters more than its functional properties and has a greater and sustainable competitive advantage. To promote destination brands companies usually go for experiential marketing campaigns. Value added services also enhance a destination brand and generate a positive word-of-mouth. Furthermore, like functional and symbolic capabilities, heritage and values, and

Psycho-social match counts for destination branding. It is a kind of branding that can be controlled through target consumers' personality profile and unique traits.

Branding is strategic! It's a business toolkit, and is all about prioritizing, differentiation, focus and consistency. It should boost your destination's marketing effectiveness and efficiency. And you really can do it on a shoestring budget by optimizing the resources, messages, and leverage that is available through the power of focusing key partners onto the same page.

### **The Challenges of Destination Branding**

The main challenge of destination branding is about balanced representation of the country. Tourism is frequently the 'loudest voice' in communicating the country; the tourism sector often has the biggest marketing budgets and the most experienced marketers of any sector. This can, over many years, have the effect of drowning out the economic, political, industrial and even cultural voices, and creates a skewed, 'soft', leisure-oriented nation brand which conflicts with the country's reputation as an exporter of quality products, a serious political player, a technological power, or a suitable destination for investment.

One way of avoiding this trap is for tourist boards to ensure that they always take care to properly represent the reality of the country's population in their marketing. Empty landscapes, in any case, tend to be less effective images for tourism promotion since the cultural aspects of tourism are so important to travellers; and stereotyped representations of smiling natives in national dress are seldom very convincing. Tourism promotion that gives some sense of the real abilities and real activities of the population is likely to be more engaging, more convincing, more agreeable to the population itself (which is, after all, the 'product' which is being 'sold' and therefore has a large stake in the process), and is less likely to set up images of the country which will clash with its economic, political or industrial reality.

The second challenge is objectivity. Of all the qualities needed by those who are responsible for nurturing a country's image, objectivity is one of the most valuable, and one of the hardest to achieve. After all, Marketing Directors who are responsible for marketing a product are generally salaried employees, are seldom the inventor or manufacturer of the product, and so do not find it too difficult to take a cool, objective view of the brand they are building: indeed, good ones are valued precisely because of their ability to see the brand in the same way as the consumer.

But when the product doesn't come out of a factory, but is the homeland of the people trying to market it – where they and their parents were born, raised, schooled and trained – objectivity becomes an extremely elusive quality.

A lack of objectivity can be fatal to the image strategy of a country, no matter how good the intentions at the start. Typically, communications departments in ministries producing lists of their country's achievements and natural advantages: the nation's most distinguished sons and daughters, the role it has played in world events, its own major historical moments, gems of architecture and natural beauty, regional cuisine, language and folklore, all served up with pages of indigestible demographics and statistics about GDP and income per capita.

From the point of view of a busy consumer the historical achievements and natural advantages of most countries are of little interest, and seldom add up to anything that could be described as a coherent or powerful brand. Indeed, since Competitive Identity is most urgently needed by the smaller, poorer and newer countries, it is all the more likely that such fact will seem pretty unimpressive to the detached observer.

There is a real risk for smaller countries with limited achievements simply confirming the world's belief that they are a smaller country with limited achievements, by telling people about the handful of world-class or nearly world-class assets they have, and of which they are greatly and perhaps justifiably proud. But the fact is that the potential tour operator or tourist is already comparing them with countries that are

in a completely different league, and their expensive marketing will simply serve to emphasize the differences, to their own disadvantage.

Rather than attempt to measure themselves up against much bigger, richer or more successful countries, it is far better for countries to identify where their real genius lies, their unique abilities or potential that really do put them in a class of their own. This potential may well be the result of their small size, small population or small economy, not something that they manage to achieve despite it. All countries, if they look hard enough, will find something that is uniquely theirs, and inherently competitive.

The ability to see one's own country, its people, its achievements and its landscape through the eyes of an indifferent consumer on the other side of the world, through the complex lenses and filters of an entirely different culture, is an indispensable skill for all those involved in promoting the nation. Proper consumer research and communications testing is one facet of this, but unless the research findings are fully 'internalized' by marketers and become part of their own perspective, they are unlikely to create real objectivity.

### **Consequences of Branding Absence**

The importance of branding may be better perceived by discussing what happens when branding is not present. Lack of branding means that the consumer may not be as aware of a destination or its identity. This means that during the decision making process of choosing a travel destination the consumer will consider a destination, which has a distinct position in his/her mind. Lack of branding means also lack of visual, emotional, rational and cultural destination images, which do not encourage potential visitors to feel a certain way about a destination and potentially motivate them to go there. Branding is very important in today's market. With so many products and services to choose from, consumers need to have some basis in order to make decisions.

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