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Nation Branding: Presenting the image that matches national identity

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In September 2009, VisitDenmark, the tourism arm of the Danish government, launched a marketing campaign on YouTube. The video introduced to the world a beautiful 20-something blonde protagonist, Karen, and her adorable baby, August. Nothing quite extraordinary there, except that Karen had a small *Mama Mia* problem – she had no idea who August's father is.

Speaking candidly into a webcam and computer microphone, Karen related a story of how she had met the August's father some 1.5 years ago. He was visiting Denmark, presumably as a tourist. They went to a bar, got drunk and went back to her place. He was gone by the time she awoke in the morning.



Karen explained that she could not recall the name of the man that she had slept with or his country of origin, but that she would like to get in touch with him again. She is certain that he is August's father as she had not been with any other man ever since.

She was hoping, through the powers of the internet, that her message would somehow reach this man. To add a final catalytic touch on this viral video to be, Karen recruited her audience, towards the end of her video plea, to help in her search.

There was no indication anywhere within the video or on the webpage to suggest that VisitDenmark was, in any shape or form, involved. Also, the story was fabricated – entirely.

The video spread quickly; more than 200,000 views in 24 hours. Many people were engaged and responded empathetically. They also did as 'Karen' had asked and shared the link with friends. The national media quickly took the bait as well, appealing for information that could possibly shed light on this overnight internet sensation.

In just four days, the YouTube counter showed more than 770,000 views. But by that time, the Danish media had exposed the hoax. People wrote emails and letters to newspapers, claiming that 'Karen' is an actress, and, as far as they were aware, not a mother. What followed was a massive public outcry.

Those who were kind enough to share the video felt duped. Some opposed the portrayal of Danish women as irresponsible and 'easy'. Many felt it was an inappropriate use of taxpayer money as the video misrepresented their country and culture.

VisitDenmark's rationalisation, that it reflected the country's liberal ideals, did little to calm the furore. Following a storm of criticism, the tourism organisation's director issued an official apology and stepped down.

The video stayed online for a mere two weeks.

It might not be necessary for tourism campaigns to be understood or liked by the locals, said Rhonda S. Zaharna, an associate professor at American University's School of Communications. "But the one thing that I found was that great campaigns usually enjoy strong, positive, internal resonance. That's when you know you've hit the nail on the head and you've got that defining campaign."

Speaking at *Global Strategic Thinking: Managing Public Relations in a 21st Century Global Society* – a conference organised by SMU's [Lee Kong Chian School of Business \(http://www.business.smu.edu.sg/index.asp\)](http://www.business.smu.edu.sg/index.asp) and the [Institute of Public Relations of Singapore \(http://www.iprs.org.sg/\)](http://www.iprs.org.sg/) – Zaharna explained that nation branding campaigns walk the tightrope between managing 'image' (how others perceive the nation) and 'identity' (how the nation and its people see themselves).

"People thought it was a condom ad"

As an advertisement of sorts, the video seemed to have all the elements that would easily capture human interest: There was a cute baby, a pretty blonde woman, the suggestion of sex with that pretty blonde woman, and for the more cerebral, themes relating to family structures, single-parenthood, feminism, and so on.

"This case was interesting because the tourism agency took a marketing approach, where they looked more at

creating [hype], generating coverage from the media and then creating interesting discussions, rather than looking at a more long-term engagement with the stakeholders," said Chiara Valentini, an assistant professor at Denmark's Aarhus University.

Valentini, who had followed the public's response to the campaign, shared at the conference, that some Danes had initially mistaken the video for a condom advertisement for the YouTube ages. Botched as it may all seem now, it was an exercise in demonstrating the delicate complexities involved when branding a nation. It also showed that conventional marketing principles will not sufficiently address those many broad factors that must be considered.

"When we talk about nation branding, we also have to look at public diplomacy, which is a concept that goes back to the 19th century that identifies activities related to communications that aim to bring forward understandings of national ideas, ideals and values. Public diplomacy, in some countries, corresponds to cultural diplomacy, which is related to promoting culture through the exchange of ideas, information and values," she explained.

Student exchange programmes, where students spend a semester abroad learning another country's culture and values, represent a form of cultural diplomacy. Other forms include professional exchanges in arts, sports and sciences. Tourism, she added, plays to cultural diplomacy as tourists experience the lives, history, food, religions, architecture, art and other elements that shape another country's way of life.

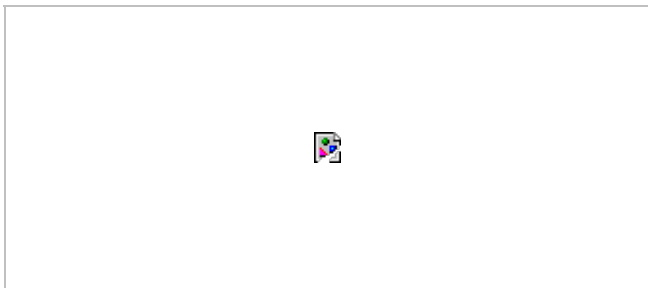
What makes nation branding especially tricky, compared to public diplomacy, is that the latter seeks to address relationships, whilst the former must speak to both internal and external stakeholders. Furthermore, it is an exercise that requires examination into larger national issues such as a country's history, people, culture, investments, immigration, trade and government.

What necessitates the bother that is nation branding?

If we were to think of the nation as a person, with her own distinct brand personality and values, how do we go about defining her core identity? "And if it's hard enough to do that for one person, think about how hard it would be to do that for a country," said Zaharna.

The idea for nation branding is a relatively recent one – a trend that had only picked up, globally, over the past few decades as people got acquainted with experiential marketing and saw how stalwarts like "I Love New York" could bring prominence and distinction to a state; and with that, visitors, investments and jobs.

"Money plays a big role in this whole [nation branding] rush," Zaharna noted. And it serves nationalistic functions too: "Because there's globalisation and we're getting 'lost'. We want to be different, to clarify the image, to remake the image and to forge a distinctive identity, especially when you're overshadowed by powerful neighbours or 'lost' in the neighbourhood of very similar countries."



Nation branding has direct and indirect implications on the economy and its businesses. The former includes hotels, airlines and travel agencies, and the latter, adjacent sectors like food, entertainment, fashion and services. "More tourism creates more jobs, more infrastructures, more industries, and it can also bring about improvements in education – so that the country has more qualified people to manage these sectors – and elevate the country's quality of life," Valentini noted.

Nation branding comes in many forms, but most commonly, as a logo with a slogan that gets splashed across television screens, websites, magazines, brochures, at events, and so on. "A successful nation branding initiative depends on how well your audience absorbs, understands, adopts and redistributes the message based on their requirements for value," said Valentini.

Citizens of a branded nation

In March 2010, Singapore Tourism Board (STB) announced that it was "evolving" the national brand from 'Uniquely Singapore' to 'YourSingapore'. The announcement drew much flak locally – from tourism industry leaders to the man on the street. *The Straits Times*, Singapore's national broadsheet, quoted marketing experts who called it "ambiguous" and referred to it as a "cop out".

YourSingapore – positioned to acknowledge each traveller's unique experiences in Singapore – has no inherent meaning on its own, people said. It was almost as if the brand had left the task of defining its value proposition to the audience, and is, as such, absolved from responsibility: No need to make good on the brand promise when a brand promise was never specified in the first place.

In its defence, STB explained that YourSingapore offers empowerment – it invites customers to define Singapore "on their own terms" – and this, they said, speaks to the modern-day traveller. It also distinguishes the country from competitors like 'Amazing Thailand', 'Incredible India' and 'Malaysia, Truly Asia'. So the brand's so-called "ambiguity", it seems, is also its strong point.

Be that as it may, local criticism puts the YourSingapore campaign at a disadvantage. Ambiguity is also "problematic", according to Zaharna, as nation brands need to be understood – no explanations required – especially by its domestic stakeholders. Citizens are, after all, the nation brand's most natural ambassadors and evangelists.

She cited 'I love New York' and 'Don't Mess with Texas' as successful campaigns that resonated with locals who had quickly incorporated the words into their daily lexicon. "The more domestic audiences are involved, the stronger the campaign," she observed. Weak local support – even in the presence of positive reception from abroad – will beg the question of authenticity: where the 'image' does not reflect the real 'identity'.

What's Zaharna's take on managing YourSingapore's domestic reception? "Find a way to sell it to the local population. Once you've got that local buy-in, you'll find ways to create different takes on it."



Logos and slogans unite

Practical benefits aside, a strong nation brand can also address intangible gaps. Just as it is within organisations, where differing and opposing views are sure to exist, a strong brand serves to bind people together through a common identity and purpose. After all, brands have the ability to relate to human emotions in ways that policies and bureaucrats cannot.

An organisation brand that evokes pride amongst its staff will hold immeasurable advantages, compared to competitors that have no regard for branding and the likes. By the same token, an appeal to people's sense of pride in their country may be far more effective than rationalising why they should care about what goes on in their country.

"Pride in the brand is important because it filters down". Zaharna cited 'Columbia es pasión (Columbia is passion)' as an example of a nation brand campaign that connected with the Columbians. This filtered right down to tourism workers – hotel receptionists, janitors and travel agents – who embodied the brand message and its values, which, in turn, strengthened its resonance with external customers – the tourists, she said.



Another key factor to successful nation branding is simply time – because brands require time in order to build trust, establish relationships and develop a following. "Longevity is important," Zaharna noted. People cannot be expected to fall in love with a brand quickly. More so for a brand that has to reach multiple stakeholders all across the globe.

'I Love New York' was introduced in 1975 and 'Don't Mess with Texas' in 1986. Both campaigns are still active to this day, in part, due to its time-honoured authority. She concluded: "If it's here today, gone tomorrow, something's going wrong."

Karen and August, participant and product of a one-night-stand, would agree.

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