

How Has Place Branding Developed? Opinion Piece

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In the first issue of *Place Branding* I deplored that the discourses of nation branding and public diplomacy pass one another like ships in the night, one of various reasons being that branding theory is rather self-contained. One year on little has changed. Let me now look at two of the main differences between public diplomacy and nation branding, and identify a few questions emerging from such a comparison.¹ It is in the interests of nation branding to be aware of a skeptical look from the other side of the hill, i.e. in the field of public diplomacy.

First, nation branding's level of ambition easily outflanks that of the limited aims and modesty of most public diplomacy campaigns. For diplomats the world is no market and practitioners of diplomacy are constantly reminded of the fact that diplomatic communication is only a flimsy part of dense transnational communication processes. The strength of public diplomacy therefore lies in the recognition and acceptance of its limitations. It is based on the common-sense assumption that public diplomacy is by no means the decisive factor in determining foreign perceptions. In contrast, the main features of nation branding are its holistic approach, its high level of ambition and clarity of vision mostly absent in governmental circles. The message of branding advisers generally reflects the 'can-do' approach that is characteristic of the marketing field, and their language and involvement often bear the hallmarks of those who have a personal stake in the communication of their ideas.

Precisely because branding appears to be so promising and even visionary, it has proven to be attractive for a considerable number of countries with a reputation that leaves much to be desired. But in such cases the challenge for branding consultants is also a daunting one. For people in the profession it is hardly a surprise that few countries in the 'down-market' category have been successfully re-branded by outside experts, but in some places where 'it did not work' - whatever the reasons - this has led to a dent in nation branding's own reputation. In some places the practice of nation branding itself may become an object of more 'reputation management'. Successes and failures also point to a relevant question: is nation branding a mere option for countries looking for the promotion of their soft power,

whereas no country can opt out of public diplomacy? To be sure, diplomacy today affects broad groups of people as well as interests that go beyond those of government, and it therefore inevitably includes public diplomacy.

Second, while reshaping a country's self-image, nation branding is crucially about the articulation and projection of identity. The new public diplomacy does not at all contradict this kind of approach. Both practices are principally aimed at foreign publics but they also have a vitally important domestic dimension, and both have foreign rather than one's own perceptions as their starting point. But instead of aiming at the projection of identity, public diplomacy in its more advanced form is fundamentally dialogical, an international to-way street and not a one-way messaging system. 'PD' is about promoting and maintaining *relationships* in an international environment that is characterized by multiple links between civil societies and the growing influence of non-governmental actors. The new public diplomacy is therefore thriving in modern democracies. Is this also true of nation branding? Does the emphasis on discipline, conformity to the core idea and selected messages and symbols leave enough scope for pluralism, diversity and opposition, which is the life-blood of democratic nations? As Biljana Scott put it: 'Branding is about diktat whereas public diplomacy (cl)aims to be about dialogue'.

True or not, theorists of nation branding would be wise to address these and other questions posed by outsiders. Observers of nation branding are sometimes accused of turning its practice into a caricature, but one is left to wonder whether branding enthusiasts are paying enough attention to both criticism and insights from other disciplines.

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