



Nation branding: With pride against prejudice

Received (in revised form): 1st March, 2007

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Abstract This paper offers refreshing food for thought for anyone involved in nation branding. Drawing on literature from several disciplines, the author critically evaluates common assumptions and practices in nation branding. Her main criticism is that while the brand should speak with the voice of the people, and the people with the voice of the brand, nation branding does not allow for citizens to play a significant role in the branding process. The paper also introduces the distinction between nation-as-state and nation-as-people, discusses the importance of national diversity in terms of people – and provides theories and observations about stereotypes.

Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (2007) 3, 144–150. doi:10.1057/palgrave.pb.6000055

Keywords: *Nation, branding, discourse, stereotype, citizens*

INTRODUCTION

'May I ask to what these questions tend?'
'Merely to the illustration of your character,'
said she, endeavouring to shake off her
gravity. 'I am trying to make it out.'
'And what is your success?'
She shook her head. 'I do not get on at all. I
hear such different accounts of you as puzzle
me exceedingly.'
(Excerpt from 'Pride and Prejudice',
Jane Austen, first published in 1813)

In Jane Austen's novel, Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy's relation is hindered by pride and prejudice. In nation branding, experts claim that prejudice is responsible for false perceptions others have towards a nation, which can have negative consequences for the economic development of a country. On the other hand, a sound portion of national pride is said to be both a prerequisite and an outcome of successful nation branding. Whereas on the marriage market in Georgian England many letters had to be

written until the hero and heroine finally got together, nation-branding experts argue that in today's global market of nations competing for attention and goodwill, the remedy against prejudice is branding. It facilitates the 'illustration of a nation's character', so that people are not 'puzzled by different accounts'.

This paper illuminates nation branding from the perspective of media and communication studies. Drawing on theories from sociology, cultural studies and linguistics, the aim is to answer the following question raised by the renowned branding expert Wally Olins: 'Why do they get so excited? I never cease to be amazed at the violent reactions which the concept of branding the nation provokes. There is clearly something about it that sets some people's teeth on edge' (Olins, 2002: 241).¹ Empirical research for this paper included two semi-structured interviews with staff members of governmental agencies, a

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textual discourse analysis of scientific papers on nation branding — as well as a visual discourse analysis of published material.² As a result, three weak points of the concept of nation branding were identified: the way the nation is thought of; the role of the citizens in the branding process and stereotyping.

PREMISES

Nation branding is referred to in this paper as a discourse. The notion of discourse goes back to the French philosopher Michel Foucault.³ As a theoretical argument, discourse refers to a body of shared knowledge about a particular thing in the world. This knowledge is expressed in a group of statements, which not only structure the way the thing is thought about but also the way people act on the basis of that thinking. Discourse in that sense is productive. It creates the world while it explains it. Statements of the discourse of nation branding can be found in scientific journals. Brochures, websites or television spots resulting from nation-branding initiatives are also expressions of the discourse, as are strategy papers, brand books or design guides produced in the course of nation-branding projects. The discourse of nation branding also creates jobs like the one of the nation-branding expert or the national brand manager. It further shapes the institutional practices in governmental agencies commissioned with country promotion.

Discourse in the Foucauldian sense is also a methodology: the statements, procedures and artefacts of a discourse can be studied with the aim of identifying its ideologies — the shared ways of thinking that inspire them. Ideology is understood the way the cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines it: '(...) mental frameworks — the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought and the systems of representation — which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' (Hall, 1996: 26 in van Dijk, 1998: 9). Stuart Hall is a social constructionist, as are all the theorists drawn upon in this paper. Social constructionists argue that our experience of,

sense of and confidence in commonsense reality are the result of social interactions. They do not deny the very existence of a reality nor do they claim that everything is a social construct. However, according to social constructionists, it is not the material world that conveys meaning, but symbolic processes and activities (Hacking, 1999; Hall, 1996).

For the discourse analysis of this paper, publications produced in the course of nation-branding projects in Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, Liechtenstein and South Africa,⁴ as well as various papers on nation branding have been studied. Further, two extended interviews with country representatives from Sweden and Switzerland have been conducted. The leading questions for the analysis were: which patterns and conceptions about the nation can be identified? How is the role of the citizens framed? Is stereotyping a theme and if so, how is it treated?

NATIONS AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The discourse of nation branding takes for granted that nations exist. The sociologist Michael Billig calls this a misleadingly natural (or naturalised) concept (Billig, 1995). In the eyes of a social constructionist, the concept of the nation is a social construct as are gender, race or class. This does not mean that these concepts are not real, and they definitely have an impact on people. But they are not natural. They seem to be, although, because they are blended in the taken-for-granted common sense of society. They are reproduced on a daily basis in the media, in institutions and practices. One argument for nations being a social construct is that they come in all shapes and sizes. Speaking the same language is not a categorical condition for a group of people to build a nation, nor is religion. Social constructs need to be constantly re-constructed in order to survive. Nation branding is a practice that targets the nation and therefore contributes to its re-construction, as Dace Dzenovska suggests in her paper about remaking the nation of Latvia (Dzenovska, 2005).

Whereas globalisation is referred to as the most important reason for nation branding, the persistence of the nation-state in a globalised world is never questioned. According to nation branders, globalisation is reinforcing national boundaries rather than dissolving them. The globalised world is described as a marketplace in which nations are competing with each other, and branding is promoted as a strategy to do so successfully. Often, language with metaphors from war or sports is used to illustrate the competition among nations: 'In this respect, place branding can be described as a species of self-defence (which is often pre-emptive) against the tendency of the marketplace to vulgarise, to trivialise and to summarise in ways which are often unfair' (Anholt, 2005b: 224). If the metaphor for the world is a marketplace, the analogy between nations and companies is intruding and indeed is drawn frequently, though not with ease: experts agree that a country still is more complex and diverse than an organisation. 'I am not suggesting that branding the nation is the same as branding a company — only that many of the techniques are similar; that people are people whether they work in a company or live in a nation and that means they can be motivated and inspired and manipulated in the same way, using the same techniques' (Olins, 2002: 247). If the world is a marketplace with nations competing is the nation for the citizens what the company is for the employees?

NATION-AS-STATE OR NATION-AS-PEOPLE?

Simon Anholt notes in the editorial to the second edition of *Place Branding* that branding is primarily about people, purpose and reputation (Anholt, 2005a). What does 'branding is about people' mean when the brand represents an entire nation? Are the people of the nation affected by the branding project at all? Should they participate in the branding process, or are the citizens actually responsible for the brand? *Are* they the brand? Experts are not very clear about it: Jack Yan, founder of a consulting company, advocates that the citizens need to be

understood, and that their feeling about the national brand at an early stage of the project is valuable (Yan, 2003). Marius Ursache, co-founder of a Romanian branding agency, states that in nation branding it is important that the brand also aims at the nation's own people, since they are at least in the long run the most influential brand channel: 'It is huge responsibility. A nation's branding is not only design and advertising. It's not only imagery. It's a program where every member of the nation is involved, more or less' (www.logolounge.com). Jürgen Gnoth, a New Zealand lecturer of marketing, clearly states that the people need to live the brand: 'There are ethical issues involved here as city councils or similar authorities require a clear mandate. Once that is given, how is the brand to be generated and how are its values to be enforced and "lived" by the population?' (Gnoth, 2004: 24). The two practitioners who were interviewed for this paper — Johannes Matyassy from Switzerland and Thomas Carlhed from Sweden — are both in charge of implementing a brand strategy in their respective country.⁵ They both state that the citizens cannot be told how to behave and thus, which image they should carry to the outside. Still, the enthusiasm of the population seems to be crucial for a powerful nation brand: 'One can compel people to do most things, but one cannot compel them to be enthusiastic; and an enthusiastic population or workforce is a prerequisite for building a powerful brand' (Anholt, 2005b: 226).

According to Michael Billig, the term 'nation' carries two inter-related meanings: nation-as-state and nation-as-people. 'There is the "nation" as the nation-state, and there is the "nation" as the people living within the state. The linkage of the two meanings reflects the general ideology of nationalism (...) This is the principle that any nation-as-people should have their nation-as-state. Obviously, the principle assumes that there are such entities as national peoples' (Billig, 1995: 24). The diverging opinions regarding the role of the citizens in nation branding might be a result of an insufficient reflection on the concept of the

nation, whether the nation-as-state or the nation-as-people are branded.

The nation-branding discourse remains imprecise about the characteristics of places: sometimes a place is referred to as something static, inhabited or owned by people, and then again as some sort of a dynamic actor: 'First, the citizens of a place want their place to be filled with opportunities (...). This alone creates a citizen drive to improve their place. People and resources can easily abandon a place (...) This means that a place must see itself as competitive with other places in having to retain and enhance resources' (Kotler, 2004: 12).

The lack of clarity on what is actually branded also shows in the published material studied for this paper, where the distinction between the nation-as-state and the nation-as-people remains vague. The 'brand essence' for Estonia, for example, is 'positively transforming'. Giving examples of how the brand could express itself around this essence, the people of Estonia become the voice of the brand: 'Through *positively transforming*, Brand Estonia could credibly announce itself in this manner: "We have done all of this ourselves." "Not only have we succeeded magnificently but we can do this again and again" (...) "And finally, when you come to visit us, allow us to help you transform the way you see, feel, hear, taste and understand the world" (www.eas.ee)'. Apart from textual references, visual representations of people play a central role in the representation of the Estonian nation. Portrait photographs of 'every-day Estonians' looking into the camera in a direct and self-conscious way communicate the national brand message. In the brochure called 'Sweden & Swedes', the author switches with ease between referring to Sweden and referring to the Swedes (Britton, 2004). The same goes for the brand of Liechtenstein: 'What else distinguishes Liechtenstein? To spontaneously get to the point: initiative in order to make steps into the future, concentrating on aims and the personal way of the people. Three important characteristics mention what is behind Liechtenstein's façade: people from Liechtenstein are initiative, focused,

personal. The brand Liechtenstein unites this in one image (www.liechtenstein.li)'.

ONE NATION, ONE BRAND, ONE VOICE

In nation-branding discourse, the nation is referred to as a unit with an essence. The idea seems to be that each country has intrinsically unique characteristics — 'core competencies' to speak in the language of business — 'a character' to speak in the language of Jane Austen. Switzerland, for example, is described by Johannes Matyassy as a trustworthy nation of high quality, a nation that offers high living standards, that has surprising things to offer, but that also has likeable weaknesses. Does this description only match Switzerland? Is there a country that does not have beautiful landscapes, that is not innovative, diverse or creative? Differentiation between nations is difficult, but differentiation is what competition is all about and it is what branding is all about. Based on the assumption that every nation is different from all the other nations in the world, the demanding task nation branding imposes on itself is to identify the unique characteristics of a nation and to display them in a comprehensive way, without being reductive. The task is all the more demanding since national diversity not only comprises the different spheres of a nation such as history, culture, politics, business or sports — it also means diversity in terms of people. In the sample of published information material, diversity in terms of people is a central theme. Estonia presents itself as a homogenous nation, whereas the South African campaign represents people of different race, gender, class and age, performing in their professions as artists, athletes or hairdressers. In the Swedish case, minority groups are given their own stage on which they are represented. The Latvian material mentions the different ethnic groups indirectly, referring to schools for minority groups.

Both the Swedish and the Swiss interview partners pointed out that every citizen has his/her own view of the nation he/she belongs to, but that a majority of the citizens could

theoretically agree on how they want their nation to be represented as a brand.

Even if nation branding allows citizens to have different views on their nation, even if it accepts the challenge to represent diversity in some way, it still implies that all citizens share some characteristics, respectively intentions. Statements such as: 'It is true that the Swedes have a more relaxed attitude toward nakedness and sex than many other peoples (Britton, 2004)', '(...) people from Liechtenstein are initiative, focused, personal (www.liechtenstein.li)' or 'No doubt, Estonia today is not yet a Nordic country. But we do have the will to be an accepted member of the family one day in the future (www.eas.ee)', reinforce the idea that all citizens of a nation are similar to some extent and different from the people of other nations.

DIFFERENCE MATTERS

Throughout the discourse, stereotypes are referred to as something that people hold about other nations because they do not know enough about them. That nation branding is a potentially stereotyping practice in itself is not reflected upon. Experts acknowledge that due to globalisation, people need to use shorthands in order to make sense of the world (Anholt, 2005b). Still, stereotypes are described as outdated simplifications, as generalisations based on impressions instead of facts, as distorted ideas. They are sometimes even said to be essentially wrong and unfair, and above all, they are supposedly very hard to change. Stereotypes seem to be the enemy and the best friend of nation branders at the same time, because in practice, prevailing stereotypes are often the starting point from which a national brand is developed. Thomas Carlhed calls stereotypes a bridge to people's minds over which new information can be transmitted. The Swedish brand manager pointed out that he was actually glad that people hold at least some stereotypes about Sweden. Even if the stereotypes were often wrong, at least there was something to build upon.

The cultural theorist Richard Dyer argues that the use of stereotypes is inevitable for

societies to make sense of themselves. He further argues that stereotypes are most likely to be found in representations of social categories whose boundaries are invisible (Dyer, 2002). As a social constructionist, he does not believe in a true order in the world nor in an absolute reality. This is why partial knowledge about the world is all that can ever be achieved, and why nation branding in a social constructionist's view cannot represent the true character of a nation, simply because this absolute truth does not exist. T.E. Perkins, a scholar of Dyer's, argues that stereotypes about what she calls major structural groups such as gender and class, usually are integrated in a number of practices and thus structurally reinforced for example by traditions, laws or institutions (Perkins, 1979). Already back in 1922, Walter Lippmann, who coined the term, put into words why stereotypes are rigid and stable: 'They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world, people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around' (Lippmann, 1956: 95).

If national stereotypes are widely accepted, rigid and integrated in societal practices — how do nation branders make sure that they are not blinded by stereotypes themselves? Nation branding is supposed '(...) to do whatever is possible to ensure that the country's reputation is a fair, balanced and useful reflection of its real assets, competencies and offerings, and not merely an outdated or unjustly biased cliché, informed by long-past events or ignorant assumptions' (Anholt, 2005a: 119). At one point Creenagh Lodge, a branding expert involved in various country-branding projects, describing the New Zealand project, refers to a stereotype about Scotland: 'A major problem was the self-deprecatory nature of the New Zealander. This is almost certainly due to the large amount of Scottish blood in their veins which makes them averse to "showing off"' (Lodge, 2002: 375). Potentially, nation branding instead of fighting stereotypes reproduces and enhances them.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper has been to cast a critical light on the discourse of nation branding by giving theoretical answers to the question why nation branding puts some people off. The general finding is that the experts need to come to terms with three issues in order to promote nation branding successfully. First of all, the discourse of nation branding needs to thoroughly discuss the concept of the nation. Secondly, the role of the citizens in the process cannot be treated marginally but needs to be defined. Here creative ideas and experience from practice should be warmly welcomed. And above all, nation branders need to figure out what the scope of nation branding is. Nation branding could very well be a mere technique that facilitates and to some extent professionalises what was so far called country promotion. But if nation branding is meant to be a strategy on national level — as promoted by the experts — if it is meant to be a point of reference for everyone inside and outside the nation, a magnet-like vision built on aspirations and intentions, then there is no way around citizens' participation in the branding process. Nowadays, nation branding is generally explained by referring to corporate branding, where one ends up equalling citizens with employees. If citizens do not identify with the national brand — are they supposed to move to another country, to the one with whose brand values they identify more? The same way as they are free to abandon an employer with whose vision they do not identify, or the way they switch car brands? As Dzenovska points out, in the case of branding a nation, the branding techniques are not neutral and non-political anymore (Dzenovska, 2005). Diversity in terms of people, culture and ideas does not naturally go together with the idea of one nation, one brand, one voice. To create nationwide enthusiasm for a nation (brand) in itself is a process. Nation branding might want to change perspective and look at the nation first, before starting to fight foreigners' prejudices. Then it would also be less inclined to reproduce stereotypes.

“And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?”
 ‘I hope not.’
 (Excerpt from ‘Pride and Prejudice’,
 Jane Austen, first published in 1813)

Notes

- 1 Wally Olins identifies snobbery of intellectuals, ignorance about the history of one's own country and about how business works, as well as misunderstandings about the term brand as possible reasons for people to dislike the idea of branding a nation (Olins, 2002).
- 2 The sample of scientific papers comprises seven papers from the *Journal of Brand Management's* special issue on nation branding from 2002, as well as two more papers published in an earlier, respectively later, issue. From *Place Branding's* first edition, the opinion pieces and two more papers were selected, as well as the editorials of the first three editions. Besides his paper in the *Journal of Brand Management's* special issue, Wally Olins' book '*Trading Identities*' and two papers published on his homepage were considered (www.wallyolins.com). Four papers published on www.brandchannel.com, respectively www.allabout-branding.com, as well as an interview on www.logolounge.com complemented the sample for the textual discourse analysis. In line with their prominent role in the discourse, Simon Anholt and Wally Olins are represented with five- and four papers, respectively.
- 3 Michel Foucault coined the term 'discourse' during his historical studies of among others the birth of the prison, the development of modern medicine and histories of sexuality. Foucault's major concern was always how institutions and practices defined what it meant to be human (Hall, 1996).
- 4 In 2000, the 'International Marketing Council of South Africa' was founded with the task to market South Africa through a 'Brand South Africa Campaign'. From this campaign, two television advertisements were chosen for the analysis (www.imc.org.za). In 2001, Enterprise Estonia commissioned a six-month branding project with the aim of promoting Estonia abroad. A brand book is one of the results of this project. It includes project summaries in Estonian and English as well as a style guide (www.eas.ee). In 2002 the 'Foundation for the Image of Liechtenstein' has been established, which in turn launched a branding initiative in 2003. The documents included in this analysis are two information papers from when the brand was introduced in 2004, as well as a multimedia presentation (www.liechtenstein.li). In June 2003, the Latvian Institute commissioned the Oxford Said Business School to research and develop a pilot brand identity for Latvia. In September of the same year, the strategy paper was published, proposing that Latvia should position itself as 'The keystone of the Baltics'. The brochure '*Latvia Today: Keystone of the Baltic*' by the Latvian Institute has been chosen for the analysis (Kalniņš, 2005). The brochure '*Sweden & Swedes*' published by the Swedish Institute aims at providing an overview of Sweden and the Swedes today (Britton, 2004).

- 5 Johannes Matyassy is the CEO of Presence Switzerland, the governmental institution that has the task '(...) to convey knowledge about Switzerland, to create understanding and empathy for our country and to highlight its diversity and attractiveness' (www.presence.ch). Thomas Carlhed is a brand manager at the Swedish Institute. The Swedish Institute has the task '(...) to inform the world about Sweden and to organise exchanges with other countries in the spheres of culture, education, research and public life in general' (www.si.se).

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