

Nov 04, 2016 by [Jian \(Jay\) Wang](#)

Cultivating National Image at the Expo: A Balancing Act ^[1]

As a venue for public diplomacy, the World Expo is highly valued yet under-analyzed. This is particularly true of the current Expo in Shanghai.

For many countries, Shanghai Expo is the most expensive and arguably the most important one they have ever attended. And, for the millions of Chinese, for whom international travel is still a luxury they cannot afford, visiting the Expo has become a once-in-a-life time chance to get a glimpse of other countries epitomized in the national pavilions. The potential cultural impact can certainly be vast.

The Expo being a “tournament of cultures” – more celebratory than reflective, participant countries are keen to engage and impress their visitors through representations and interactions at their stylized pavilions. The essential question facing these national pavilions is how they define and deliver messages that will stick.

Based on our conversations with representatives of a dozen national pavilions at Shanghai Expo ([click here](#) to view some of the videos), I would like to highlight several tradeoffs countries have to deal with in their presentations about their national brand.

To use or not to use stereotypes

This is a fundamental challenge in communicating about a country, especially to the mass audience. Countries often seek to leverage events like the Expo to counter or overcome existing stereotypes, and especially the negative ones. They certainly don’t want to come off as perpetuating clichéd images and associations.

On the other hand, stereotypes can be productively harnessed to entice visitors into your story as it unfolds in the pavilion; hence should not be wholesale rejected. Stereotypes form the basis of our expectations in a communicative context. An adroit use of them can effectively create visitor engagement, whereas simply presenting visitors with the unfamiliar or the unknown may alienate your audience, thus missing even the opportunity to make a connection.

Depth vs. breadth

This brings to my second observation about what to include in the pavilion. We often hear pavilion representatives say “our country has a lot more to offer than ...” The options for shaping one’s country message in the pavilion are literally endless, ranging from focusing on a select few issues to providing a panoramic view of the country, from politics and business, to culture and society. The desire to show a broader picture of one’s country is understandable, as there is less risk of being accused of giving short shrift to the multi-faceted society one represents; not to mention the various special interests involved in putting

together the displays.

But a singular focus helps to sharpen visitor impression, and especially the distinction of your country and pavilion. This is important in the context of visitors' limited attention span as they generally move from one pavilion to another to maximize the number of "countries" they can visit in any given day. With more than 200 pavilions at the Expo, it is a decidedly competitive and comparative environment.

Local vs. global

The next issue is to what extent countries should localize their message at the pavilion, and, in the current case, to the Chinese, who make up the vast majority of the visitors.

The choice can be represented on a continuum between highly localized as is the case of the South Korean Pavilion and highly globalized in the example of the Spanish Pavilion. In other words, if the Expo were held in a different country, for Spain the same pavilion could be appreciated with only slight tailoring necessary (e.g., the exterior of the pavilion); while for South Korea a totally different pavilion would need to be built. Many pavilions, of course, consider and attempt a blend of the two approaches.

Domestic vs. international audiences

The growing information transparency also entails the need to effectively handle communication to multiple audiences, including one's domestic audience. How one aligns communication designed for the consumption of the Chinese with concerns of the domestic constituents becomes a point of contention. The interests and agendas of these two publics can be widely divergent.

For instance, for the home country audience, representations at the pavilion can be a source of national pride. On the other hand, some of the pavilions may not be favorably viewed in the eyes of their domestic audience, but are nonetheless popular with Chinese visitors.

These tradeoffs are certainly not unique to the World Expo, but are common concerns in managing a country's image and brand in the global arena. There are many other tensions and dilemmas in the process that require negotiation and reconciliation. The mapping and understanding of these options is a critical step to developing a sound nation-brand strategy.