


Nov 04, 2016 by *Jian (Jay) Wang*

Advertising USA ^[1]

Brand USA, a non-profit, public-private partnership, is to launch a global advertising campaign next month, as part of the country's concerted effort in marketing tourism to the world. As its core mission, the organization, created in 2010, is to "encourage and inspire travelers to explore America's boundless possibilities."

While America's image in the global political imagination has experienced ups and downs over the last decade, the U.S. has remained as a leading destination for international investment, education and, yes, tourism. In 2010, with nearly 60 million international visitors, the U.S. ranked second (only to France) in international tourist arrivals, and first in international tourism receipts. In-bound tourism  has seen steady improvement since it hit a low in the aftermath of 9-11 and the ensuing war in Iraq.

Nevertheless, this campaign is important and timely. Symbolic as it may be, it sends an unmistakable signal reaffirming America's openness and optimism, the very foundation of the country's soft power.

Tourism, being the consumption of place, is essentially an "experiential good." And cultural encounters, as facilitated by international tourism, are venues for building ground-up awareness and understanding between peoples and societies.

This is particularly poignant for the U.S., as the sole superpower in an increasingly multi-polar world and with growing visitors from emerging economies of Brazil, China, and India. As a form of public good, the Brand USA campaign transcends tourism marketing at hand.

Yet, managing such a nation-branding effort is fraught with challenges.

First, sorting out the relationship among the sub-brands of cities and states and their structural arrangements with the overall national brand is crucial to defining a productive role of Brand USA. For a big, complex country such as the U.S., is it better to let a city or a region drive the national brand, or vice versa? This is akin to brand portfolio management in general marketing.

Moreover, branding in the commercial sector is a relatively easier process, for there is greater control over managing consumer contact points and messaging and delivery strategies. In a nation-branding program, multiple parties, from government agencies to civic organizations to businesses, often with divergent and sometimes competing interests, are involved and affected.

Although there has never been a shortage of fascination with America, the tourist needs among the source countries are varied, and will thus require localization in engagement approaches and tactics. At issue is how to broaden the scope of tourism offerings while maintaining focus and how to sharpen the distinction of a specific destination against a panoramic view of the country.

It will be interesting to see how the Brand USA initiative unfolds and how the upcoming campaign will be received by its overseas audiences.
