

Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

## Public Diplomacy, Branding, and the Image of Nations, Part II: More of the Same, or Different? <sup>[1]</sup>

One of the defining attributes of being in a center of global commerce and culture is the feeling you get when walking down the sidewalks. In London, I found the experience of strolling a few blocks from where I was staying to the downtown campus of UEA London, in large part along the fabled Brick Lane, to be a source of energy and inspiration.

Now back in Ottawa for a month, I find the contrast especially striking. Almost painful. The narrow, crumbling sidewalks along the anonymous streets in the Canadian capital's exquisitely excrecent central business district seem to drain any joy or enthusiasm. With each step, you can feel the spirit ebbing. Whereas London is a great place to be in the midst of, Ottawa is a great place to leave.

Fortunately, that is easily done, and its wonderful environs make the prospect irresistible.

Both London and Ottawa have brands. London is a world city and global network node, less an exemplar of things English or British than a vibrant cosmopolitan crossroads that just happens to be the capital of the UK.

Ottawa is a blandly pleasant frontier town and bureaucratic outpost on the fringe of the settled part of the North American continent. All of which is to say that brands, not least because they exist mainly in the minds of the beholders, have personality and complexion. And on that note, I would like to return to, and weave further a few of the analytical threads comparing branding and public diplomacy (PD) first presented in Chapter 10 of Guerrilla Diplomacy.

### *Public Diplomacy vs. Branding*

With the notable exception of Canada, public diplomacy most everywhere is enjoying somewhat of a renaissance, with interest and activity at levels not seen since the end of the Cold War.

Why the resurgence? I have not seen much research on that issue, but the renewed commitment may be associated with the spread of democracy, which means that public opinion, and relations with civil society generally, are more important to governments in their efforts to exert influence in a globalizing world. The accelerated levels of PD programming on the parts of China and India have had a major impact across the board. Meanwhile, a major assault on Western values has been launched by jihadists; al Qaeda's call cannot go unanswered. Military responses, however, have proven exceptionally costly in every respect. This has heightened interest in an examination of the alternative international policy instruments. Finally, complex interdependence and the transnational nature of many pressing global issues

– management of the earth's commons, genomics, environmental collapse, to name a few – have combined to heighten the general efficacy and appeal of public diplomacy.

At the highest level of analysis, the idea of a nation *brand* aligns closely with national image or reputation, and attempts at international *branding* with the practice of public diplomacy. That said, as soon as you begin to drill down, the differences can be seen to outweigh the similarities.

Public diplomacy is rooted in the need to address issues non-violently, and at its best is characterized by dialogue, meaningful exchange and relationship building rather than monologue, information dominance or message dumping. It is *associative* rather than *assertive*, to use my colleague R.S. Zaharna's apt terminology. In this regard, and after Kathy Fitzpatrick, PD has more in common with public relations than it does with lobbying or advocacy. The latter two practices are in my view more akin to branding, which I see as device to narrow the distance between perception and reality and to keep pace with identities in constant evolution.

Branding is a private sector import, and its corporate origins and provenance may explain its tendency towards the use of broadcast means to achieve economic and commercial ends. Like PD, branding relies on ideas, intelligence, cultural knowledge and market or audience research. Yet in my estimation, public diplomacy differs from branding mainly in that it is on “receive” at least as much as it is on “send” mode. Listening is critical. Using meaningful exchange with public constituencies to exert indirect influence on governments and decision makers, public diplomacy is a sophisticated form of triangulation, an approach to the peaceful practice of international relations that has at its centre not compulsion but partnership and persuasion. This is a description that does not fit branding, which in political terms more closely resembles propaganda.

Public diplomacy might be defined as the sum of efforts by government to promote policies and interests abroad by connecting with populations, building coalitions, creating networks and in so doing influencing public opinion. A brand, on the other hand, consists of the shared perception of a place, product or person around which those interested can congregate. Hence the importance of logos in branding campaigns. These are part projection, part reaction, and accordingly are more concerned with matters pertaining to image shaping and reputation management than is PD.

The distinction, though far from absolute, is nonetheless worth pursuing.

*No logo?*

A brand is what sets you apart, what makes you distinct, what differentiates you from others. Good brands are suffused with attitude. They are positive and convey promise. They have soul and seek to establish or maintain an emotional attachment. Nation branding involves telling a unique story, and expressing that story as an integrated narrative with clear form and direction. The resulting brand, and the “re-brands” which may follow, will represent the distillation, crystallization and projection of that story in a manner supportive of national values, policies and interests.

Brands take years to build but are easily damaged and will erode if not cultivated constantly. When the image, or brand, is positive, it will be immeasurably easier to draw others into the conversation. When countries fail to live up to the brand promise being promoted, they risk

losing credibility and running down their soft power.

If public diplomacy is thought of as a nation's book, then a nation's brand is something like its cover, designed to appeal viscerally to the consumers of international policy by encouraging potential buyers to open the book (or visit the country, buy the product, or support the international policy objective). But because the market evolves quickly, the cover's design may need attention even before the book requires revision and a new edition can be released.

Engineering a positive predisposition - that is, when association with a specific nationality evokes in the first instance a smile rather than a scowl - is the end of nation branding; through dialogue, public diplomacy seeks to produce results in support of identified objectives and in service of national interests. By virtue of its origins in marketing and advertising places and products, branding is reliant more upon projection and is less dependent upon genuine two-way communications. If branding means consistency, conformity and staying on *message*, and the communications content is paramount, then public diplomacy means *explaining* the message, asking for comments, and reporting the response. It enlarges understanding by creating a shared frame of reference, and weds communication to action - the demonstration effect, diplomacy of the deed.

It might be an oversimplification to suggest that branding has more to do with spin and PD more to do with engagement, but I will pursue that line of argument in the next installment.

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