

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

Public Diplomacy, Branding, and the Image of Nations, Part III: A Pair of Aces? ^[1]

In a couple of [recent postings](#) I have tried to elaborate the notion of a nation brand, to identify some of the salient issues surrounding the relationship between public diplomacy and branding, and to illuminate the more subtle distinctions. In this entry, I would like to drill down further into each of these, and several related issues.

Branding guru [Simon Anholt](#) has developed a hexagonal model that sets out the principal elements of a nation's brand, including tourism, exports, policies, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, and people. This has become the industry standard. While Simon and I concur on many points, we do not agree on everything covered in the continuing debate. As far back as 2006, he wrote me to say "I dispute... your contention that branding is fundamentally a monologue. The best brand theory - and the best brand practice - today sees brand as the common purpose or shared vision that unites businesses with their staff, suppliers and customers, and so is in every sense parallel to (e.g. the British Council's insistence on) the mutuality of public and cultural diplomacy. A brand is also ... as much an invitation to complain as it is a promise of quality, so even in that rather literal sense it must always be about two-way communication... Brand is very much more than 'image' and the communication, management or promotion of image. Brand strategy is almost synonymous with corporate strategy, and at least in theory, there is a parallel notion in nation branding. Most firms these days would describe their brand as their relationship with their market and their other stakeholders."

My response? Let one hundred flowers bloom.

But when it comes time to pick the bouquet, it seems worth remembering that if branding is about selling dreams, public diplomacy is about sharing them.

De-mystifying the distinction

A nation's public diplomacy should support its brand, and vice versa; it is not a matter of which is subsumed by the other. If anything, branding may be a somewhat more expansive concept, in that while all PD, in one way or another, contributes to the brand, not all branding – for instance, uni-directional communications – can be considered part of PD. And although the connection is not continuous, which it should be in the case of PD's continuous conversation, branding, with its reliance upon market testing, client feedback and customer satisfaction, seems to me rather more responsive to changes in the environment.

At the end of the day, much of the PD vs. branding competition is rather sterile. Suffice it to say that the two concepts are intimately related but distinct. More important is the observation that they converge around the conviction that a country's international image and reputation requires active, ongoing management if international (and, by extension, domestic) policy are

to be developed successfully.

That said, even with best efforts, the experience of using branding efforts to support public diplomacy has been mixed. The “Cool Britannia” campaign launched by the UK in the late 1990s received much attention at the outset, but the novelty melted away as quickly as the ice cream it was named after and the exercise ended in a media circus of scorn and ridicule. Much less attention was received during several attempts to use public diplomacy to burnish the Canadian brand; the Think Canada Festival in Japan (2001) and the Upper North Side campaign in New York (1998-99) achieved little of lasting value.

Nor have attempts to apply private sector approaches to public sector challenges always produced the results desired. Selling foreign policy, after all, is not like selling soap, especially if the policy on offer is wildly unpopular. In the wake of 9/11, marketing executive Charlotte Beers, whose previous job was Chair of the advertising giant J. Walter Thompson, was asked by Colin Powell to sell “Brand America” in the Middle East. Beers’ multi-million dollar budget and Madison Avenue tactics, used in the campaigns “Shared Values” and “Muslim Life in America”, dissolved in fiasco; although there were many complicating factors, she resigned less than a year into her appointment and the ads were pulled. All of this underscores the point that it is not enough to pump out the messages or know how, technically, to connect. You must understand the culture and values of those you are trying to influence. R.S. Zaharna is excellent on these matters.

Mind the gap

I have emphasized that PD is most effective when meaningful exchange is wed to policy development and state behavior. Avoiding the perilous say-do gap requires not only standing up for one’s country abroad, but, when necessary, standing up to one’s country - pushing back – at home, especially when international policy is incongruent with the inputs supplied by public diplomacy. In this sense, public diplomacy has much more in common with dialogue than does branding, which does not typically incorporate the active feedback dimension and is more about diktat and promotion than meaningful exchange.

As instruments and elements of international relations, both public diplomacy and branding are techniques of statecraft, not unlike international PR as practiced by governments. But they are also something more, part of a larger international policy process which works at various levels, time frames and dimensions. An integrated, coherent public diplomacy and branding strategy will adopt the ecosystem approach to help condition attitudes and sustain an environment conducive to influencing behavior and achieving international policy goals.

That said, amidst all the boosterism, a note of caution is warranted before climbing onto the bandwagon; it would be unwise to slip entirely into promotional mode. Public diplomacy and branding are innovative, evolutionary additions to the diplomatic wardrobe, but they are not cure-alls suitable for all circumstances. While very useful, there are real limits to what can be achieved with either. Good public diplomacy can’t compensate for bad policy, and the most sophisticated branding campaign will come up short if unaccompanied by facts and behavior supportive of the brand. As suggested above, any gap between what a country says and what it does can be terminal. Embedded in each are also a number of inherent contradictions, or, to be charitable, paradoxes.

We will return to those matters in the next entry.

