

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

Public Diplomacy, Branding, and the Image of Nations, Part IV: Some Practical Implications ^[1]

In the previous three entries in this series I have tried to compare and contrast various aspects of public diplomacy (PD) and branding - two related, but nonetheless distinct approaches to the management of a country's international relations through public engagement, image projection and reputation management. In the last installment (Part III), I undertook to comment upon a central and abiding paradox which inevitably afflicts all forms of diplomacy.

Vitiated messaging

Diplomats, however well-intentioned, are hardly disinterested parties - they work for governments or international organizations and this can make them suspect from the start. The messenger can subvert the message.

Governments exist to defend and pursue national interests, to advocate policies and to promote values. In these respects they rely on the apparatus of the state, of which diplomats are an integral part. When members of civil society encounter diplomats, the encounter is not likely to be entirely unconditional; this can give rise to suspicion and mistrust. Chances are the diplomat, especially if he or she has initiated an exchange, will be after something – an expression of support, a shift in position, a useful insight, or a gem of intelligence. Of course there is nothing at all the matter with reciprocity. But it is not a neutral point of departure. Just as the best communications cannot compensate for flawed policy, no amount of active listening can overcome the handicap of seeking scripted outcomes or pre-ordained conclusions.

While this does not necessarily undermine or devalue the activity per se, it does leave open the possibility of eroding the integrity of the exchange. And, in so doing, could diminish the chances of arriving at a mutually beneficial outcome.

For these reasons, the messenger, being suspect from the start, may vitiate the message - and then, quite possibly, the results.

Who are the public diplomats?

Governments are fond of saying that “PD is for everyone.” The implication? The best public diplomats might not be members of foreign services at all, but rather business people, artists, entertainers, travellers or NGO representatives whose particular networks, contacts, fans or client base can make them indispensable as partners. One caveat here, though: If an activity, regardless of who initiated it, is not tied to international policies and state interests, then it isn't

PD.

What does this mean in terms of establishing priorities for action and adjusting diplomatic practice?

Sequencing matters...

In the short term, the focus of PD and branding activities might well include event management and media relations, the latter being by nature principally reactive and often related to crisis response.

Dialogue, advocacy and strategic communications would be the hallmarks of the medium term, and involve the proactive initiation of discussions with a view to being persuasive, listening and obtaining feedback, and achieving measurable outcomes.

Over the longer term, sustaining these kinds of relationships, in combination with the nurturing and promotion of robust cultural, educational and scientific relations, can result in the formation of durable partnerships and effective networks based on mutuality, trust and respect.

... and culture counts

In terms of content, culture is a key ingredient of both nation branding and public diplomacy, which helps to explain the substantial investments governments have made in institutions such as the British Council, Alliance Francaise, and China's Confucius Institutes. The latter of which now number about 400, and the total is growing fast. India has also displayed considerable enthusiasm for PD in recent years. However, in some countries support for state-funded international cultural programs is tenuous and commitments have proven vulnerable to changing fortune. In Canada's case, the 1995 foreign policy review Canada in the World, which seems longingly progressive compared to the lamentable standards in place today, proposed a major push under the rubric of the "Third Pillar". Unfortunately, the requisite budgetary and internal support never materialized. One of the most promising initiatives, the Canadian International Information Strategy (CIIS), which would have placed Canada in the forefront of public diplomacy, lost out in 1997 to the campaign to ban landmines at a time of diminishing resources across government. The stillborn CIIS proposed major new investments: the creation of a worldwide satellite television broadcast service (the Canada Channel), the expansion of DFAIT's internet presence, support for expanded short-wave radio programming, and many other ventures.

With each passing year it becomes clearer that the losses and opportunity costs associated with the failure to pursue the CIIS are unrecoverable. Radio Canada International, due to an 80% budget cut, has been reduced to a web-only presence. Public diplomacy, once a signature Canadian activity, is for the most part a distant memory.

But true belief is not enough

For the foreign ministry to manage public diplomacy in such a manner as to convey forcefully the essential brand characteristics of attitude and soul, special attention must be accorded the shaping of longer-term relationships through the careful targeting of international artistic, educational and academic support programs. However, that alone will by no means be sufficient to secure improved performance. Much more will be required: process and structural re-engineering; re-allocating resources and investing in public diplomacy tools; work planning

and priority-setting. Still, a coherent public diplomacy and branding strategy, situated in the context of globalization management and connected to a supportive domestic constituency, could make a real difference in restoring the place of the foreign ministry within government.

The way ahead

Although practitioners have tended to think of public diplomacy as a program and branding as a campaign, together they in fact constitute a paradigm: a new way of doing diplomatic business, of constructing a narrative and of telling a country's story in an open, transparent and inclusive way. They represent a critical means (networking, advocacy, the power of attraction and ideas, engineering a positive pre-disposition) to important ends (attained goals, specified results, desired outcomes) and accordingly must be engaged with care and forethought.

There is, after all, a very real downside. A central characteristic of brands is that they carry the promise of fulfilling expectations: from whiter whites or superior handling, to respect for human rights, habeas corpus, due process and the rule of law. However, if the brand message does not tally with the brand experience, then the costs begin to rise. As the United States has learned over the past decade, credibility will be lost and the position of the source country weakened when policies and communications do not align.

As regards public diplomacy, I have referred to this peril as the "say-do gap," and the results can be disastrous.

In both instances, only when the message and the experience, the saying and the doing, are in accord can legitimacy be demonstrated, lasting relationships built and networks reinforced. When anything less is the case, integrity suffers and the risk of incurring the worst indignity in international affairs - that of being ignored or not taken seriously - increases.

Walk the talk, or risk exposure as a naked emperor.

A topical trinity?

To recapitulate: public diplomacy is enjoying a renaissance, and branding is a growth industry. This may be explained by "Three Ts":

- the tanking of traditional diplomacy - it is occupying a smaller niche in the diplomatic ecosystem and is just not working very well anymore; the role of the state is shrinking, and the actors, institutions, legal framework, ethics, and conventions require reform.
- the transnationalization of diplomatic issues - globalization, the blurring of the lines between the international and domestic and the indivisibility of security are forcing foreign ministries to rethink their role and refocus their activities.
- the triangulation of diplomatic issue management - connecting with host governments through their populations rather than, or in addition to, acting bi- or multilaterally is becoming the new norm.

These "Three Ts" don't account for all of the changes which are transforming diplomatic practice in the 21st century. But they do go some the way towards providing an explanation of why so many governments are placing an increased reliance upon public diplomacy and

branding to advance their international agendas.

Whatever else might be said, that choice is surely superior to the threat or use of armed force.

And not least, PD and branding are immensely more cost-effective.
