

# **JAPAN'S NATION BRANDING: RECENT EVOLUTION AND POTENTIAL FUTURE PATHS**

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Keith Dinnie's main area of interest is the emerging field of nation branding, with a particular focus on four key areas: export promotion, inward investment, tourism, and public diplomacy. He is the author of the world's first academic text book on nation branding, 'Nation Branding – Concepts, Issues, Practice', published 2008 by Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann. He has delivered seminars, conference speeches and lectures in the UK, Germany, Iceland, Greece, Portugal, China, and Japan. He teaches courses on international marketing, business communications, and business ethics. Previously he has taught undergraduate and Masters level courses on brand management and strategy, new product development, services marketing, and advertising management.

## **Abstract**

Interest in the concept and practice of nation branding has proliferated in recent years. Whilst it is clearly true that nations have always sought to impose themselves and promote their economic, diplomatic and military interests, it is only in the last decade or so that nations have turned to the explicit use of the techniques of branding as practised in the business world. Terms such as ‘brand image’ and ‘brand identity’ are increasingly used to describe the perceptions that are held of nations amongst their various ‘stakeholders’. This article outlines the key aspects of nation branding and then considers the various nation branding activities engaged in by the Japanese government in recent years. Potential future paths for Japan’s nation branding are also explored.

## **Keywords**

Nation branding; public diplomacy; Japan

# **“Japan’s nation branding: Recent evolution and potential future paths”**

## **1. Introduction**

Interest in the concept and practice of nation branding has proliferated in recent years, as more and more governments around the world attempt to harness the power of commercial branding techniques in order to improve their country’s image and reputation across a wide range of sectors. The Japanese government has been actively engaged in developing nation branding activities to boost Japan’s exports and tourism, although Japan’s efforts to attract inward investment – normally a key objective of nation branding strategy – have been called into question. Before looking in detail at Japan’s nation branding, an overview will now be given of the key aspects of nation branding.

## **2. Key Aspects of Nation Branding**

Whilst it is clearly true that nations have always sought to impose themselves and promote their economic, diplomatic and military interests, it is only in the last decade or so that nations have turned to the explicit use of the techniques of branding as practised in the business world. Terms such as ‘brand image’ and ‘brand identity’ are increasingly used to describe the perceptions that are held of nations amongst their various ‘stakeholders’. As van Ham (2001) has noted, “Smart states are building their brands around reputations and attitudes in the same way smart companies do”. This irruption of the vocabulary of branding into the international affairs of nations is not universally welcomed and there is a widespread sense of cynicism and suspicion regarding the appropriateness and relevance of such overtly commercial practices.

However, almost every government in the world is now engaged in one way or another with nation branding – most visibly through the commissioning of glossy advertising campaigns on CNN, and less visibly through the hiring of public relations agencies in an attempt to manipulate opinion in target audiences. A comprehensive nation branding strategy would also encompass initiatives and programmes to stimulate diaspora mobilization, enhance the coordination of the nation’s key institutions and organisations, and ensure a reasonable degree of consistency in the country’s official communications and behaviours. Many advertising agencies, branding consultancies, and public relations firms have found nation branding to be an extremely lucrative revenue stream during the past few years.

Concomitantly, public scrutiny of the interaction between politicians and private sector communications professionals has grown, although not to the same extent as the rigorous scrutiny that is applied to the socially responsible (or irresponsible) behaviour of business corporations. Occasionally, the mainstream media takes an interest in the lobbying activities conducted particularly by American PR firms on behalf of repressive regimes, as was seen when one of the key advisers of Republican presidential candidate John McCain was forced to resign from the McCain team when the adviser was shown to have been involved with a lobbying firm that worked on behalf of the Myanmar government.

Public scrutiny of this type can be unnerving for politicians, particularly in democracies where voters tend to react unfavourably to media reports about what is perceived to be extravagant spending on advertising, PR, logos and all the other paraphernalia of branding. This is one reason why many governments take a low-key approach to public pronouncements on their nation branding activities. For example, prior to the G8 summit in Hokkaido in July 2008, the Japanese government announced that it would be hiring a private sector communications agency in Tokyo to train some of the country's official representatives to communicate in English more effectively with the foreign media. When asked how much money was going to be spent on this initiative, the government spokesperson replied that it would not be a large amount – presumably this downbeat answer was designed to defuse potential public criticism of the initiative.

Whereas private sector communications consultancies have been quick to jump on the nation branding bandwagon, academic interest in the subject of nation branding has been slower to take off although there has been an exponential increase in the number of journal articles published on the topic in the past three or four years. A key stage in the deepening of academic interest in nation branding occurred with the founding of the journal 'Place Branding' in 2004, under the editorship of Simon Anholt who is widely considered to be the founder-of-the-field. The journal's name was soon modified to 'Place Branding and Public Diplomacy' to better reflect the twin business and diplomatic components of the place branding concept. Other journals now publish papers on nation branding and the somewhat scant theory base currently underpinning nation branding can be expected to become more robust over the coming years as more research is conducted in the field.

## 2.1 Nation Branding for Export Promotion, Inward Investment, and Tourism

The key commercial objectives of nation branding are to boost export promotion, inward investment, and tourism. Traditionally, national tourism organisations have been assigned the role of projecting a country's image but there is a growing awareness that the imagery employed for tourism purposes may deliver few if any benefits beyond directly tourism-related goals; indeed, many nations have concluded that the sustained use of the bucolic, rural imagery often favoured by tourism organisations may actually damage perceptions of the nation in other domains. For example, positioning a nation as a business-friendly location or as a hotbed of innovation may be difficult if the overwhelming imagery is of a nostalgic, natural history or heritage hue. One of the prime challenges for nation branding is to adequately balance the diverse mix of attributes that most nations possess.

In terms of export promotion, there is an ongoing debate as to whether individual product/corporate brands enhance the image of the overarching nation brand, or vice-versa. Does the image of Sony enhance the image of Japan, or does the image of Japan enhance the image of Sony? In some cases, commercial brands deliberately downplay their country of origin in order to appear as being ubiquitous global brands, present everywhere but from nowhere. For many years, Nokia has downplayed its Finnish origins to such an extent that surveys in the United States reveal that a clear majority of American students believe that Nokia is a Japanese brand. In other cases, well established brands that have invested considerable budgets over a timeframe of several decades in highlighting their country of origin, feel unwilling to participate in

nation branding campaigns because they take the view that they would be subsidising inferior brands. Such a situation occurred with the shortlived 'Scotland The Brand' organisation, where many of the big Scotch whisky brands refused to carry the logo of that organisation's accreditation scheme because they felt that the logo offered no added value to them; if anything, they feared that their own brand image could have been tarnished through association with more downmarket brands that may have used the logo.

Some export brands assume iconic status. In the case of Japan, corporate megabrands such as Sony, Toshiba, Mitsubishi and Toyota have certainly contributed to the positive associations of the 'Made in Japan' label. Another exportable icon of Japan is the Shinkansen bullet train. Japanese efforts to export the Shinkansen to China and Taiwan have been analysed by Hood (2007), who makes the following clarification: "Shinkansen is not simply a bullet train; it is an entire system spanning and transforming the Japanese archipelago. Indeed, 'Shinkansen' literally refers to the line, not the train, although it has come to mean the train also". The exporting of such an icon of Japan is obviously complicated by political considerations and international relations.

Japan's export promotion efforts fall largely under the auspices of the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO). JETRO is a large and well-resourced organisation that is engaged not only with export promotion but also with attracting inward investment. In a wide-ranging and extremely informative article, JETRO auditor Teiji Sakurai (2007) identifies four major issues that export promotion agencies need to focus on: first, the importance of establishing a public-private consensus on export promotion; second, the need for collaboration among the various organisations concerned in export promotion; third, the drafting of appropriate industrial policies and SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) policies; and fourth, how to attract foreign capital. Interestingly, there is no mention of nation branding. One of the few nations to have developed a clear strategy in which the nation's commercial brands collaborate with the public authorities in order to achieve the twin goals of enhancing the nation brand at the same time as enhancing individual commercial brands is Spain, where the 'Leading Brands of Spain Association' is active in many markets, including Japan.

One of JETRO's characteristics is that it is keenly aware of the link between export promotion and inward investment. The link is straightforward but often overlooked by other nations – inward investment frequently results in the production of goods that are subsequently exported. Motorola, for instance, is one of the top ten exporters within China. To date, nation branding has made relatively few inroads into the domain of inward investment compared to other domains such as tourism promotion and public diplomacy. However, one high profile case of nation branding to attract inward investment is 'The New France' campaign. This campaign involved a high level of collaboration between numerous French government departments and the private sector in a joint effort to reduce negative perceptions of France as a place to do business. In terms of tourism, perceptions of France were found to be highly positive but corporate perceptions of France as a possible investment location were much more negative. The New France campaign sought to address this through the use of testimonials from chief executives of multinationals operating in France, advertising campaigns in relevant business publications, and an intense round of face-to-face meetings with business executives in targeted foreign countries.

It is in the area of tourism that governments feel most comfortable with the techniques of nation branding. Projecting positive images of a country's tourist attractions is a well established and familiar activity, and the benefits appear to be so clear that there is little media hostility to the public funding of tourism strategies. However, there needs to be more coordination between tourism organisations and trade promotion organisations in order to achieve a multidimensional image of the nation (Dinnie 2008) and to avoid the risk of accidentally positioning the nation as a rural backwater. Japan's recent tourism promotion has featured the 'Yokoso Japan' campaign, an interesting example of ignoring the marketing mantra that any communications must speak the language of the consumer, not the language of the producer. The weakness of the 'Yokoso Japan' slogan is that the word 'Yokoso' means nothing to the vast majority of English speakers. However, the strength of the slogan conversely resides in its strangeness and unfamiliarity. Through its unusual appearance, the word 'Yokoso' has a high impact factor. People notice it, but whether they actively process it and understand the message is something that presumably the Japanese tourism authorities are measuring through market research. Currently, the focus of Japanese tourism efforts is on attracting tourists from other parts of Asia; it will be intriguing to see if the 'Yokoso Japan' slogan is still used in coming years when the European and American markets are more vigorously targeted.

## 2.2 Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy – Leveraging Soft Power

Although they share similar goals with regard to fostering positive perceptions of a country, nation branding and public diplomacy have until relatively recently followed separate paths. The study of nation branding has been conducted largely by scholars in the field of marketing and international business, whereas public diplomacy has been studied by those in the field of international relations. Public diplomacy could be considered as a subset of nation branding along with export promotion, tourism promotion, and the attraction of inward investment. The most succinct definition of public diplomacy is that offered by Melissen (2007: xvii), who describes it as "the relationship between diplomats and the foreign publics with whom they work". The key distinction between public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy is that the former involves diplomats communicating with foreign publics whereas the latter involves diplomats communicating with other diplomats. Clearly, a different skill set is required for public diplomacy compared to traditional diplomacy. Countries such as the USA, Canada, and Spain have developed training programmes to ensure that new generations of diplomats possess the necessary communications skills and commercial awareness to fulfil a public diplomacy role.

Closely related to public diplomacy is the concept of 'soft power' advanced by Joseph Nye, Jr. (1990), who argues that:

Soft co-optive power is just as important as hard command power. If a state can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow.

In the same article, Nye also observes that "Japan has certainly done far better with its strategy as a trading state since 1945 than it did with its military strategy to create a



Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere in the 1930s". Unlike military-based hard power, the essence of soft power resides to a large extent in the promotion of a country's culture. Culture is usually seen as a non-threatening, enriching and pleasurable experience and phenomenon. Many countries have set up institutions to export their nation's culture, such as the British Council, the Goethe Institut, and more recently China's investment in the creation of a worldwide network of Confucius Institutes. However, Cynthia P. Schneider, a former US Ambassador to the Netherlands, has warned that "without institutional support, cultural diplomacy is not systematic, but capricious and sporadic, reflecting the interests of individual ambassadors" (2007: 160). Individual ambassadors may not be enamoured of the public-facing role that public diplomacy would demand of them, and therefore countries need to develop formal strategies for training their diplomats in this respect and also for establishing planned programmes of cultural promotion.

Japan has been criticised as being weak in terms of soft power. In a recent article in the *Asahi Shimbun* (AS, 09/02/08), Robert Dujarric, director of the Institute of Contemporary Japanese Studies at Temple University Japan, argues that:

Despite its economic weight, Japan lacks strength in what is known as soft power... Japanese universities wield minimal influence. Only a few Japanese thinkers in the social sciences and humanities have a foreign audience... If Japan wishes to develop international human networks, it will need elite undergraduate programs, as well as some high schools where most courses are taught in English. This will allow the country's future leaders to establish global connections from the time they enter college while familiarizing themselves with foreign cultures thanks to overseas professors and students.

Whilst Japan does not appear to score highly on any measures of English language ability, a far more positive picture emerges when one looks at other dimensions of Japan's soft power such as the international success of Japanese fashion, anime, and other aspects of the 'Cool Japan' brand discussed in section 3. The Japanese government is currently formulating a new cultural strategy, which will emerge from the deliberations of the Cultural Affairs Agency's advisory panel on strategies for enhancing international appreciation of Japanese culture (JT, 10/04/08).

### **3. Recent Evolution of Japan's Nation Branding**

Despite, or perhaps because of, Japan's postwar economic success there has been sustained criticism by foreign commentators of Japan's allegedly insular and closed behaviour. It is within this context of disapproval that Japan has had to develop its recent nation branding strategies. Grimes (2005) identifies three major financial issues that contribute to the negative perceptions held by many regarding the Japanese economy: first, banking regulation; second, the postal saving system; and third, the unattractiveness of Tokyo's financial markets. It is important for Japan, Grimes argues, that Japanese policy makers need to consider "what sort of image, or brand, it should be projecting to the outside world in order to improve its ability to shape its own external environment". The current image of Japan as a difficult place to do

business is exemplified by Ozawa's (2003) observation that "foreign competition in imports and inward FDI was fended off, if not by outright legal restrictions, by the built-in bias of regulations and red tape". This apparent 'fending off' of inward foreign direct investment (FDI) is a recurring theme in business and current affairs media coverage of Japan.

A high-profile incident demonstrating Japan's perceived unwillingness to welcome FDI occurred in April 2008, when the Japanese government rejected a request by UK-based hedge fund The Children's Investment Fund (TCI) to raise its stake in Japan's largest electricity wholesaler. The reason given for the rejection was that TCI's request posed a potential threat to national security (JT, 17/04/08). TCI attempted to escalate the rejection into a European Union – Japan bilateral issue but this was declined by European Union trade commissioner Peter Mandelson, who did however express the opinion that Japan "remains the most closed investment market in the developed world", (JT, 25/04/08). It seems unlikely that radical changes will be made any time soon to the existing restrictions on inward investment flows, given that currently "Japanese politics are in a state of frozen immobility, the Fukuda government having lost control over the Upper House but too fearful of annihilation at the polls to seek a mandate" (McCormack 2008). Therefore, for the foreseeable future, Japan's extremely low ratio of FDI to gross domestic product (GDP) can be expected to remain around its current level of 2.5 percent compared to 8.8 percent in Korea, 13.5 in the United States, 25.1 in Germany, and 44.6 in the United Kingdom (Caryl and Kashiwagi 2008).

The dangers of an insular attitude taking root in Japan are highlighted by Ishizuka (2008a), who warns that there are some signs that xenophobia is creating "a latter-day sakoku mentality – national isolation – to the great concern of those Japanese who are aware of such a mentality's significant dangers". In a different article, Ishizuka (2008b) goes on to suggest that "Japan is a nation that constantly feels that it is not being heard enough on the world stage". Ishizuka's view is that this problem is self-inflicted due to Japanese unwillingness to try hard enough to communicate their point of view. This opinion appears to be shared by the BBC's Tokyo correspondent Chris Hogg, who contends that "Japan is nervous and afraid to stand up for itself and talk about itself... The good stories about Japan just don't get told", (JT, 25/04/08). Another echo of this viewpoint comes from Shintaro Ishihara, the Governor of Tokyo, who bluntly declares that "We Japanese are bad at promoting ourselves" (Wilson 2007).

Despite the apparent validity of the above observations on Japan's insularity and closedness, it would be a distortion to depict Japan only in such negative terms. The country has made significant investments and efforts in recent years to brand itself and to project its attractive qualities to the outside world. A thorough and detailed account of Japan's nation branding activities from 2002-2006 is provided by Akutsu (2008), who traces the development of Japan's branding strategies from then Prime Minister Koizumi's policy speech in February 2002 through to the activities of the Intellectual Property Strategic Program in 2006. The ambitious goal set by the 2006 program is to "improve the image and reputation of Japan and turn it into a nation that is loved and respected by people throughout the world". Akutsu reports how the Japan Brand Working Group was set up in 2004 and compiled a report titled 'Promotion of Japan Brand Strategy', whose three main goals were to foster a rich food culture,

establish diverse and reliable local brands, and to establish Japanese fashion as a global brand.

At a regional level there have been numerous initiatives carried out in Japan in recent years in attempts to stimulate the development of high quality local brands. Encouraging a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurialism has been high on the agenda during recent years, and the Japanese government has contributed to this by launching the 'Japan Brand Development Assistance Program' through the Small and Medium Enterprise Agency of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2004 (Ikuta et al. 2007). As well as encouraging the development of successful product brands, such regional initiatives have also seen a flourishing of place branding activity whereby individual cities and regions develop their own brand identities.

These indications of focused, government-sponsored nation branding by Japan may go some way to dispelling the gloomy views expressed by the critics of insular Japan. By engaging actively in nation branding, Japan is demonstrating its willingness to engage with external audiences. Another encouraging sign is that the Japanese government set up in July 2008 a new initiative to drive forwards its public diplomacy strategy. It would be far more worrying if Japan gave up on its nation branding and turned inward, not caring what the rest of the world thinks of it.

Japan's nation branding, like that of any other country, comprises a combination of planned and unplanned activity. In addition to the programmes outlined above that are directly sponsored by the Japanese government, there are a multitude of cultural and creative events and activities constantly going on, which contribute towards what Douglas McGary writing in *Foreign Policy* famously termed, 'Japan's Gross National Cool' (McGray 2002). McGray's key contention is that Japan has moved from being an economic power in the 1980s to being a cultural superpower in the twenty-first century, based on cultural outputs ranging from architecture to fashion, and animation to cuisine. It is Japan's spontaneously produced culture that has given rise to the 'Cool Japan' brand. American cartoonist Charles Danziger, co-author with Mimei Sakamoto of 'Harvey and Estuko's Manga Guide to Japan', suggests that manga helped Japan to attain its 'cool' status in the United States, replacing the previous dull salaryman imagery that prevailed during the 1980s (DY, 09/05/08). Emphasising the potentially powerful contribution of design in creating a nation brand, Hirano (2006) proposes that "the combination of the ascetic exclusivity of Japaneseness and the mainstream, progressive pulse of modernization" may be a strong basis for constructing a powerful nation brand with international appeal. The international success of the iconic 'Hello Kitty' brand contributes another layer to Japan's soft power, with the additional benefit of providing a softening *kawaii* counterpoint in contrast to the aggression of much contemporary manga output.

#### **4. Potential Future Paths**

Having looked at the recent context and evolution of Japan's nation branding, at least three potential future paths may be discerned.

For Japan, as for other nations, benefits could be derived from a more coordinated approach between the different organisations engaged in various components of the

country's overall nation branding strategy. Links could be developed between tourism and export promotion, for example, in order to encourage visitors to Japan to continue buying Japanese brands once they have returned to their home country.

A more entrepreneurial and publicity-oriented mindset could be encouraged amongst Japanese diplomats as part of ongoing development of public diplomacy strategy. Other countries have demonstrated such a mindset. Within Japan, for example, Estonia have enlisted as a goodwill ambassador the Estonian sumo wrestler 'Baruto'. Baruto has generated a vast amount of publicity for Estonia, publicity which Estonia would not have had the financial resources to buy through conventional advertising campaigns.

Finally, Japan is supremely well placed to leverage the soft power potential of food and drink. Expatriates who have lived in Japan know that Japanese cuisine is extraordinarily diverse; however, in many foreign countries the only form of Japanese cuisine that is known by the general public is sushi. There are still strong negative perceptions in markets such as the United Kingdom, where Japanese restaurants are widely perceived as serving only raw fish at excessively high prices. Japan should initiate a strategy of izakaya diplomacy, encouraging Japanese restaurant entrepreneurs to set up izakayas in the UK and other European markets. These izakayas would provide a more earthy and boisterous dining experience than existing sushi restaurants, and would help propel Japanese cuisine away from the fringes and into the mainstream of international dining.

## **5. Conclusion**

Japan's nation branding takes place within a context of highly critical attention from the Western business media, who routinely accuse Japan of being insular and closed. Japan's extremely low ratio of FDI to GDP appears to support such criticism. However, other audiences are more positively predisposed to Japan, particularly with regard to what can be termed Japan's soft power – its cultural outputs such as manga, fashion, architecture and design. The Japanese government has initiated several programmes as part of its overall nation branding strategy, with a particular focus on encouraging the development of successful and distinctive local brands from different regions of Japan. In the next two to three years, it is likely that there will also be an increased effort to develop Japan's public diplomacy strategy. In terms of Japan's nation branding capabilities, future success will depend very much upon the extent to which the Japanese public and private sectors collaborate in order to achieve shared goals.

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