

NATION BRANDING INTERVIEW – *BRIEF FOR POLAND*

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Version February 2009

Accepted for Brief for Poland

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What will be the future of the nation branding concept? Could it be the main determinant of social and economic development for countries all over the world?

The future of nation branding is uncertain. On the one hand, almost every country in the world is attempting to develop some kind of nation branding activity – I hesitate to use the word ‘strategy’ because of the general absence of vision, coordination and long term commitment that characterizes the nation branding initiatives of many countries. But on the other hand, I do not see much evidence that countries are getting better at nation branding. I see a proliferation of nation branding committees across the globe, but as with many initiatives in the corporate world, the initial excitement surrounding the creation of such committees gradually evaporates and nothing new or radical happens.

From a practitioner perspective, nation branding still remains very much at the mercy of the whims of the politicians in power at any point in time. When there is a change of government, or even just a change of individual Minister, then the existing nation branding programme tends to get cancelled and a new programme developed. Lack of continuity plagues any efforts at long term nation brand-building.

From an academic perspective, nation branding has not yet imposed itself as a topic for study. This is something that I personally am attempting to change, by encouraging academic colleagues and institutions to offer courses in nation branding. My experience is that students are extremely interested in nation branding and would like to study nation branding. I have supervised several student dissertations on nation branding. But the problem is that many universities are conservative and slow-changing, and unwilling to offer courses in new subjects about which they know very little. Hopefully this situation will improve in the coming years and universities will start to offer courses in nation branding.

Here comes the slump/economic crisis – do you think we should make some changes in the nation branding concept (e.g. to profit from the crisis)?

I don’t like the idea of “profiting from the crisis”. The crisis needs to be resolved as soon as possible in order to avoid huge amounts of suffering. There is no reason why nation branding should not play a role in the efforts made by countries to emerge from the

crisis. I do not believe that changes need to be made to the nation branding concept because of the crisis. The principles of nation branding remain constant, regardless of the economic conjuncture. Obviously, the specific programmes that countries develop will need to be framed in terms of current economic realities; but the principles of coordination, vision and commitment stay the same.

What is the best practice to combine, to organize cooperation between those 4 most important aspects of nation branding: tourism, inward investment, public diplomacy and export promotion?

This question is perhaps the biggest challenge in nation branding. One problem is that it is difficult to persuade all the stakeholders you mention in your question to work together in a nation branding strategy if those stakeholders do not know anything about nation branding. So, education is a prerequisite. Stakeholders need to gain a reasonable level of awareness regarding what nation branding is and what its objectives are. A further problem is that in many countries, the primary player in nation branding (even if they do not use the term ‘nation branding’) is the national tourism organization (NTO) and if the NTO possesses a large budget and a high degree of autonomy, it may not want to collaborate with other stakeholders such as export promotion and inward investment. The NTO may wish to continue its dominance in the projection of the nation’s image and be unwilling to collaborate with other parties. Unfortunately, tourism is an incredibly politicized domain, as can be seen from the constant restructurings in many countries of NTOs and associated tourism-related organizations.

Other challenges to greater coordination can occur from the culture clash of professional backgrounds, for example, between diplomats and business people. In many countries, the diplomatic corps rejects the ‘commercial’ mentality of marketing and branding. At the same time, marketers and branding specialists may be ignorant of the complex interplay that characterizes international relations between countries. It can be difficult to establish common ground between such conflicting mindsets. In such cases, there needs to be a firm and clearly signaled commitment by the country’s political leader regarding the obligation for diplomacy, tourism, export promotion, and inward investment to work together.

In Poland we have:

- Polish Tourism Organization - to promote Poland as a tourism destination,

- PAIZ - inward investment agency,
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs - to cover some public diplomacy activities,
- KIG - national chamber of commerce - to conduct export promotion,
- also some other organizations like: Adam Mickiewicz Institute (cultural projects), Polish Olympic Committee (sport projects) and so on.

It is not clear how effectively those organizations cooperate. How we could improve their cooperation? Perhaps we should build some strong organization over them?

As I mentioned above, this is one of the biggest challenges in nation branding, if not the biggest single challenge. What is certain is that those organizations will not work together unless they are either forced to or encouraged to. In a democracy it is not really possible to take a coercive approach. Therefore more imaginative solutions need to be found. There is no standard template for this. Each individual country must develop its own unique responses to the nation branding challenges that it faces. A first step could be to map out and identify what cooperation already exists between those different organisations, and use that as a starting point for building stronger and deeper collaborative relationships.

If you were asked to create branding strategy for Poland - what you would start with?

A very clear and precise brief regarding what goals the country wants to achieve. Without such a brief, we could talk all day about possible branding strategies but we would be wasting our time. Specify the goals and then identify what steps need to be taken to achieve those goals. In the case of Poland, I would prioritise eco-tourism as a means of increasing the strength of the Polish nation brand. But an overall nation branding strategy would need to be wide-ranging and not focused exclusively on one issue.

In contrast to weak nation branding activities in Poland there are some strong city brands like: Warsaw, Krakow, Wroclaw, Gdansk and so on. How we could combine those city brands with the "umbrella" brand of the whole country?

First of all, I would want to see what evidence exists for the claim that those cities are 'strong city brands'. In what ways are those cities strong brands? Amongst which target audiences in which countries are those cities strong brands? It may be true that they are strong city brands, but one should not proceed on the basis of assumptions that are not supported by relevant evidence. Having said that, it would be beneficial for the city brand managers to develop a relationship with the nation brand managers. But a potential

problem is that it may not be clear who the nation brand managers are. In that case, how can there be collaboration between the city brands and the nation brand? Dialogue and imagination are required in order to establish a basis for productive collaboration between the cities and the nation.

Do you know some strong Polish export brands? How important for the country brand is the country-of-origin effect?

Export promotion is an area of huge potential for Poland. At the moment, there are few if any high profile Polish export brands. This should be seen as an opportunity rather than a weakness. We live in an increasingly globalised world and cosmopolitan consumers have an endless appetite for authentic products and services that display a clear provenance, or country-of-origin. In order to achieve higher levels of export performance, there should be close collaboration between the public and private sectors. An example of such collaboration can be seen in the case of Spain, where the ‘Leading Brands of Spain’ association works with the Spanish government in order to simultaneously improve the image of Spain’s nation brand and also the image of individual brands that are made in Spain.

We can observe, even in corporations in Poland, the popularity of the concept of corporate social responsibility. Do you think it could be combined with the concept of sustainable development and branding of places?

Yes, absolutely. I suggest in my book that countries that score highly on indexes such as the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) should be much more vocal and active in telling the rest of the world about their excellent performance in environmental sustainability. Consumers, tourists and investors may all be attracted to a country on the basis of its environmentally responsible behaviour and policies. Countries such as Uruguay, Guyana and Argentina have appeared in the top ten countries in the world in the ESI rankings, whereas they do not achieve similar rankings of more conventional indexes of country brands. Countries such as these should promote their environmental credentials far more vigorously than they have done to date.