

Brand Africa

WHAT IS COMPETITIVE IDENTITY?

Simon Anholt

TODAY, THE WORLD IS – very nearly – one market. The rapid advance of globalisation means that every country, every city and every region, rich or poor, must compete with every other for its share of the world’s consumers, tourists, investors, students, entrepreneurs, international sporting and cultural events; and for the attention and respect of the international media, of other governments, and the people of other countries.

In such a busy and crowded marketplace, most of us simply don’t have the time, the patience or the inclination to learn what other places are really like. We all navigate through the complexity of the modern world armed with a few simple clichés, and they form the background of our opinions, even if we aren’t fully aware of this and don’t always admit it to ourselves: Paris is about style, Japan about technology, Switzerland about wealth and precision, Rio de Janeiro about carnival and football, Tuscany about the good life, and most African nations and cities about poverty, corruption, war, famine and disease.

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The sad but simple fact is that most of us are much too busy worrying about ourselves and our own countries to spend too long trying to form complete, balanced, and informed views about six billion other people and nearly two hundred other

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countries. We make do with summaries for the vast majority of people and places, the ones we will probably never know or visit, and only start to expand and refine these impressions when for some reason we acquire a particular interest in them. When you haven't got time to read a book, you judge it by its cover.

These clichés and stereotypes – whether they are positive or negative, true or untrue – fundamentally affect our behaviour towards other places and their people and products. It may seem unfair, but there's nothing anybody can do to change this. It's very hard for a country to persuade people in other parts of the world to go beyond these simple images and start to understand the rich complexity that lies behind them.

In consequence, some quite progressive countries don't get nearly as much attention, tourist trade, business or investment as they need because their reputation is weak or negative; while others are still trading on a good image they acquired decades or even centuries ago, and today do relatively little to deserve. The places with good, powerful and positive reputations find that almost everything they undertake on the international stage is easier; and the places with poor reputations find that almost everything is difficult, and some things seem virtually impossible.

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So all responsible governments, on behalf of their people, their institutions and their companies, need to discover what the world's perception of their country is, and to develop a strategy for managing it. It is a key part of their job to try to build a reputation that is fair, true, powerful, attractive, genuinely useful to their economic, political and social aims, and honestly reflects the spirit, the genius and the will of the people. This huge task has become one of the primary skills of governments in the twenty-first century.

Today, most countries promote their products and services and steer their reputation as best they can, but they seldom do it in a coordinated way:

- The tourist board promotes the country to holidaymakers and business travellers;
- The investment promotion agency promotes the country to foreign companies and investors;
- The cultural institute builds cultural relations with other countries and promotes the country's cultural and educational products and services;
- The country's exporters promote their products and services abroad;
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents its policies to overseas publics in the best possible light, and sometimes attempts to manage the national reputation as a whole.

... and in most countries, there are many other bodies, agencies, ministries, special interest groups, NGOs and companies all promoting their version of the country too.

Because most of these bodies, official and unofficial, national and regional, political and commercial, are usually working in isolation, they send out conflicting and even contradictory messages about the country. As a result, no consistent picture of the country emerges, and its overall reputation stands still or moves backwards.

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Far more can be achieved if the work of these stakeholders is coordinated, of consistently high quality, and harmonised to an overall national strategy that sets clear goals for the country's economy, its society and its political and cultural relations with other countries. This is a role that none of the conventional disciplines of public diplomacy or sectoral promotion are able to perform alone. However, the task of promotion, positioning and reputation management on a global scale is a familiar one in the world of commerce: corporations have been facing it for more than a century, and this is how the techniques of brand management have emerged.

Clearly there are more differences than similarities between

countries and companies, but some of the theories and techniques of branding can, if intelligently and responsibly applied, become powerful competitive tools and agents for change both within the country and beyond. The fundamental importance of reputation to all commercial, political and cultural activities has been recognised since the beginning of civilisation, but nowhere has it been developed to such a level of sophistication than in commercial brand management during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. If a country, a city or a region wants to sharpen its competitive edge in the age of globalisation, it is here that many of the answers are to be found.

Competitive Identity is the term I use to describe the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with trade, investment, tourism and export promotion. Competitive Identity is a new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world, and one that is already beginning to pay dividends for a number of countries, cities and regions, both rich and poor.

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AFRICA'S IMAGE

Africa hasn't just got a bad image. It suffers from what I call 'continent brand effect': because there is so little public awareness and knowledge of the individual countries, every country on the continent (apart from South Africa) ends up sharing the same reputation. When there is little differentiation between the countries in a region, negative equity will always transfer to the entire group (for various reasons, positive equity migrates in a far less even-handed way). Even a relatively prosperous and well-governed nation like Botswana ends up sharing perceptions of violence with Rwanda, of corruption with Nigeria, of poverty with Ethiopia and of famine from Sudan.

And Brand Africa, with its simple message of ongoing catastrophe, is promoted with skill, dedication, creativity and vast financial and media resources by aid agencies, international organisations, donor governments and, most prominently, by aid celebrities like Bob Geldof and Bono. Every time such a celebrity appears before tens of millions of TV viewers around the world to make another impassioned plea on behalf of the continent (usually represented by a black logo in the shape of Africa), he is building the brand image of Africa, not as 53 countries in various stages of development and struggle for independent existence and identity, but as a uniform, hopeless basket-case.

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This image is ideal for generating charity, but with each additional promotion, it becomes harder for places like Botswana, their companies and entrepreneurs, to break free of these negative associations and start to build a competitive identity of their own, or to inspire anything more useful than pity. This kind of branding is the hardest of all to criticise, because it is so plainly done with the noblest intentions, and because it does as much good in the short term as it does harm in the long term, and because so many in Africa are still

dependent on foreign aid. Yet branding for charity and branding for economic development are fundamentally incompatible: a brand image exclusively designed to inspire disinterested generosity cannot easily inspire healthy commercial self-interest at the same moment.

Nigeria is another example of the negative effect of 'Brand Africa'. Lagos ranks at or near the bottom of most of the categories in my annual global survey of city images, the City Brands Index, but this is hardly surprising, since it is the least well known and least visited of the 60 cities in the Index, and has no world-famous landmarks, personalities, events or achievements. This creates a kind of perceptual vacuum, into which a wide range of generalised African imagery tends to flow. By far the leading association with Lagos is "war", mentioned by 11% of our respondents, an unusually high percentage by any standards:

the same percentage, in fact, that associates the United Nations with Geneva. The important point is, of course, that Nigeria's Biafran War ended in 1970.

The bad brand of Africa is deeply rooted in the consciousness of countless millions of people around the world, and it certainly doesn't start with Live Aid or posters for famine relief: for many people living in more prosperous parts of the world, it started in early childhood when their mother or father told them to finish the food on their plates "...because there are starving children in Africa".

It is surely time to abolish this "Africa" – and by Africa of course I mean Brand Africa, that big, bad, hopeless continent brand that ruins the chances of so many well-run African businesses and African countries – and replace it with 53 separate, distinctive nations, each with its own story to tell of people, pre- and post-colonial history, culture, products, services, landscape and government. At the moment, it is Brand Africa that defines the brand images of each country, but it should be the other way round: Africa should be the summation of those individual national reputations.

I don't think it's going too far to say that until this issue is widely recognised, and until the governments of each African nation start to take their brand management and public diplomacy responsibility seriously, human and economic development in Africa will remain elusive.

During a recent meeting with government officials in Botswana, I was asked how the country could communicate the facts that it is prosperous by African standards, peaceful and beautiful, and has enjoyed a stable democracy for forty years, when such stories seem simply unable to gain any traction against the overwhelming story of Brand Africa, a story which Botswana is obliged to share with every other African nation.

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I suggested, only half joking, that the next time presidential elections are held in the United States, the Botswana Government might consider sending an election monitoring team to Florida, in order to ensure that the ballot is fair, free and transparent. My suggestion caused a good deal of merriment in Botswana, but it does make one pause and consider the power of Brand Africa that such a suggestion can only be considered a joke, even in the country at whose expense the joke is made. After all, one could argue that America has little more right to send election

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monitoring teams to Botswana than vice-versa. (My subsequent suggestion that the Botswana military might consider sending planes over the Bronx and dropping sacks of grain on the poorer neighbourhoods was received – and, I hasten to add, suggested – with even less seriousness).

But there is a serious point behind this comical scenario: it is deeds, not words, that change people's minds about countries, or at least open their minds to the possibility of change, and as the Greek philosopher Socrates said, "the way to achieve a better reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear". People, as I said before, are very warmly attached to their simple narratives about other countries, and will not abandon them willingly or quickly: it takes a good deal more than clever marketing to persuade somebody that the impression of Africa he or she has spent decades carefully forming is entirely mistaken.

The problem with attempting to 'market the nation' directly – as several African nations have begun to do in recent years, sometimes wasting millions of dollars of donors' and taxpayers' dollars in creating attractive but futile television spots on international TV channels – is that products can be sold through marketing communications, but countries aren't products. This naïve belief that a lifetime's negative prejudice – much of it founded on hard evidence – can be annihilated by an instrument as feeble as advertising or PR is one of the most worrying tendencies of African governance during the last ten years.

Advertising works – when it works – because most people are prepared to change their minds about products and services as a result of good advertising and good marketing. That’s a pact which consumers make with producers: they are prepared to pay a little attention to commercial messages, and receive some of their information about products through paid-for media. But there is no such pact between governments and people: that kind of communication is called propaganda, and it is instinctively, strenuously and rightly resisted wherever it is practised.

The nation’s reputation wasn’t built through communications, and it can’t be changed through communications. Building Competitive Identity isn’t an advertising, design or public relations exercise, although of course these techniques are essential for promoting the things that the country makes and does: its tourist and heritage attractions, its companies and their products and services, its music and art and other cultural products, its sport, its people, its investment and employment opportunities. The quality of the marketing done by all of these stakeholders, and the consistency between the different messages they send out about the place, is an important factor in the way the place builds up its reputation – and of course good advertising often plays a major part in creating the positive tourism brands that many countries enjoy today. But that’s not the same thing as a positive, famous, well-rounded national reputation, one that stimulates attention, respect, good relations and good business all around the hexagon. The fact of the matter is that each stakeholder – tourist board, investment promotion agency, corporate sector, central government and so forth – is probably not in control of all the factors that affect its business, so it is essential that they work together.

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Creating more harmony between the way all of the country’s companies and organisations and people do business and sell their products and services is an important part of the process of building Competitive Identity: if they are all telling the same powerful, believable, interesting story about the country, then the country has started to achieve some control over its international image.

But getting everybody in the country to speak with one voice, and do it well, is just part of the solution, and on its own won't achieve any dramatic enhancement of the national image. What really makes a difference is when a critical mass of the businesses and organisations in a country becomes dedicated to the development of new things: new ideas, new policies, new

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laws, new products and services, new businesses, new buildings, new art, new science, new intellectual property; and when those innovations seem to be proving a few simple truths about the place they all come from, the reputation starts to move. The place produces a buzz, people start to pay attention, and prepare themselves to change their minds.

And the great thing about implementing the strategy in this way is that all these actions benefit the country quite independently of their effect on its reputation: they are good for the businesses and organisations and people that carry them out, so the money invested in them is also an investment in the country's economy, rather than money simply spent on slogans, logos and media space, and gone forever.

I would argue that governments should never do things purely for brand-related reasons; no action should ever be conceived of or dedicated to image management or image change alone. Every initiative and action should first and foremost be done

for a real purpose in the real world, or else it runs the risk of being insincere, ineffectual, and perceived as propaganda (not to mention a use of taxpayers' money that is often extremely hard to justify). But there should be something unmistakable about the way in which these actions and initiatives are done, the style and method of their conception, selection and delivery, the context and the manner in which they are presented, and the way in which they are aligned with other initiatives, that little by little will drive the country from the image it has acquired by

default towards the one it needs and deserves.

Where the notion of Competitive Identity differs from the straightforward call for more innovation (which one hears all the time and the wisdom of which nobody really doubts), is the idea of not merely stimulating more innovation, but aligning the innovation to a strategy for enhancing the country's international reputation. This makes the innovation more focused and more appropriate to the needs and resources of the country; and the relatively faster improvement in the country's image helps to bring in additional investment, better markets for the commercialised innovations, and more international interest and respect for the changes taking place.

In other words, brand management for countries should be treated as a component of national policy, not a discipline in its own right, a "campaign", or an activity that can be practised separately from conventional planning, governance, economic development or statecraft. Just as the best-run corporations see brand strategy as virtually synonymous with their business strategy, so the best-run countries should build the awareness and understanding of brand management into their policy making.

If brand management is treated as a separate discipline from statecraft, and put into a separate silo of 'communications', 'public affairs' or 'promotion', then there is very little it can do. When, on the other hand, it becomes implicit in the way the country is run – almost, as it were, a style of policy making rather than a method in its own right, it can speed up change in the most dramatic way.

It is one of the most challenging and important roles of Competitive Identity to ensure that weakly branded states – such as the African nations – are able to compete on equal terms with the ones that have a distinctive identity, and, as far as possible, to level the playing field. In the struggle for competitive advantage in the modern world, the factor of national reputation is becoming more and more significant, and the sooner that the development 'community' recognises that perception is as important as reality in the global marketplace, the better its assistance will match the real needs of the countries it aims to help.