



# Place branding: has it all been a big misunderstanding?

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My first published essay on the topic of national image appeared in the *Journal of Brand Management* in 1998: this was, I believe, the first time the words “nation” and “brand” had appeared next to each other in print.

The piece elicited positive interest so the journal’s publisher, Brenda Rouse, suggested that I guest-edit a Special Edition of the journal, devoted to the topic of national image. The Special Edition duly appeared in 2002, and again the response was warm enough to encourage Henry Stewart Publications to allow me to launch a new journal, *Place Branding* (we renamed the Journal *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* in Volume 3), which was first published in 2004.

My Editor’s foreword to the first edition of the new journal began in a rather excitable tone:

*Place branding is happening. A new field of practice and study is in existence, and whatever we choose to call it or however we wish to define it, there can no longer be any doubt that it is with us.*

Sadly, much of my writing on this topic during the twenty years since I wrote those words has been less upbeat: actually, it’s been partly a series of retractions or, as some have wittily called them, product recall notices. The dangerously faulty product I’ve been trying to recall is of course the term “branding”, which as I realised far too late, is vague, ambiguous and potentially misleading in this context (in fact, in most contexts).

In my defence, the term I inadvisedly used in that 1998 essay was “brand”, not “branding”, the first term being part of a simple observation that countries have images just like products and corporations, and depend to a considerable degree on the power of those images in order to operate successfully. The second term sounds more like a promise that if you don’t like the image your country is saddled with,

there are devilishly powerful tricks in the toolbox of commercial marketing that can quickly put everything right.

There is little point in my rehearsing the whole palinode yet again. My position on the matter is best summarised by Condoleezza Rice’s memorable phrase “the diplomacy of deeds”, or, according to my own rather less gnomonic formula, *if you want to be admired, you have to be admirable.*

My preferred evidence for challenging the “brandability” of nations is a simple line-chart tracing the overall images of some 50 countries tracked over the period 2008–2024 by the Anholt Nation Brands Index®, a large annual poll which has been measuring mass perceptions of countries since 2005. The briefest glance at the chart shows that country images, when they change, almost invariably change *as a cohort*: it is in fact very rare for any one country’s image to behave any differently from the image of any other country.

A notable exception to this rule is the United States, whose image has always been more volatile than that of other countries: I suppose that this is simply because it’s one of the few foreign countries that people around the world actually think about. There are other incongruities: China’s image took a dive after the pandemic and Russia’s after the invasion of Ukraine, so perhaps another cardinal rule of nation branding should be that if you really want your country’s image to change quickly and dramatically, all you need to do is start a pandemic or invade a neighbouring state.

Alert readers will notice that these are both changes for the worse: unfortunately I’ve never yet found an equally rapid and effective method for moving a country’s image in the other direction.

Aside from these outliers, the clear conclusion is that the “brand images” of countries are overwhelmingly more likely to be influenced by changes in the mood of humanity from year to year, rather than by anything those countries say or do.

Yet the vast majority of the papers that appear in the Journal (not to mention the wider media) always manage to sidestep the critical question of whether any of this communications-based “branding” actually produces measurable results, or whether it’s just an expensive,

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performative delusion. Sadly, the field probably considers itself too mature to bother any longer with such basic questions, wrongly believing that it got past that stage years ago.

If I could make a wish for the future of the academic field of ‘place branding’, it would be never to abandon these existential doubts. A field that never questions its right to exist or its fundamental articles of faith is a field that is doomed to superficiality and ultimately to irrelevance.

The consequence is that place “branding” is still regarded by most governments as a ‘nice to have’ rather than a ‘must have’ and this is bad news for everyone: for consultants of course, but also for academics and for the governments themselves. The academic field has done very little to reassure the spenders of public money that strategic and empirical measurement and management of the reputation of the city, region or nation is an essential component of modern-day good governance, not merely an amusing luxury to be indulged in when times are good and the Treasury is feeling generous—or when an election is in the offing and government wishes to demonstrate its nationalistic fervour to ‘make the country great again’ in the eyes of the world.

To be fair, a great deal of the confusion surround the topic of place “branding” comes from a simple conflation of sector-specific marketing and national image management. Tourism promotion, trade promotion, export promotion and investment promotion, as the names imply, are promotional activities: in other words, they consist of selling a defined product to a defined target. In such cases, the tools of commercial sales and marketing can be very effective and are indeed indispensable since countries are locked in a continuous arms-race against each other in these areas.

Altering the image of an entire country, city or region is an entirely different proposition. The purpose is not to sell goods and services but to change minds on a vast scale: this is not marketing but propaganda (I don’t necessarily use the term in its pejorative sense).

This confusion is perhaps one of the most charitable explanations for the persistent inability of the field to get a grip on the real nature and meaning of its own subject. It’s perhaps more likely to be the result of an unhealthy combination of greed and opportunism on the part of agencies and consultants, and political grandstanding on the part of their clients.

To be less charitable still, the confusion might in some cases be deliberate. A scenario where government officials are authorised to transfer large sums of public money to private communications firms, in order to purchase services which are attractive but mysterious by their very nature, whose outcomes are allegedly difficult or impossible to measure—a true ‘black box’ that everybody believes in but nobody understands—is the ideal scenario for corruption to flourish.

## Being good

Another key finding from the hundreds of millions of datapoints collected by the Anholt Nation Brands Index since its launch in 2005 is that the primary driver of a positive “brand” is not so much the assets or achievements or appearance of a country—the aspects which “nation branding” campaigns invariably choose to brag about—but the perception that the country contributes positively to the world outside its own borders.

Perhaps this is not surprising: the domestic successes of other countries are, by definition, of little value or relevance to the citizens of other countries, who it seems are much more interested in whether other countries make the world a safer and happier place, or whether they don’t: put more simply, “do I have good reasons to feel glad your country exists?”.

It was in an attempt to measure this elusive aspect of national performance that in 2014 I launched the Good Country Index, a composite indicator that attempts to estimate the contribution each country makes each year to humanity and the planet, to the world *outside* its own borders.

I can’t tell if it’s correlation or causation, but at some point since 2014 I’ve started to observe certain countries singing a distinctly more saintly tune than they did before. “Branding” one’s national commitment to disaster relief, peace, climate change, migration, medical advances for the benefit of humanity, aid donations and so forth has become almost the standard place branding recipe in the Nordics and increasingly elsewhere too.

But of course bragging about how much you contribute to the world is no better, indeed arguably worse, than bragging about how beautiful, powerful, advanced or successful you are. At least some people out there might be interested in what you have to sell, but very few will care how righteous you think you are.

## Is volatility the new normal?

I used to joke that the Nation Brands Index was the world’s most boring social survey, since the results were so stable from year to year.

However, during the last five or six years, there has been a definite increase in the volatility of the index. I assume that the emergence of social media plays a part in this change, with its habit of whipping public opinion into a fury of love or hate, and pushing it towards the idiot, binary extremes of every topic. With social media has come an expectation that *everybody* must hold—and



aggressively defend—clear positions on every imaginable discourse, no matter how complex or how distant and frankly irrelevant it might be to their own existence. In the absence of the time, the patience, the skill or the knowledge to reach such opinions through examination of the issues, social media encourages people to buy ready-made and battle-ready opinions, branded by the tribe to which they have decided to pledge their allegiance.

What this frightful dynamic does to place “branding” is complex, and interesting. Alarmed by the way that their country’s image can be dragged from the mountain-tops to the valleys and back again in a matter of days or even hours, often in consequence of trivial episodes over which they have absolutely no control, many governments have started panic-buying research that aims to track their online reputations in real time. This practice of course sets up an expectation that the same governments can somehow *respond* to these changes as fast as they occur: a sad delusion, since most governments can’t move at anything remotely like such a pace (and arguably shouldn’t try, since the lives and livelihoods of millions of people depend on their ability to make prudent, careful and well-researched decisions).

I have heard from more than one national government in the last year or two that has gratefully given up attempting to sustain this kind of street-fighting, having learnt that it costs a great deal of money, creates more anxiety than measurable results, and distracts government from the longer-term strategic thinking which lies at the heart of effective policymaking.

Today, the Good Country principle of constructive multilateralism, of collaboration mingled with competition and cooperation, is confronted by an aggressive and rapidly metastasising nationalism. This is driving the Great Split between “the West and the rest”, to some extent mirrored by the emerging BRICS + bloc versus NATO and the EU. It produces the same rapid clearing of the middle ground that we observe in micro scale every day on social media, reflected at the global scale as two vast, stupid tribes. (Curiously, it turns out that the majority of citizens in BRICS + nations still rate the traditionally admired Western countries much more highly than they rate each other, and

perhaps BRICS + will not reach its full potential unless this dynamic changes).

So where does all this mighty muddle leave place “branding” and public diplomacy?

The ultimate aim for place “branding” should be, in my opinion, to refine itself out of existence. True place “branding” is a lens through which policy and strategy are seen, not a campaign or a project that comes into being once policy and strategy have been made, and ends when certain results are achieved or a new government takes office.

For this reason, the government bodies responsible for “branding” the nation should first aim to achieve enough trust and respect among senior decision-makers to be allowed to advise on policy (or at least on the reputational impacts of policy). Beyond this stage, such bodies will train the next generations of officials and politicians so well, and upgrade the culture of government so completely, as to put themselves out of business, since the real shapers of image—the policymakers and administrators themselves—will have fully internalised the instincts that enable them to shape image as they shape policy.

When place “branding” is no longer required, we will have done our job.

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**Simon Anholt** is acknowledged as the world’s leading authority on national image. He coined the term “nation brand” in 1998, a topic on which he has advised over 60 countries. He publishes the Anholt Nation Brands Index and City Brands Index, two image surveys which have accumulated over 1bn datapoints since 2005. He is the Executive Chairman of the consulting firm Anholt & Co. He has published six books on national image and ethical geopolitics and is Founding Editor Emeritus of the journal Place Branding and Public Diplomacy. He gave the all-time most viewed TED talk in the ‘Government’ category with over 12 million views. His latest book, *The Good Country Equation*, was described by the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights as “a masterpiece”. In 2014, he launched the Good Country Index (GCI), an annual ranking that analyses how much each country on earth contributes to humanity and the planet.

