

INTRODUCTION

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DOES IMAGE MATTERS?

SIMON ANHOLT

A question which is all too seldom posed by researchers in the fields of soft power, public diplomacy and nation “branding” is the most basic one of all: why do we study, measure or even discuss the images of countries? Does it really matter what people think about any country? Is worrying about such things simply vanity?

This is an important question to ask. Even though governments have been attempting to influence the images of their countries for decades if not centuries, it’s still worth remembering why perceptions are such a critical factor in trade and international relations: these may be “soft” factors but their consequences are decidedly hard.

When I first coined the term “nation brand” back in the 1990s, some of the politicians I worked with admitted to me that worrying about their country’s image felt somehow shallow, a distraction from the more serious task of dealing with reality. Logically, this didn’t make much sense then and doesn’t make sense now. Perception and reality are two sides of the same coin and can’t be separated: what people believe about other countries and their populations and governments is what determines their behaviour towards them, whether or not those beliefs correspond to reality.



This anxiety about the superficiality of image has become less common with newer generations of politicians, however: the ones who have grown up, one might say, in “the age of the brand”. Up until the late 1990s, Western politicians were typically lawyers or historians by training, whereas today their previous job experience is just as likely to be journalism or public relations.

So it’s no surprise that these days I often find myself dealing with the opposite problem: a growing number of leaders who seem obsessed with perception and image, and simply won’t pay enough attention to the underlying realities. Many seem to believe—or perhaps want to believe—that branding and communications offer a magical short cut to a better image, and that if you can somehow persuade the world that your country is successful, harmonious, stable and attractive, then it somehow becomes all of these things.

In part, this may be a natural consequence of the way domestic politics works. Most national elections today are mere popularity contests, and the more money candidates spend on promoting their images, the more likely they are to win: so it should come as no surprise if they perceive “nation branding” as nothing more than the international edition of the same game.

Many politicians buy into the story told by the marketing industry, that thanks to the potency of modern communications and digital media, “re-branding” a nation or city is expensive but quick and easy: a new logo, a new slogan, an ambitious advertising or public relations campaign, and the problem is solved.

In fact, the opposite is true. Changing the way people perceive a city or nation is incredibly difficult and takes a very long time, but needn’t cost very much at all, since it has almost nothing to do with what a country says and everything to do with what it does. Some of the most impactful policies cost little or nothing to execute but can influence public opinion in profound and lasting ways.

I began measuring the images of countries in 2005, when I launched a study now known as the Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI). Each year for the last 20 years, the NBI has polled a sample representing 72% of the world’s population and 83% of its economy on its perceptions of other countries. The NBI has accumulated nearly a billion data points and since its launch it has found absolutely no correlation between a country’s image and the money or effort its government spends on “nation-branding”, strategic communications, public diplomacy or any other form of national self-promotion.

By far the strongest influence over country image is what I call the “mood of humanity”: the spontaneous oscillation of global sentiment towards almost all countries from year to year. Sometimes the trend is negative, sometimes positive; sometimes these movements appear to correlate with global events such as wars or the pandemic; but the vast majority of country images always rise and fall together in cohort. The images of individual countries only ever deviate significantly from the rest when they misbehave in a particularly egregious way that is widely perceived to threaten or harm the international community or the planet. I have never seen any country’s image improve statistically significantly faster than the international cohort, except over the longer term (>5 years).



In conclusion, national image certainly does matter, but it does not appear to be subject to direct influence through marketing or messaging. Clearly, a good “brand” can’t be bought: it can only be earned.

It’s important, however, not to conflate nation “branding” (the attempt to influence international perceptions of a country) with sector-specific promotion (the marketing of trade, tourism, foreign investment, major events or other products and services of the nation). The conflation of sector-specific promotion and overall national image management is a perennial source of confusion in the field, and is responsible for vast sums of public money being wasted around the world each year.

Despite the general tendency for modern politics to focus on perceptions at the expense of policy, there is another countercurrent that challenges the whole construct of national image: the unstoppable rise of a populist-nationalist style of politics which fosters and legitimises the claims of a certain type of leader that it simply doesn’t matter what foreigners think.

Today’s crowd-pleasing politicians even exaggerate the antipathy or ignorance of outsiders in an effort to stimulate unity at home. Indeed, the feeling that the world is prejudiced against their nation can very effectively drive populations towards a wounded, belligerent, and ultimately paranoid nationalism. This perfectly suits the agenda of leaders with authoritarian ambitions, as it increases the population’s feeling of dependence on their aggressively xenophobic style of governance. North Korea is by no means the only country that deliberately conducts this kind of “nation de-branding” for domestic purposes.

Partisan politics are a potent force, but the simple economic reality is that public opinion abroad matters as much as public opinion at home. The Anholt Nation Brands Index shows a correlation of more than 80% between the strength of a country’s image and its trade, investment and tourism revenues. Put simply, the more people like, trust and admire your country, the more money your country will make. Countries simply cannot afford to be indifferent to the way they are perceived beyond their own borders, because in our age of advanced globalisation, almost everyone on the planet is a potential customer, migrant, investor, tourist or influencer.

Not surprisingly, the handful of states that deliberately opt for isolationism have fragile economies and are frequently unable to provide for their populations. Ironically, they also become proportionately more dependent on being positively perceived by a very limited number of like-minded countries.

Aside from the economic consequences of a positive national image, this is inescapably also a moral issue. Just as it is the duty of leaders to take the perceptions of their voters and taxpayers seriously, so it is their responsibility to future generations to consider how their country relates to and engages with the citizens of other states.

After all, we may not all live within the same national borders but we do live on the same planet, and the actions of all countries ultimately have an impact on the citizens of all nations. We modern humans and the leaders we choose (or don’t choose) may be obsessed with borders, but climate change, conflict, migration, pandemics, natural



habitat loss, insect-borne diseases, water shortages, drought, floods and organised crime don't know that borders exist.

For entire societies as for individuals, knowing and caring about what others think is the prerequisite of responsible behaviour. I wish I had used different language to say it, but I still stand by what I first said in 1998: governments today must learn to be brand managers as well as policymakers.