



Rethinking UGANDA'S STATE BRAND STRATEGY

using intangible assets

My attention has been drawn to an intense social media debate touching on a neighboring country that picked on one of the premier league football clubs to brand itself. The debate has been more driven by sentiment than the realities that have come to define the branded state in the present age of globalization. In today's branded society, a cursory look at the covers of the brochures in any travel agency, inflight magazine, or popular websites and it will not escape your attention the various ways in which countries present themselves on the world's mental map.

Singapore has a smiling, beautiful face offering us tasty appetizers on an airplane, whereas Ireland is a windy, green island full of freckled, red-haired children. The question I ask of myself time and again, do these images depict real places, existing geographical sites one can visit? Or do the advertisements simply harness cultural stereotypes to market these geographical entities?

The last twenty or so years have witnessed straightforward advertising give way to branding giving products and services an emotional dimension with which people can identify. To this end, Singapore and Ireland are no longer merely countries one finds in an atlas. They have become "brand states," tapping into geographical and political frames of mind that seem trivial compared to their emotional resonance among an increasingly global audience of consumers. Brands are increasingly recognized as a customer's idea about a product; the "brand state" comprises the outside world's ideas about a particular country.

By way of examples, "America" and "Made in the U.S.A." stand for individual freedom and prosperity; the land from which we purchase block buster movies out of Hollywood, box office music hits, and software as the biggest earners for the US. France evokes fragrances; the world's romance capital with the finest boutique hotels, Made in China represents affordability, BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes drive with German efficiency and reliability. Great Britain, besides its amazing Britannia model is the undisputed financial capital of the world. The United Arab Emirates, most business friendly as well as efficient jurisdiction. Closer home in Africa, South Africa represents the Incredible Rainbow nation born out of the shackles of apartheid ushered in by the "Madiba" Magic, Kenya represents the Afrikan Sun Safari Experience, Botswana - Diamonds are Forever and Egypt the Pharaohs and the architectural marvels that the Pyramids are. Invariably, brands and states often merge in the minds of the global consumer. For example, in many ways, Microsoft and McDonald's are among the most visible U.S. diplomats, just as Chocolate is Switzerland's envoy to the world (mind not that the cocoa is actually grown in mainly Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire). It must be borne in mind, that the contemporary world of information overload, strong brands are important in attracting foreign direct investment, recruiting the best and the brightest, and wielding political influence.



The trend is that, individuals, firms, cities, regions, countries, and multinational corps all market themselves professionally, often through aggressive sales techniques. Having a bad reputation or none at all is a serious handicap for a state seeking to remain competitive in the international arena. States that neglect this trend will increasingly have difficulty attracting economic and political attention. Image management and its attendant reputation are now considered integral parts of the state's strategic equity. Just as branded products, the branded state can harness the trust and customer satisfaction as an asset. Given the emergence of globalization of culture, lifestyles, and the like branding is often deployed to all kinds of products and services and is setting apart national and cultural barriers with astonishing ease. The most recognizable brands, facebook, amazon, Cola and Virgin for instance have been set in our minds using artful brand creation and awareness experts and are increasingly becoming indispensable. The lack of a brand name means certain death for companies aspiring to play a global role.

In this regard the forces of Globalization and the media revolution have conspired to make each state more aware of itself, its image, its reputation, and its attitude, in other words its intangible assets. To this end, Uganda that has been at various points in time made attempts at branding starting with the "Gifted by Nature" campaign on CNN ought to rethink its entire branded state strategy and seize the moment. The Nile Valley for instance is one of the biggest mind recognition items that can be branded for the global market. I was pleasantly surprised to find a monument erected at the source of the Nile in memory of Mahatma Gandhi whose ashes were sprinkled at the source of the Nile. I can imagine what branding of this aspect of Uganda and say commemorating an annual International Mahatma Gandhi Day at the source of Nile would do firstly in the more than One billion people market the Indian subcontinent is and later on the world would rake in for Uganda in terms of brand recognition and by extension tourist earnings?



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