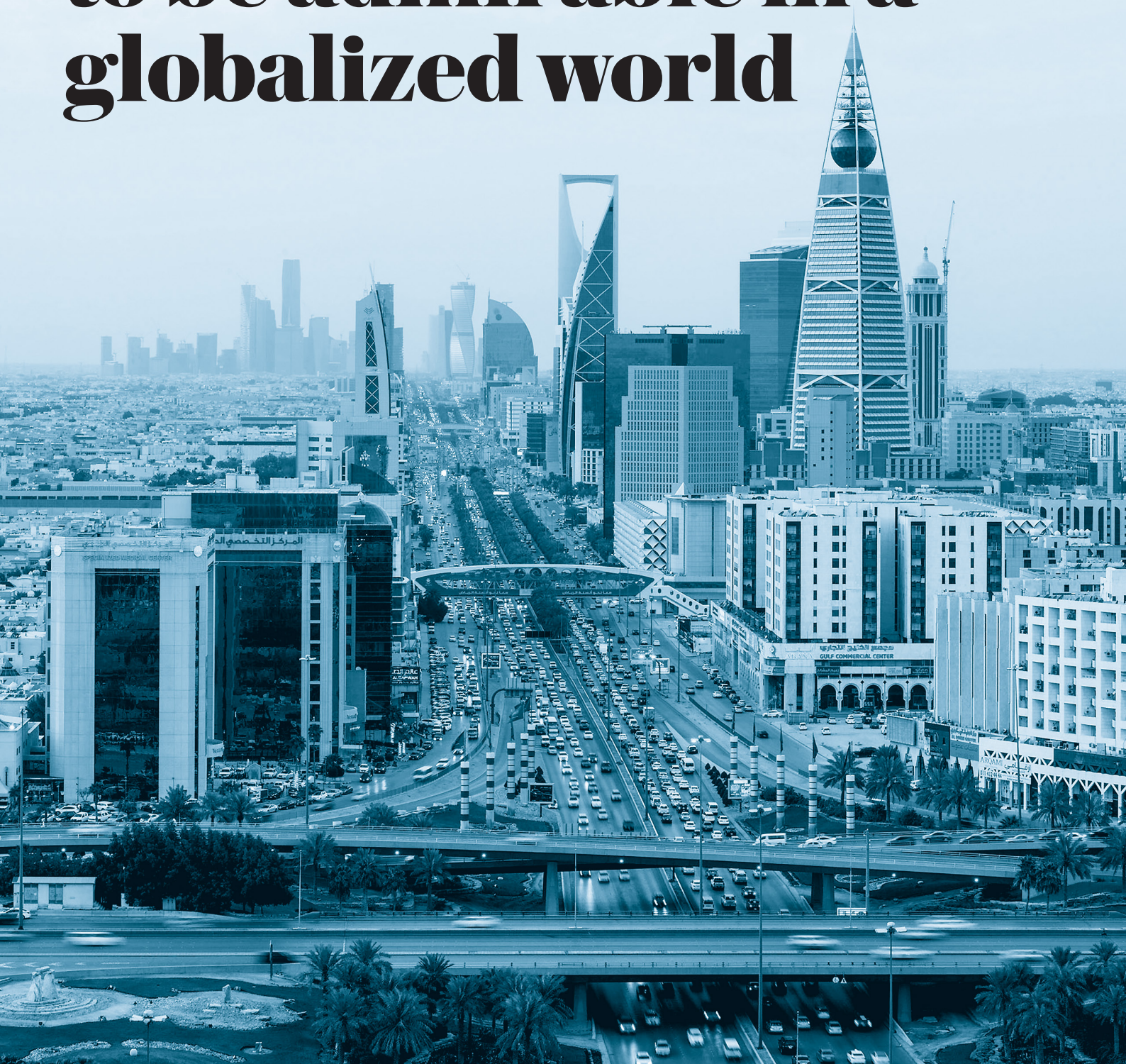


Nation as a brand: Why countries strive to be admirable in a globalized world



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INTRODUCTION

The images of countries and cities are a regular topic of discussion around the world these days. But there is a good deal of confusion about the subject. Numerous terms are used, such as public diplomacy, soft power, nation branding, and strategic communications, that overlap or even contradict each other, while huge sums are spent on ambitious campaigns that often sink without trace, with no concrete evidence that such initiatives ever had or ever could have made a measurable difference to how a city or country was perceived.

If building a better image is so complicated, expensive, and unpredictable, it is not unreasonable to ask, “why bother?” Why should people’s ignorance about our country and our region trouble us? Is this not pure vanity? We know our worth and that should be what counts.

But the question of image runs deeper than mere national self-esteem. Image matters today for many very good reasons.

Like it or not, every country has an image, and how it is perceived by the outside world has become increasingly important in this era of globalization. A country with



Joseph Nye, the coiner of the Soft Power concept and former United States Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. AFP

a strong, positive image, such as Singapore, for example, has little difficulty attracting tourists, investors, students, international events, consumers for its products, and the attention and respect of other governments and the media – and all this adds up to yet more progress and prosperity for Singapore.

On the other hand, a country that fewer people know about – Mauritania, for example – or which has many negative associations – such as Sudan – finds it difficult to attract interest and investment. Put simply, countries in good standing



trade at a premium, countries in poor standing trade at a discount.

A weak or negative image is truly a structural deficit and can quickly become a security risk: Governments may feel little motivation to expend money and lives defending another country that their own citizens either do not know or do not care about.

However outdated, inaccurate, and unfair the popular image of a country might be, it has a huge impact, especially on countries with less well-established images. In our interconnected and interdependent world, the beliefs, and prejudices of billions of people, driving their everyday behavior and their economic choices, can determine the fate of some nations.

Building a positive national reputation usually takes generations and the image of any country is unlikely to change much from year to year. Even self-harming a national image can be a surprisingly slow process, although there is one quick way of doing it – by insulting, threatening, or attacking another nation, race, or religion. In such cases, 19th-century Dutch politician Johan Thorbecke’s maxim that “reputation arrives on foot but leaves on horseback” really does hold true.

Other things can harm a country’s

worker walks past installations at the Basrah Gas company, at Khor al-Zubair in Iraq’s southern Basra governorat. AFP

good name – persistently selfish, callous, chaotic, or irresponsible behavior will eventually do the trick, but it needs to be sustained over several years.

TERMINOLOGY, AND THE CONFUSION IT REPRESENTS

So, what about those confusing terms? What do they mean, and are they helpful in navigating this complex field?

- **Public diplomacy** – when a government and/or its diplomats attempt to influence foreign publics (as opposed to the official representatives of other countries, as is the case with traditional or private diplomacy).
- **Cultural relations/cultural diplomacy** – the use of cultural assets and activities to foster good relations and increase understanding between the populations of states.
- **Soft power** – any method of achieving a state’s international aims by persuasion, or the power of attraction, rather than by military or economic force¹.
- **Nation brand** – the observation that countries have images, rather like the images of corporations and their products and services².

The term nation branding may be the

most problematic of the lot (I’m sorry to say, because I coined it). When I first used the term nation brand in a 1998 academic paper, I was simply observing that countries have images, and that good governance in the 21st century includes recognizing, monitoring, and managing this precious national asset. The phrase soon evolved into nation branding.

Unfortunately, there is no real consensus on the definition of this term, but it suggests that the country’s image can be manipulated using the tools of commercial marketing – including branding itself, which is usually equated with designing logos.

I should have made myself clearer. What I had in mind was a strategic process of measuring and managing the reputation of a nation or city and enhancing it by means of symbolic actions – imaginative policies, projects, and behaviors – which earn an image that is more fair, true, and useful to the aims of both government and citizens.

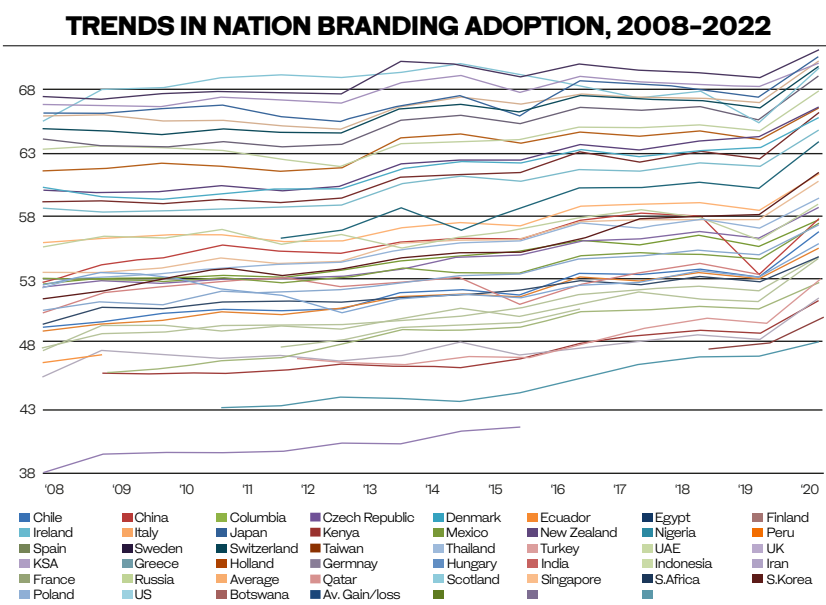
I later coined a new term, competitive identity³, to clarify the difference between a commercial-style marketing-communications approach, and my own policy-based good-governance approach, but the term never caught on quite as widely as nation branding. I suppose that branding simply has a better brand.


Since then, a large amount of research has supported my view that the policy-based approach is much more likely to produce lasting results than any amount of messaging, as well as costing far less.

If that seems like a bold claim, the following chart is worth a glance. The data comes from one of my regular surveys, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, which every year since 2005 has measured the images of 60 countries, polling a sample of 60,000 ordinary citizens in 20 countries around the world, based on a questionnaire of more than 50 questions.

The graph simply tracks the overall NBI scores of 47 countries from 2008 to 2022. It looks complex at first glance, but the central message could not be clearer or more surprising: The images of most countries do not move around independently from year to year, they move together as a cohort, many of them in virtual lockstep.

This can only mean one thing, that the images of countries are driven more by the mood of humanity than by anything that those countries do or say about themselves, and several other large international opinion surveys have detected a similar phenomenon. Some years, everybody in our sample, which represents more than 70 percent of the world’s population, feels slightly better about most other countries, in other years, slightly worse.




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And nowhere in the NBI’s accumulated 1.5 billion datapoints is there any correlation to be found between the amount of money spent by governments on branding campaigns, and the strength of their countries’ images. No country’s image ever improves except when the images of many other countries also improve.

As I mentioned earlier, an individual country’s image can sometimes get worse all on its own, usually because it has attacked another country or threatened the international order (look at the steeply descending pale green line at the right-hand side of the chart: that is Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. The falling red line one year earlier is China during the coronavirus pandemic.

Since I started conducting the NBI in 2005, I have repeatedly called for case studies from any country that has demonstrably improved its image by means of communications campaigns, advertising, PR, logo design, or social media, and I am still waiting.

Part of the problem is that very few countries practicing nation branding take any steps to measure its effectiveness. The success or failure of such initiatives is all too often left to anecdotal evidence (people saying they like the campaign); measurements of outputs rather than outcomes (the amount of media coverage achieved rather than any quantified change in behavior or attitude on the part of the target audience); or correlation instead of causation (increases in tourism arrivals or foreign direct investment inflows with no evidence that these were driven by the campaign).

Not having a way of knowing whether a major initiative is producing benefits tends to make the whole exercise pointless. How will you know whether to maintain the same level of investment in future years, or change it? If



Flags of all nations outside the UN headquartered in New York City. Shutterstock

it does not seem to be producing results, how will you know whether to stick with the same approach or try something different?

Something else that really does not help is the almost universal confusion between the everyday marketing of individual sectors, and the far more ambitious aspiration to manage the country’s overall image. Promoting for trade, tourism, talent, or foreign investment is completely different from trying to improve the country’s brand image, and the two activities work in entirely different ways. Advertising, PR, social media, and design are helpful tools for marketing individual sectors, but they have no power to shift international perceptions of the country.

Sectoral promotion and nation branding are closely connected but must never be confused. One is about selling a product, in which case marketing can help; the other is about encouraging people to change their deeply held beliefs about the world they live in, in which case marketing becomes propaganda – and invariably fails.

SO, WHAT DOES WORK?

It is useful to know what does not work, but in 2012 I began to look more deeply into the question of what does work. Analysis of the accumulated NBI data showed that by far

the most important driver of overall national standing was the perception that a given country exerted a positive and principled influence on humanity and the planet.

This came as a surprise. The countries most people around the world prefer, it seems, are not necessarily the biggest, strongest, richest, oldest, most advanced, or most beautiful, although any of these attributes can contribute to a good image.

By a very wide margin, the most likely reason why somebody would admire a country was because they believed it contributed consistently to the world outside its own borders; that it did a good job of balancing its domestic and international responsibilities; that it was fundamentally motivated by positive values and principles. That it was, in other words, a good neighbor and a good team player.

The evidence continues to grow that if a country wanted to be admired, it must be relevant, and to become relevant, it must participate usefully, productively, and imaginatively in the topics that matter to people elsewhere and everywhere. The list of those topics is a long one: Climate change, war, poverty, famine, disease, inequality, narcotics, migration, economic stability, human rights, women’s rights, property



An Afghan child watches American soldiers as they arrive to search a village during the Operation Deliberate Strike, some 60 kilometers north of Kandahar. AFP

rights, pollution, species and habitat loss, indigenous people's rights, children's rights, religious and cultural tolerance, nuclear proliferation, water scarcity, education, human trafficking, corruption, terrorism, organized crime, and arms control are just a few of the most obvious ones.

It is difficult to imagine any country that could not select at least one item on this list with a special relevance to its own needs, experiences, or resources, and find a way to contribute meaningfully toward tackling it (in

partnership with others, of course, because there is no rule to say that earning a better national reputation is necessarily a solitary or even competitive activity).

There is a strong precedent for this kind of behavior in the corporate world, and this presents a far better metaphor than branding for understanding how countries can improve their images.

For decades, if not centuries, it has become more evident that companies which fail to demonstrate and maintain

high ethical standards, transparency, and social responsibility will eventually lose the trust and respect of their consumers – as BP, most tobacco companies, Nestle, Facebook, Victoria's Secret, The Weinstein Co., Volkswagen, Union Carbide, and dozens of others can attest. The NBI data points to corporate social responsibility all over again but played out this time at the level of the nation-state – and governments, just like corporate boards, ignore it at their peril.

This is a way of seeing the nation as brand that is radically different from the communications-based efforts of so many governments. Clearly, it places responsibility for the curation of the nation's image squarely on the shoulders of policymakers. This is about policy and strategy rather than messaging and media: grand strategy rather than brand strategy, you might say. Yet this does not leave communication entirely out of the frame, because unless the deeds, projects, and policies of the government are intrinsically communicative, it is unlikely they will be noticed internationally – and if they are not noticed then they are powerless to influence international perceptions or behaviors.

That does not mean, however, that the route to a better nation brand is simply bragging about your good deeds. Indeed, spending vast sums telling the world about such deeds seems to have the opposite effect, especially if your country suffers from a weak or negative image to start with (it is no coincidence that several of the world's major religions teach that publicizing one's own good deeds devalues them).

Boasting about your own assets or achievements could never be regarded as sophisticated marketing, and yet it is what dozens of countries, regions, and cities repeatedly do in their attempt to raise their profiles and improve their images. One of the golden rules of national image is that success does not automatically produce respect.

Governments tend to be interested in success and power, since those are the currencies of politics, and that is what they instinctively want the world to know about. But this instinct makes them poor marketers, since it is not what their target audience is interested in. In fact, the more people learn about the growth and success of a country they mistrust, and experience its power to project its chosen messages worldwide, the more likely they are to mistrust and even fear it. In some cases, keeping a deliberately low profile is the best route to a better profile in the longer term.

Increasingly, when it comes to other countries, the target audience is more interested in values and purpose. Most people simply want to feel glad that other



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countries exist: whether they appear to be working to tackle the transnational, existential challenges of our age and are playing their part in ensuring the survival of humanity and the wellbeing of the natural world; whether they are simply free-riders on the international community; or whether their behavior poses a threat to the future peace and prosperity of all of us, our children and our grandchildren.

So, in the end, the fundamental message of nation branding is quite simple, and obvious: If you want to be admired, you need to be admirable. That is what former US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes, echoing ex-American President Dwight Eisenhower, liked to call “the diplomacy of deeds.”

All this raises an interesting question: What sort of expertise do leaderships need to obtain or acquire to manage their nation's or city's image in a measurably effective way? As I have argued, it is not public relations, branding, design, social media, or advertising, although the utility of each of these crafts is clear enough when it comes to promoting specific sectors, products, or events.

So, who is left? Is it management consultants or strategic-communications experts? Is it practitioners in politics, international relations, or both? Do you need a historian, a military tactician, an anthropologist, an economist, a psychologist, or a sociologist?

It is probably a mixture of all the above, and that is just the problem: Few if any players in the world of advisory services successfully span such a diverse range of disciplines. In the end, the country's image is far too valuable and sensitive an asset to be simply outsourced to consulting firms or delegated to civil servants.

It is the policymakers who are ultimately the image-makers-in-chief. Understanding how the diplomacy of deeds can influence the country's good name is simply a new lens through which they must learn to view the art and science of good governance.

FOOTNOTES

1. Nye, N. S. Jr. (Public Affairs, 2004). “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.”
2. Anholt, S. (Henry Stewart Publications, 1998). “Nation-Brands of the Twenty-First Century” in The Journal of Brand Management, Vol. 5 No. 6.
3. Anholt, S. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). “Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Regions, and Cities.”