
Politics & Diplomacy

Branding America®

Charles Skuba

Many Americans were shocked by the results of a Gallup poll conducted in nine Muslim countries in December 2001 and January 2002. The poll revealed that most of the respondents considered the United States to be ruthless, arrogant, aggressive, and biased against Islamic values and against the Palestinian people in particular; moreover, most thought that U.S. culture was a corrupting influence on their societies.¹

However, among officials within the U.S. government, instead of surprise there is a growing realization that more emphasis needs to be placed on better communication with the people of the Islamic world, and with other global audiences as well. This view was already evident in 2001, when the House International Relations Committee held hearings that stressed the importance of improving public diplomacy. At the same time, Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed his desire to bring “people into the public diplomacy function of the [State] Department who are going to change from just selling us in the old USIA [United States Information Agency] way to really branding foreign policy, branding the Department, marketing the Department, marketing American values to the world and not just putting out pamphlets.”²

The confirmation of former advertising executive Charlotte Beers as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy is part of this strategy. It is a strategy, though, that has not been universally well received. Journalists have jumped on Ms. Beers’s

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reported intention to bring “branding” to the State Department, dismissing her as an advertising huckster. The press has generally ridiculed the idea of branding in relation to foreign policy, describing it as a “mystical art” and “quasi-alchemic process,” and criticizing what it views as being “slick marketing techniques.” This disdain and suspicion of branding U.S. foreign policy is unfair and misleading. It

many opposing messages, some from overt enemies. The image of the United States abroad is also sometimes adversely affected by a complex media environment in which American entertainment and business messaging often disturb cultural sensitivities. There are many, in the Islamic world and elsewhere, whose perception of America is shaped greatly by these factors, causing them to hate or

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may stem not only from journalistic skepticism, but also from a widespread misunderstanding of what branding means and of the nature of the advertising business in which the very able Ms. Beers rose to the top. “Many people in Washington have experience in the no-holds-barred, rough-and-tumble, in-your-face arena of political advertising,” says Dick O’Brien, executive vice president of the American Association of Advertising Agencies. “They don’t understand the disciplined, thoughtful, and measured business of building brands.”³

Realistically, the issue is not whether or not to brand, but how to manage and market the U.S. brand. Although the terminology may irritate many in the press as well as in the diplomatic community, the United States is undeniably a brand, and one that means very different things to different audiences. In his article, “The Rise of the Brand State” in *Foreign Affairs*, Peter van Ham wrote, “We all know that ‘America’ and ‘Made in the U.S.A.’ stand for individual freedom and prosperity.”⁴ However, this is just one view, and the American brand must also compete with

represent the United States and what they believe it stands for.

To better understand how professional branding practices could be used to improve the U.S. image abroad, it is useful to analyze how marketing professionals approach the concept and practice of branding, how it might be appropriate for U.S. foreign policy, and what is required to make it effective.

Defining Branding. To some, branding simply means advertising designed to create emotional imagery usually associated with a business. To others, it means the creation of symbols that allow ready recall of the institution. In practice, however, the modern concept of branding is more complex and encompasses the holistic environment in which the brand exists, operates, and interacts with its many customers and stakeholders. Philip Kotler, the author of many leading marketing text books, describes branding in its greater context: “The art of marketing is largely the art of brand building...Brand building [sic] calls for more than brand image build-

ing. It calls for managing every brand contact that the customer might have with the brand.”⁵ This generally involves setting a focused central branding strategy and then clearly communicating to everyone in the brand organization what his or her role is in that strategy. While global ad agency networks link branding mostly with advertising, they also emphasize the role of the full spectrum of communications practices: public relations, direct marketing, brand identity, interactive marketing, customer relationship management, and promotion. Advertising has traditionally been the marketing practice that drives branding, but branding can also be driven by other instruments from the communications toolbox. In the case of public diplomacy, public relations is the most obvious primary driver.

Beers’s former company, Ogilvy & Mather, labels its proprietary branding philosophy and methodology “360 Degree Branding.” This is defined as “creating attention-getting messages that make a promise consistent and true to the brand’s image and identity. And guiding actions, both big and small, that deliver on that brand promise. To every audience that brand has. At every brand intersection point. At all times.”⁶

Ogilvy’s work with IBM since 1998 exemplifies the concept of 360 degree branding. With a budget in excess of \$1 billion, IBM has invested heavily in a global multimedia branding effort, aimed primarily at information technology executives, to equate the company with “e-business.”⁷

Not only did the advertising communicate that IBM was all about e-business, but the company delivered on this promise through its products, services, employees, web site, brochures, and ver-

tical industry analyses. The web site and e-mail helped to identify and create a dialogue with those identified as potential customers. This strategy was integrated with direct sales force and customer relationship management efforts. Thus, IBM transformed itself into the ultimate e-business at the same time that it promised to help other businesses become e-businesses. The IBM campaign may be the best corporate example of a successful global branding campaign in recent history. IBM leads all competitors in brand awareness and preference related to the concept of e-business.⁸

The United States would not be the first government to use branding techniques. An example of how branding can be applied by a nation seeking to influence another country’s public opinion is the “Britain in Malaysia” campaign. Conducted since 1998, the campaign aims to strengthen the cultural and economic partnership between Britain and Malaysia. As described in Paul Temporal’s “Branding in Asia,” Britain began by identifying key target segments of the business, government, and press communities, and then developed “a series of key messages created for each target audience.” Each message needed to reinforce four core brand values that were intended to represent “Britain in Malaysia”: innovativeness, dependability, professionalism, and stylishness. A special tag line, “Just Between Friends,” and a logo were also developed. Every participating British organization, which included the British High Commission, the British-Malaysian Industry and Trade Association, the British Council, British Airways, and the North West Arts Board, was required to use the campaign elements in its advertising and events in Malaysia. The campaign was intended to be a long-

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term effort. Obviously viewing the campaign as successful, the British high commissioner remarked:

The values we have adopted will remain relevant well beyond 1998. As such, we shall be able to build on them in years to come to present an even stronger image of Britain in Malaysia.... By consistently stressing why Britain is different and better through the values we have identified, we shall provide the strategic platform for the successful presentation of all British activity in Malaysia.⁹

Using Branding in U.S. Foreign Policy. Of course, the United States can neither manage every contact it has with every person around the world, nor hope to convince every public audience that it is following the right policies. However, it can do a much better job of marketing itself, and this is where branding comes in.

With the end of the Cold War, the need to communicate American values overseas seemed much less urgent; consequently, valuable strategic ground was lost. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States Information Agency (USIA), formerly an independent foreign affairs agency within the executive branch, was folded into the State Department, Voice of America (VOA) experienced significant budget cuts, and various public diplomacy programs' budgets were reduced significantly. A recent panel report on "comprehensive strategic reform," sponsored by the Center for the Study of the Presidency, opined:

Our failure to communicate convincingly our values and policies during the strategic reversal [since the end of the Cold War] partially explains the loss of public influence and the growing anti-American trends. We must now address this oversight and acknowledge our own misorganization of our public communication resources.¹⁰

The United States's need to get its message out to foreign public audiences is increasingly obvious. Putting this issue in context, Chairman of the House International Relations Committee Henry Hyde explained the necessity for more targeted U.S. communications abroad:

I believe that half of our foreign policy is missing...The U.S. has the unique capacity to simultaneously pursue a foreign policy along two separate tracks: the first with the governments of the world, the second with their peoples. Our relationship with these populations can provide powerful leverage in our dealings with their ruling regimes.... That then is the role I would set for our public diplomacy: to enlist the populations of the world into a common cause and to convince them that the goals they seek for themselves – freedom, security and prosperity – are the same as those that the United States seeks.¹¹

To fulfill the role laid out by Congressman Hyde in a world of increasingly global media and communications, public diplomacy should embrace professional marketing practices. It must have a more comprehensive and long-term goal than just to overcome current challenges among Islamic audiences. It will also require the use of the full spectrum of

marketing tools, rather than traditional public relations alone. The United States has many superbly qualified and highly creative professionals in private industry to help in this task.

This is not an argument for message over substance. Branding America must not be propaganda, but should be a clear and loud voice for American values, as well as a demand for smart and balanced policy. One of the basic principles of marketing and advertising is that you have to have a good product to make an effective, long-term brand sale. Great marketing will not sell bad policy.

With the United States as the world's sole superpower and the ubiquity of the U.S. presence in the lives of people throughout the world, marketing American values is a necessary task, but one whose success strongly depends on the United States making smart policy choices. Before we can brand America, we must know the answers to basic questions: What is the brand promise of the United States, and to whom does it pertain? Is it a believable promise? Are our actions consistent with it? These questions are fraught with multiple policy dilemmas.

In testimony before the House International Relations Committee on November 14, 2001, Robert Wehling, the co-chair of the Ad Council Advisory Committee and former Global Marketing Officer for Procter & Gamble, testified:

At P&G we learned over and over again never to exaggerate the claims for a product. If [consumers'] experience with the product does not meet or exceed their expectations, they won't buy it again.... Our actions must be fully consistent with our words. If we send messages to the Arab world that communicate friendship and peace, it won't mean anything unless it's accompanied by a major humanitarian effort, a major push for a Palestinian State, and oth-

er similar activities. If we aren't willing to deliver this kind of effort, we should not release an advertising or PR campaign.¹²

Branding Principles. There are six key steps that America must take in branding itself to the outside world.

1) *Deciding upon a straightforward, believable, and true brand promise*

What the United States stands for needs to be defined and emphasized. The basic American values of freedom, tolerance, opportunity, and compassion will appeal to any audience with whom America wants a dialogue.

In her statement at the House International Relations Committee hearing on Public Diplomacy on October 10, 2001, Ms. Beers stated, "This is a war about a way of life and fundamental beliefs in values we did not expect to ever have to explain and defend—such as freedom and tolerance."¹³ Later, in her November press conference, she stated, "We have to put forward something we might have all taken for granted, which is U.S. values... words like 'freedom' and 'tolerance' and 'diversity of human beings' are precious to us, and I don't think they're very well understood. In this day I would say we must renew our communication on what we mean by such things."¹⁴

With the United States's core message strategy taking shape around these key values, it is critical that U.S. policy initiatives are substantial and consistent for the communications to be believable and effective overseas in the long-term. In other words, we must practice what we preach. Any efforts at "disinformation" as envisaged by those who supported the creation of the (aborted) Pentagon Office of Strategic Influence would be counterproductive.

2) Audience segmentation and prioritization

U.S. branding strategy must begin by identifying, segmenting, and prioritizing exactly which audiences present opportunity and critical targets for messaging. In his book "All Consumers are Not Created Equal," former Ogilvy director of Differential Marketing Garth Hallberg wrote that marketers "must invest their efforts and their budgets where they will produce the most return. The most valuable customers deserve special treatment to build and retain their loyalty."¹⁵ The United States must therefore understand those public audiences who will be the most desirable recipients of U.S. messaging intended to influence public opinion.

A start in this direction is recognizing the great diversity that exists globally. As Moufac Harb, Washington bureau chief for *Al Hayat* newspaper, counseled:

Now consider the Muslim world—1.2 billion people living in 60 nations. You cannot win the war of ideas and images here with a strategy of 'media carpet bombing'... At the very least, the United States should tailor its messages for each country—not only for language but also for content. Within countries, the United States should have multiple messages crafted to reach particular segments of society.¹⁶

Mr. Wehling added to his testimony about messaging to "the Arab World":

Just as there is no single appropriate message for all the countries in the region, there is probably no one message that's right for all the people in a country. Picking the most important target audience for the messages is critical. P&G's success in this region has principally come because of our focus on women, particularly mothers. That same focus may make sense in this case because surely the women of the region have had enough of violence and bloodshed. A secondary target might well be Arab men described as educated and moderate.¹⁷

Chairman Marc Nathanson of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors has identified a specific target for the new U.S. government's new Middle East Radio Network: young mainstream educated Arabs under thirty and the emerging Arab leadership.¹⁸

3) Research and dialogue for continuous learning

When asked how to start a great campaign, any marketing executive would immediately identify the need for good audience research. Again, Mr. Wehling's words are apt: "Don't start writing messages before getting up to date research in each country regarding how people feel, why they feel that way, and what it would take to change their minds."¹⁹

Research must be ongoing and all communications efforts must be dedicated to constant learning. If the United States is truly committed to the dialogue, this means active listening to the audience and actually responding to their concerns and needs. The policy implications of a responsive dialogue with the Arab world, given the harsh reality of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the substance of Arab demands for its resolution, are proving too much for many in the United States government to swallow. Dialogue cannot happen without openness to policy change.

4) Evolving, dynamic messaging and programs

While basic values embody the brand promise, ongoing messaging content must be much more substantial and dynamic with specific objectives. Situations evolve and constantly change, as do people's views. If dialogue is truly desired, it should be progressive and lead to a desired goal.

Mr. Hallberg defines this concept in marketing terms: "This is all about a

mutual value exchange with information as value. Brands learn from customers and customers learn from brands. It's really a marketing curriculum. The challenge for the brand is to always remember its objectives and constantly move the customer along the curriculum."²⁰ Mr. Hallberg's curriculum truly applies to public diplomacy messaging and audiences. For example, if we want educators in Indonesia to become fair and honest in their teachings about the United States, we can develop a marketing curriculum with them in mind. Such a curriculum could be designed for use through a dynamic web site. Newspaper advertising or brochures distributed in Indonesian schools might attract educators to the web site. Through helpful and informative educational content, the web site would encourage the educators to register and engage in e-mail correspondence with U.S. educators and U.S. culture and information officers. The U.S. government might send educational materials to the teachers, or invite them to participate in an exchange program.

5) *The full range of marketing communications*

The U.S. State Department has always relied on public relations "spinning" and U.S. broadcasting as its primary communications channels. Without necessarily challenging this primacy, a branding assignment should have all communications tools available. The issue is to get a compelling message to the right audience, whether that is an audience of foreign journalists or a broader target. As John Leslie, Jr., chairman of the PR agency Weber Shandwick, told Congress: "We should heed the Powell Doctrine...and apply it now to communications. We must have

clear objectives and then we must bring overwhelming force—the full range of communications [sic] resources necessary to achieve those objectives."²¹

The State Department must look at every medium and tool available. In some cases paid advertising in mass media might be appropriate. It depends on the specific objective involved and the context of the message. For example, while a television commercial might not be the right medium for an ad promoting American values to a broad Muslim audience, it might be very effective in promoting U.S. friendship with a specific country if it promotes a significant event in that country. Also, when the United States delivers valuable information via a web site, like a presentation on Muslim life in America or information about U.S. programs, it cannot assume that it has instant, broad exposure.²² Rather, marketing is needed to alert viewers and readers and cause them to visit a web site or look for a specific publication.

The greatest obstacle to media marketing on a global scale though is the very absence of advanced media in many parts of the world. TV and Internet penetration rates are extremely low in most Asian and African countries. In fact, television news and the Internet are the media of an elite, educated segment of the population in many countries. While this is an argument in favor of their use in efforts to reach selected educated audiences, it does mean, on the other hand, that reaching broad audiences requires different tools.

Increased funding for the expanded use of more traditional media for U.S. messaging must therefore be a priority. The most powerful media available to the United States include Voice of

America as well as other U.S. broadcasting efforts under the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB), such as the new Middle East Radio Network. U.S. international broadcasting reaches over 100 million people in sixty-one different languages and not only offers news, but also other highly appreciated programs such as courses in English instruction. One critical area for budget increases is in the marketing of American broadcasting programs. Less than one percent of the IBB's budget has been dedicated to marketing. This is ridiculous, as marketing is critical to increasing the penetration of VOA and the number of its listeners in many countries where there is already a lot of media competition.²³

6) *Marketing-driven database and collaboration tools*

Just as marketers use sophisticated database tools and technology to profile, understand, and communicate with their most valuable customers, the State Department should do the same with its many public audiences. The development of an accessible and usable database is dependent upon smart marketing rules that determine what criteria will best identify good candidates with whom to build a long-term relationship.

Institutionalization of Professional Marketing Practices.

President Bush's commitment to a long-term, multifaceted war on terrorism suggests that the United States is going to assume a role as an 'activist superpower.' Public diplomacy needs to become a long-term and sustained U.S. priority if the country is going to effectively function in this role. Leadership requires constant communication, not just in times of crisis. To return to marketing

terminology, Harvard Business School's Theodore Levitt wrote tellingly, "Keeping customers for an intangible product requires constant reselling efforts while things go well lest the customer get lost when things go badly."²⁴

In opening hearings on "Rethinking U.S. Public Diplomacy," Congressman Hyde stated, "It is by now obvious to most observers that the role of public diplomacy in our foreign policy has been too long neglected."²⁵ The aftermath of September 11 has shown the need for aggressive communications in a time of crisis. But a long-term, state-of-the-art, and marketing-driven approach will be necessary in order for public diplomacy to be truly effective. When it is time again for government budget cutting, public diplomacy will again be vulnerable. This should be guarded against. Public diplomacy must be consistent and enduring.

In advocating the need for companies to institutionalize branding responsibility, David Aaker and Erich Joachimsthaler wrote,

The charge is to create a strong, clear, rich identity and to make sure that the implementation groups, whether inside or outside the company, understand the identity. When alternatives to mass-media advertising are driving the brand-building process or playing a substantial role, it is particularly important to have a brand champion with the ability, authority, and incentive to ensure that the brand identity is delivered consistently across multiple media.²⁵

America must have a "strong, clear, rich and appealing" identity and more effective communication of that identity through professional marketing disciplines. To do this will require increased funding for public diplomacy and an

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institutional brand champion. Although the State Department might seem the obvious choice for its residency, other options exist.

The Center for the Study of the Presidency recommends:

Rather than compartmentalize it in the State Department, the public communications strategy should seek to overarch the Departments of Commerce, Treasury, Health and Human Services, and the trade representatives, as well as other representatives of U.S. values and interests.... drawing especially on the creativity of the non-

governmental sector. Perhaps we need to give serious thought to whether some kind of public corporation or some new vehicle should be formed to achieve such a goal.²⁶

Wherever the authority will ultimately reside, it is paramount that a clear institutional leader be at the helm of this important new mission in order for the message to be consistent, credible, and compelling. And whether you call it “branding” or not, this entity must have the full power of marketing at its disposal.

NOTES

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20 Garth Hallberg, telephone interview with

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21 U.S. House. 2001. Committee on International Relations. *The Message is America: Rethinking U.S. Public Diplomacy. Hearings before the Committee on International Relations 107th Cong., 2d sess.* 14 November 2001. Testimony of John W. Leslie, Jr.

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