

# **The Path to Creative Nation Branding- Applying Creative Thinking while Branding a Nation**

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## **Abstract**

*The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of three successful and creative nation branding campaigns. In the first part, the case study of Slovenia is presented. Secondly, the nation branding campaign of Estonia is considered. The paper then demonstrates the 100% Pure campaign launched in New Zealand. Finally, common characteristics of efficient nation branding projects are examined.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In the simplest terms, a brand can be defined as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of these intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition” (Kotler and Gertner, 2002: 469). Therefore, a nation’s brand commonly refers to the images, perceptions and associations people that people generally attach to the certain nation (Fan, 2008).

The term nation branding was coined by “the father of national branding” Simon Anholt in 1996, although the emergence of place branding and place marketing as a specialization of marketing and branding dates back to the early 1990s (Szondi, 2008). Simon Anholt (2002) argues that path towards a successful nation brand goes through the hexagon consisting of tourism, exports, people, governance, investment and immigration, culture and heritage. If the government realizes success in all of these fields, that country has become a successful nation brand. According to Anholt (2002), citizens are one of the crucial requirements of successful

nation branding. In order to represent his homeland in the best way, each ordinary citizen should act as "passionate ambassador" for his or her country. (Anholt, 2005:75).

The concept and practice of nation branding became very popular term in last decades. The governments of small and big countries, rich and poor ones invest a lot of effort and financial resources in order to (re)brand their nations. Not only that best marketing experts from the particular country are engaged but quite often the famous international nation brand experts such as Simon Anholt himself are hired. But what does make a nation brand successful?

In any case, it is way easier to brand certain countries than others depending on their political, economic, cultural and others prerequisites. Moreover, the experts agree that determining the brand essence is the key factor of branding process bearing in mind that that essence has to be grounded in the reality of the country. In addition, the citizens who have to "live the brand" are of major importance (Aronczyk, 2008).

But what all successful nation brand campaigns have in common is their creative approach. The new, yet unseen, different, sometimes controversially ideas seem to be the path to the successful nation brand. I will here use three examples of three countries' nation branding campaigns (Slovenia, Estonia and New Zealand) which all have something in common: they were very creative and, despite some critics, they are generally regarded as successful.

## **2. SLOVENIA**

Slovenian national identity was always torn between East and West. In former Yugoslavia, Slovenia was considered as the country which is the closest to West, but it was never fully accepted as West in the Western eyes. The citizens of this small country realized very early that economic changes are necessary. At the same time, they figured out that branding of the country is equally important if they want to obtrude their state on the world market. In last few years, Slovenian experts have put strong effort to brand Slovenia in the most effective way.

Like the rest of the former Yugoslav states, Slovenia had to proceed with the project of identity building while simultaneously "selling" itself to the international market. In the area where the bitter taste of nationalism and its terrible consequences is still present on the daily basis, the nation branding was welcomed as a tool which allows nations to transpose their

mutual competition to the marketplace. In addition, the commercial campaigns are seen as an alternative to the violent obtrusion of ideology, as a way to transfer politics into the record of sales and promotion (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011).

The majority of early Slovenian campaign attempts were focused on the clear strong messages and slogans, such as “On the sunny side of the Alps”, “Slovenia- diversity to discover” or the interesting slogan which appeared after the qualifications of Slovenian football team on the World Cup 2010- “Slovenia, small country with big balls”. But all of those tries were not realized in the best way or they simply were not original enough. What Slovenia needed was professional and methodological approach. In 2006, the results of the extensive survey showed very limited international recognition of Slovenia. Moreover, Slovenians found the fact that their country regularly gets confused with Slovakia by Western Europeans as very disappointing and disturbing. Consequently, in the same year, the Slovene government started to prepare the country’s first long-term branding effort. After call for proposals, the slogan “I feel sLOVEnia” was selected as the best out of 250 alternatives. Even though the initial intention of the slogan was to invoke emotions shared by Slovenes, the fact that slogan’s word play works only in English whitens about its international orientation (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011).

While the Slovene Ministry of the Economy invited marketing agencies to create an overall supporting nation-branding campaign, the citizens were invited to give their contribution to the creation of Slovenian brand through the internet and countrywide mail campaign aiming to gain a public feedback. This unique opportunity, as it was advertised, to take part in historical nation branding was at the same time a successful way to propagandize the campaign. On the other hand, the model in which the nation was branding itself was very interactive containing both elements- state propaganda and the opportunity to build a sense of national identity among Slovenes (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011). “I feel Slovenia” (Slovenijo čutim), Slovenia’s first overall brand, has been used consistently and systematically across the government sector, by non-governmental and business organizations, and various associations and individuals in order to promote Slovenia to foreign visitors, investors and partners in the fields of culture, science, and at international sports events. “The mission is clear: going forward with nature, which means focusing on organic development, promoting a niche economy, welcoming diversity, and attracting the best technological and human potential... ‘Slovenian green’ is the dominant color in the logo. It refers to natural balance and the calm diligence of Slovenes. One can feel Slovenia through the smell of the forest, the rushing of a

creek, the fresh taste of water and the softness of wood..."(The Brand of Slovenia, 2007). The emphasized characteristics that differentiate Slovenia from other countries are unpolluted nature, the intertwining of various natural and cultural influences in a particularly small geographical space, safety, and, internally directed, the richness and variety of the Slovene language (Konecnik Ruzzier, Petek, and Ruzzier, 2015).

Apart from TV commercials, billboards and advertisements, this comprehensive campaign includes official web sites and profiles on the social networks. The brand has also been used in the field of culture, especially during the events in 2012 when Maribor was the European Capital of Culture (Konecnik Ruzzier, Petek, and Ruzzier, 2015). All these things considered, it can be concluded that "I feel sLOVEnia" campaign has been quite successful.

### **3. ESTONIA**

Estonia, a small country of only 1.4 million people, like other nations of Central and Eastern Europe shared the similar destiny as the most of the countries that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It had to overcome economically and reaffirm its national identity. The problem of Russian immigration was also present. However, unlike other postcommunist countries, Estonia's language, culture, and traditions are very close to those in Scandinavia, especially Finland (Jansen, 2008). After gaining independence, Estonia lost its primary market, Russia what lead to the collapse of state industry. But once Prime Minister Mart Laar had applied his economic measures, so-called "shock therapy for socialism ", Estonia's economic recovery was perceived as great success drawing lots of attention of foreign media (Jansen, 2008).

In the beginning of 21st century it seemed like the perfect moment came to launch Estonian overall nation branding campaign. The plan was to emphasize country's orientation towards advanced technology using its own name in the word play- E-stonia. The country was reported to be very advanced regarding the use of modern information and communications technologies, especially mobile technology. Allegedly, already in 2002, 90 percent of all banking transactions were conducted over the Internet and Estonian parliament was the first paperless parliament in the world (Bolin and Stahlberg, 2009). However, the emphasis on E in Estonia was lately criticized as dubious and unrealistic.

The Estonian Government introduced a special organ, Enterprise Estonia, in order to promote Estonian competitiveness, entrepreneurial environment and businesses. Moreover, after Estonia won the Eurovision Song Contest in Copenhagen 2001, the Estonian government was dedicated to launch a campaign to deal with Estonian image. Soon enough, Enterprise Estonia started the project Brand Estonia hiring the British consultancy agency Interbrand. In order to include citizens in the campaign, a survey on public support for spending of state finances on the development of an international brand image for Estonia was conducted. In order to reach the target group which was foreign investors and tourist, it was important to primarily convince domestic population (Bolin and Stahlberg, 2009).

The main slogan and the "essence" of the campaign was the phrase " Welcome to Estonia: Positively Transforming" indicating that this country has successfully undergone through the change but now is ready to welcome visitors and investors (Bolin and Stahlberg, 2009). The accent was on the Estonian proclaimed Nordic identity, its belonging to the Europe and its break from the Soviet past. The word "Nordic" was used much often than term "Baltic". On the other hand, Soviet ideology and the part of Estonian communist history have been mentioned nowhere (Jordan, 2014). The campaign was very comprehensive and adopted by Estonian national airline, airports, shipping docks, tourist industry, and many businesses. Some of the slogans which were also used to describe the modern Estonia were "a Nordic country with a twist", "the new Scandinavia" and "IT-nation" (Jansen, 2008).

The great opportunity to send new Estonian message was hosting European Song Contest after Estonia in 2001 became the first post-communist participant to win the contest. In the same time, it was a great challenge for such a small country to host and broadcast such a huge event. After the Western media expressed their scepticism on Estonian ability to host the ECS, the Estonian Television found itself under the pressure. Following lots of problems caused by lacked of the technical equipment and experience, neighbouring Sweden offered its help and with Swedish support the event was successfully realized. The theme which the Estonian Television chose was "the modern fairy tale" which served to present Estonian case and its return to Europe as in a fairy tale with a happy ending. In addition, the emphasis was on promotion of Estonia as technologically advanced country. The event was cost-effective and had an overwhelmingly positive effect in the media (Jordan, 2014).

Interbrand declared the whole campaign "Visit Estonia" as a huge success both domestically and internationally. The brand Estonia, according to Anholt, managed to evoke a

sense of community among Estonians and arouse their national pride (Jansen, 2008). Anyway, in 2008, "Introduce Estonia", a newer version of Brand Estonia was developed by Estonian advertising agency Tank. The primary focus of the concept is tourism and the new motto is "An Old Country in a Shiny Package". In addition, the slogan "Positively transforming" is changed to "Positively surprising" (Same and Solarte- Vasquez, 2014).

#### **4. NEW ZEALAND**

The New Zealand campaign is definitely one of the most famous success stories in the history of nation branding. Although the New Zealand has a very long tourist tradition and the oldest tourism board in the world (which was-established in 1901), the recognisability of the country's brand at the dawn of the new millennium did not look very promising.

During the 1990s, New Zealand was oriented towards short-term stimulating of consumers' interest to visit this distant destination. However, in the meantime, the world has changed dramatically making international travel more popular and obtainable. On the other hand, countries started to compete more aggressively for every potential tourist or investment and nation branding became increasingly important. It was about time for New Zealand to launch its first overall nation branding campaign in order to build a strong, global brand, attract more tourist and reduce the backlog in this field which was occupied by Australia, its greatest concurrent (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002).

In order to maximize the chances of success, before creating the campaign, Tourism New Zealand (TNZ) initiated a series of in depth research activities in which local businesses, regional economists, similar destinations, previous visitors and people who have never visited New Zealand were surveyed. This process facilitated New Zealand's brand managers to create a brand which is in line with expectations and desires of consumers. The next step was to define what New Zealand actually represents and transfer it into brand. The research showed that although the international public perceived New Zealand as full of beautiful landscapes, green hills with grazing sheep and traces of the Maori culture, the overall picture was relatively boring. This image differs a lot to how New Zealanders themselves see their homeland (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002).

However, experts decided that the emphasis of the brand should be on its landscape which is at the very core of the country. Not only it attracts the majority of visitors but it is also not very likely to change any time soon. The brand was launched gradually between July 1999 and February 2000 with the prime targets of the so-called "interactive travelers"— usually young people or at least young in heart who love to travel and who are always in search for new experiences. In addition, these consumers are often powerful opinion formers (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002).

The message of New Zealand's first-ever global marketing campaign was unique, catchy but very simple: "100% Pure New Zealand". This was the title of principal campaign but the number of variations was also developed, such as "100% Pure Romance", "100% Pure Spirit" or "In Five Days You'll Feel 100%".(Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002). The approach proved to work very well. In 2005, 100% Pure was named tenth best world tourism brand according to the Anholt-GMI Nations Brand Index. Moreover, Interbrand calculated that the exposition induced by New Zealand's marketing efforts was worth US\$13.6 billion. After launching campaign, international visitor numbers have grown 50 percent to and earnings from tourism have almost doubled making it New Zealand's largest industry (Heeringa and Cropp, 2009). The filming of movies based on the Tolkien's books in which the locations of New Zealand perfectly staged Middle- Earth have definitely contributed to the success of the destination New Zealand.

The success stories like this one proves that even small countries can reach enormous success and become recognized brands provided that they use accurate branding approach. However, it has to be noticed that it is easier to build a strong destination brand than to keep it. Once the brand is established, the marketers have to ensure to preserve the brand's essence (Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott, 2002).

Despite the success of "100 % pure" campaign, some criticism is still present. There is an argument that New Zealand is indeed seen as beautiful and friendly but there are lots of other areas which makes it attractive. For example, it is very smart and innovative and a world leader in ease of doing business or lack of corruption but these messages are failed to be sent (Smith, 2015) Moreover, the insisting on the pureness of the nature is not something which will sustain unconditionally. The beautiful nature and landscape have helped to arouse national pride but sustaining that greenness requires lots of work (Bell, 2006).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Slovenia, Estonia and New Zealand are all relatively small countries which have entered in 21st centuries rather unrecognizable and with various, each one with its own problems. They all invested a lot in comprehensive nation branding campaigns which achieved success. What was in common in these campaigns? First of all, they were more or less based on reality of the country. Secondly, they were realized after extensive market research. Furthermore, the citizens were actively involved in campaigns. Additionally, they were all planned as long term. And finally, they were different, based on something new and very creative.

These cases prove that good and creative nation branding campaigns may indeed be of special importance for small countries. Not only they can bring them to the map of desired tourist destination but very thriving campaigns are able to completely change their image abroad.

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