Branding Canada: Can We Brand a Country?

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ABSTRACT

John Nadeau describes the challenge of building and managing one brand for Canada, a country that evokes such a wide variety of images in the minds of its inhabitants. He describes the origins of country image as a concept, and emphasizes the importance of consistency and credibility in the message being sent to others across the world. Nadeau concludes that a common theoretical basis allows countries to borrow strategies from the field of brand management in order to successfully market their own national image.

Discover our true nature (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2003)

"A world leader in innovation and learning, a magnet for talent and investment" (Speech from the Throne, September 30, 2002)

Canada – A Profitable Option (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 2001)

Countries can represent many ideas to many different people, as demonstrated by the quotes above. For some, Canada represents a great open space characterized by wilderness and trees, while for others Canada is a land of innovation and technological development. Within our borders and beyond, this diversity of opinion exists. With such diverse views of our country, is it possible to successfully brand Canada? Can multiple images exist while promoting a central country brand? What is known about country images? To answer these questions, this paper draws on the rich knowledge base of Product-Country Image research. This research stream developed from early questions raised about the impact of 'made-in' labels and their effect on product evaluations and purchase intentions. The field has evolved to examine the broader role of country images in the process of decision-making.

What are Country Images?

Images are simplifications of more complex ideas. They are knowledge structures that are used as mental short-cuts for processing information in decision-making processes (Kotler and Gertner 2002). Images are also defined as the sum of all attributes considered when thinking about an idea (Scott 1965). Country images are a specific instance of images that are closely associated with the political entity of a country. While other images exist for geographical or economic regions, country images are based on political borders. The area of study that has evolved from a marketing perspective is firmly rooted in the interaction of country images with the images of products from that country.

Brands are also a unique subset of images and are distinctly different from the general category of images. The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition." While images exist in everyone's minds, the act of branding is an attempt to influence and standardize the image into a brand image. Branding is also an attempt to match the brand identity (how the brand is intended to be perceived) with the brand image (how the concept is perceived by the interpreter).

Country Image Foundations

The assertion that branding a country is possible suggests that the country image can be managed among the global public. Some people may argue that country images are unique and difficult to brand due to their high level of complexity. In addition, many issues may exist outside the realm of control for marketers and have the potential to harm a country image; for example, natural disasters, political turmoil, and economic downturns (Kotler and Gertner 2002). However, country images do persist and consistency among these images may also be found. For instance, Germany is often considered as a country that possesses great engineering abilities regardless of its damaging political history. Furthermore, managing a country image is possible because brands and country images share some essential foundations, namely, cues, stereotypes, differentiation, and attitudes.

Cues are bundles of information or 'triggers' that invoke an image in the mind of the beholder. For country images, the traditional cue is considered the 'made-in' label found on textiles and other manufactured goods. While research has demonstrated stronger effects of a country image when only one cue is present (Lim et al. 1994; Ahmed et al. 1994; and Peterson and Jolibert 1995), the country cue remains important in multi-cue settings (Nes and Bilkey 1993; Peterson and Jolibert 1995). At times, country information can have a negative effect on evaluations, so it is not always beneficial to supply country information (Gaedeke 1973, Kiecker and Duhan 1992). For example, a Canadian brewer uses a red maple leaf on its label everywhere except in Quebec where it is replaced by a red wheat sheaf. In this case, the red maple leaf could evoke negative perceptions about the country held in Quebec and negatively affect the purchase outcome. Generally speaking, the application of country image cues is found to have an impact on decision-making processes. In addition, brand marks behave similarly, signifying to consumers what the product represents.

The use of stereotypes is another shared aspect of branding and country image theories. Stereotypes are defined as expanding perceptions based on a central element to all other elements (Scott 1965). In other words, one takes a belief about a single aspect of a country and applies that belief to all other aspects of the country and everything that comes from the country. Stereotypes are a way for people to build images and to simplify complex concepts to reduce information processing time. The association of stereotypes with a person or object's country of origin has been demonstrated by researchers (Bamossy and Papadopoulos 1987) and has been shown to affect evaluations (Niffenegger et al. 1982; Wall et al. 1990; Witt and Rao 1992). For Canada, research indicates that the country is often viewed favourably for beliefs about the country and its people (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2000). The effect of country stereotypes on consumer evaluations is similar to the effect of highly focused brand images. The emphasis of brands on a single attribute purposely creates a stereotype image to aid in the efficiency of communication.

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As with brands, differentiation is a key aspect of country images, particularly when considering the many applications of public policy. For example, a need exists for countries to select a unique competitive position in order to attract foreign investment (Wee et al. 1993). This can be difficult to accomplish given that there are hundreds of countries in the world that could conceivably compete. In addition, not all countries are perceived as unique entities. Indeed, the country image may become less important and an economic development or regional image can supersede it. For Canada, an image should be defined that is unique from other developed countries and distinct from a North American image. However, this lack of differentiation tends to occur more often with less developed countries where image attributes are perceived as equivalent (Cordell 1992). Without differentiation in country image, the country is unlikely to succeed in attracting more attention and favourable decision outcomes.

The role attitudes play with images is to explain how the use of images affects behaviour. The three parts of attitudes, namely, cognitive, affective, and conative aspects, help to explain this role. The cognitive component of attitudes refers to the beliefs held about an object or person. The affective portion refers to the evaluation of like/dislike of the object or person. The conative component represents the intended behaviour resulting from the beliefs and evaluation. The relationship among these three components is a useful way of describing the effects of country of origin (Papadopoulos et al. 1998). For example, the three parts of attitudes could be represented as 'I believe Canadians are friendly,' 'I like Canadians' and 'I will increase my investment in Canada.' Attitudes explain the country image phenomenon in the same way attitudes explain the impact of brand image on purchase behaviour. Kotler and Gertner (2002) acknowledge the importance of attitudes in branding and echo the three parts of attitudes by writing "brands incite beliefs, evoke emotions and prompt behaviours." (p.249)

Challenges

Managing the image of a country is not a simple task. This paper concludes by discusses key considerations for managing country images, namely, coordination, relevancy, credibility, and consistency.

A quick sampling of messages that are distributed about a country can reveal the many beliefs and perspectives that are held about a country. For instance, the quotes at the beginning of this paper illustrate the divergent views that Canada is a vast wilderness and that it is a land of innovation and technological development. The suggestion that messages be coordinated should not be interpreted as the development and promotion of a single message for all applications. Coordination refers to the search for shared characteristics among applications that uniquely define the country. This is consistent with branding theory that suggests common associations should be portrayed in the event of multiple brand identities (Aaker 1996). Moreover, this suggestion has also been forwarded in the country image literature referred to as an 'umbrella

concept' (Kotler and Gertner 2002) or a 'family branding approach' (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002).

To consider the matter of relevancy is perhaps stating the obvious, however, it is worth noting here. In consumer products, there is a strong relationship between brand relevance and the number of people who buy the brand (Aaker 1996). For a country brand, there is a risk of diluting the image over the various applications to incorrectly satisfy the coordination consideration, so as to mean nothing in every single application. A good example of this shortcoming may be summed up in the recent slogan for the City of Ottawa as "Technically Beautiful". This slogan fails to resonate strongly with either the travel or technology groups it was designed to appease. Fortunately, a trade-off between relevancy and coordination is not required, as long as the country brand is based on shared underlying ideas. The concept of relevancy remains a useful test for messages in each area of public policy.

The acceptance of a country branding strategy requires an underlying credibility in the messages that are distributed. Credibility is an important aspect of branding and, in the consumer product area, a company typically extends its credibility to the individual brands offered in the market (Aaker 1996). For a country, the messages must coincide with existing beliefs about a country so the image may be viewed as a realistic representation of that country. The Canadian brand image, for example, would lack credibility if the central message were to become 'Canada is a nation of strong cricket players.' There is little or no basis for this claim. To avoid this problem, surveys are a useful tool to assess where the country currently resides in the consciousness of the world (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002). An alternative method would be to examine existing icons in industry, personalities, natural landmarks, and historical events to understand global perceptions (Kotler and Gertner 2002). Credibility remains an important ingredient for managing a strong brand.

The consistency of implementation is also important to the management of a country brand. The consistent delivery of a message over time can result in being the only brand to represent the ideas and image invoked with the message (Aaker 1996). The consistency challenge for countries is the existence of many distinct and independent points of contact. For example, most people may not consider exporters and other travellers to be official representatives of a country; however, the interaction they have with foreigners will impact the image people have about a country. To improve consistency of the image, Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) have called for "a greater role by government and trade associations in helping to coordinate and promote the country's export brand." (p.311) While consistency is more difficult to accomplish with a country than a consumer products brand, attaining consistency of a country image is not impossible, particularly, if the other three challenges are met.

In summary, the idea of managing a country image as a brand can be successful because the two types of images share some foundations in theory: cues, stereotypes, differentiation and attitudes. This common theoretical basis enables us to borrow techniques from brand management to the area of country image and assist in the management of a country brand.

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