How Can Nation Branding Strategy Help Deal with Harmful Rumors?

Author Keith Dinnie

By Keith DINNIE

In the aftermath of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, the tragic events of that day have been compounded by fears about the real or imagined threat posed by the leaking of radioactive material from the Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant. Harmful rumors have proliferated due to the limited and incomplete information provided to the public, exacerbated by the sensationalist reporting of the international media. In this context, what role, if any, can nation branding strategy play?

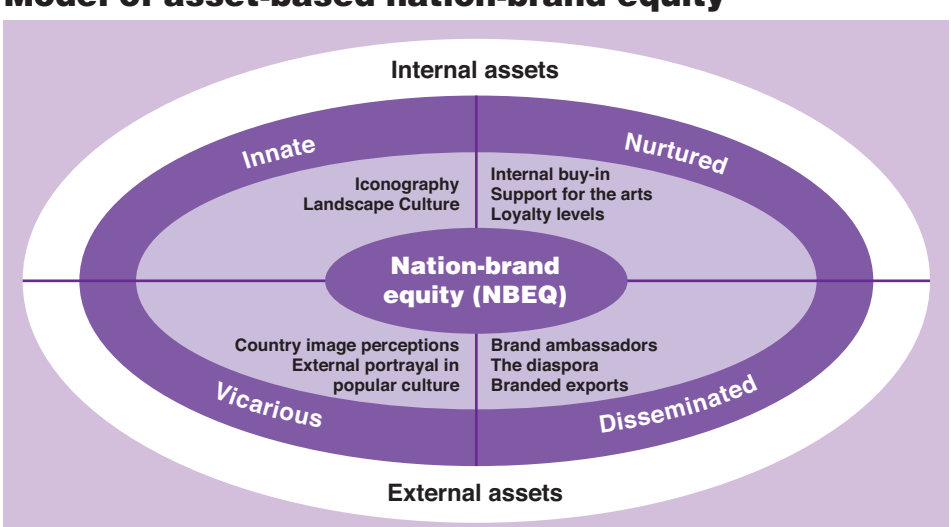
The usual objectives of nation branding are to improve a country's performance in terms of trade and tourism promotion, as well as achieving the more intangible goal of enhancing a country's international influence and image. Whilst some of these goals can be translated into specific performance indicators, the broader concern with country perceptions is more difficult to measure objectively. When developing their nation branding strategy, governments around the world tend to default to an unimaginative, advertising-based approach that makes exaggerated assumptions about the power of advertising to manipulate country image perceptions. In the domain of tourism promotion, the power of advertising is probably stronger than in other domains such as investment attraction or export promotion. However, in order to address the rumor-related perception issues raised by natural and man-made disasters such as the March 11 tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear radiation, an advertising approach is pointless. Instead, a public relations and media relations approach is required.

In the past, a common complaint amongst foreign journalists in Japan has been that the Japanese government is unresponsive to requests for information, declining to make senior figures available for interviews, preferring instead to feed morsels of information to the docile domestic media rather than exposing itself to the less reverential scrutiny of foreign reporters. The DJP election victory of 2009 signaled an improvement in this respect, with more press conferences being opened up to foreign correspondents and an effort to improve the quality of the government's relations with the international press. In this respect, the Japanese government has acknowledged the power of the international media to impact upon country image perceptions. Rather than simply complaining about unfair coverage, the Japanese government has wisely engaged more openly than before with the foreign media.

Country image perceptions, misinformed though they often are, constitute an important dimension of any country's nation-brand equity *(see Chart 1)*. Nation-brand equity may be viewed as the tangible and intangible, internal and external assets or liabilities of the nation. The model in *Chart 1* shows how country image perceptions represent an external asset (or liability) within the overall framework of a country's nation-brand equity. Country image perceptions may not always accord with reality and where this occurs, a conscious strategy needs to be implemented in order to ensure that negative or outdated perceptions do not damage overall nation-brand equity. On the other hand, a negative image may be an accurate reflection of underlying problems such as high crime levels, government corruption, and so on. In this case, remedial action to tackle the real problems needs to occur before any branding work can be undertaken.

CHART 1

Model of asset-based nation-brand equity



Source: Dinnie, K., Nation Branding – Concepts, Issues, Practice (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008)

It is well known that in any situation, whether political or social, rumors will rush in to fill an information vacuum. This was demonstrated starkly in the spectacular fear-mongering indulged in by many international media organizations in their coverage of the Fukushima-related aftermath of the March 11 earthquake and tsunami. It would be misguided to chastise the international media for their coverage

of the tsunami, as that was obviously a tragic event on a huge scale. The people of Japan and the rest of the world needed to be informed of what was going on. Some journalists and camera crews showed great personal courage in entering the disaster zone and reporting back amid the aftershocks and destruction that prevailed there.

However, the international media's coverage of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant crisis was more questionable. Although the danger from radioactive material leaking from the Fukushima plant was real, and continues to cause concern, the international media undoubtedly exaggerated the scale of the threat. Even well-respected international news organizations contributed to a hysterical 'run for your life' discourse that not only inflated the real extent of the threat, but also contributed to a kind of psychological abuse of the residents of Japan, sowing panic in people's minds when they were already in a vulnerable and traumatized state. One illustration of this was the misreporting in the British media of the official advice given by the British Embassy to British nationals that they should "consider leaving" Tokyo. This advice was shamelessly altered by sensationalist British media – including the so-called quality press, not just the grubby tabloids – for whom the "consider leaving" advice morphed into headlines wrongly declaring that British nationals had been "told to leave." The change from "consider leaving" to "leave" may seem insignificant but it is not. There is an immense difference between being advised to "consider doing" something compared to being advised to "do" something.

The UK's Chief Scientific Advisor, Sir John Beddington, addressed this directly during the crisis when he was asked at what stage he would change the UK's official advice from "consider leaving" to "leave." Sir John's answer was as follows: "Only in the worst-case scenarios. The reason we said 'consider leaving' – there are major disruptions to transportation and supply chains in the whole of Japan. We are not advising that people leave due to the risk of radiation. Even if a plume were to reach Tokyo, it would not pose major health risks."

Sir John's comments were made during a telephone briefing with the British Ambassador to Tokyo, David Warren, and published on the website of the British Chamber of Commerce in Japan. But his comments were largely ignored by journalists and editors. For the headline writers of UK newspapers and their websites, calm, reasoned statements such as "even if a plume were to reach Tokyo, it would not pose major health risks" were ignored in favor of alarmist, hysteria-inducing headlines along the lines of "British citizens told to leave Tokyo." If people had believed this misinformation, the consequences would have been severe. There would have been a frantic rush by British citizens to the nearest airports, an unnecessary dislocation of people's lives, and an increased sense of panic and abandonment amongst the local Japanese population.

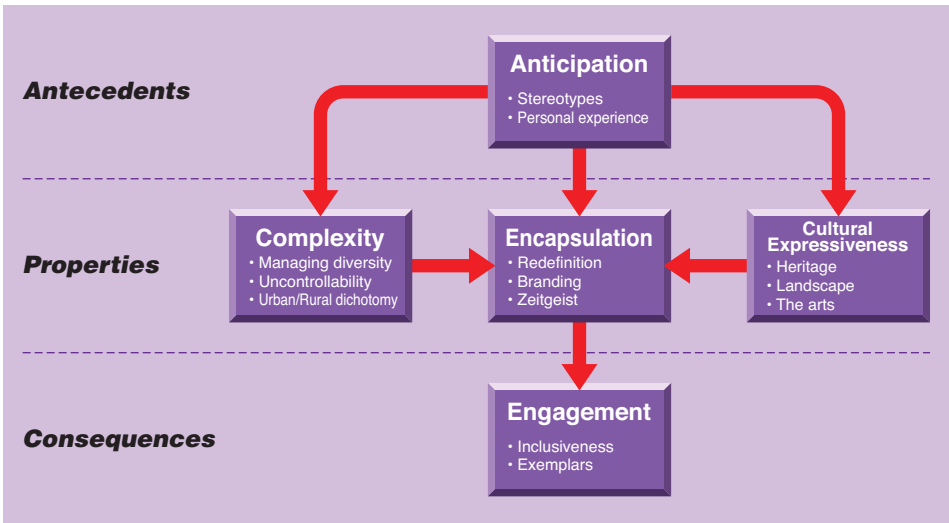
Two or three decades ago, in the pre-internet era, the international media organizations would have got away with this irresponsible fear-mongering. Fortunately, there are many British citizens living in Tokyo and elsewhere in Japan who blogged their indignant responses to the British media's branding of Japan as a hopeless disaster from which people should immediately flee. It is difficult to gauge, though, to what extent individual bloggers managed to counterbalance the dominant sensationalist media discourse. The hegemony of the mainstream media may be threatened in our notionally democratic internet-enabled era, but the mainstream media still exert considerable power in their framing of the news agenda, as became apparent in the days and weeks following the March 11 disaster. During the crisis, it was possible to search out information online in order to be informed about what was really going on. One could read blogs written by foreign residents who were living in Tokyo and one could seek out statements made by independent experts on the nuclear issue. But if one had not previously had any personal involvement with Japan, one would probably not have made this effort, and instead would have relied on the mainstream media, which prioritize sensational headlines over credible reporting.

Throughout the crisis, if their comments were too calm and lacked shock impact, the potentially reassuring contributions of authoritative sources were relegated to lowly paragraphs within stories rather than featuring as attention-grabbing headlines. It was necessary to sift through a mass of misinformation in order to find sane voices such as Imperial College London's Professor Gerry Thomas, the Director of the Chernobyl Tissue Bank, who criticized the undue emphasis that the media was putting on the nuclear issue as follows: "What concerns me most is that we're actually focusing on the wrong disaster. The real disaster is the tsunami and the number of people who've lost their lives that way. We're focusing on a disaster that isn't a disaster."

Although the Fukushima incident has had very serious effects upon the surrounding area, it has not proved to be the Chernobyl-like catastrophe that the media talked up in their alarmist coverage of the crisis. But the incident naturally triggered a debate within Japan regarding the wisdom of relying on nuclear energy in a country so prone to regular earthquakes that threaten the integrity of nuclear power plants such as Fukushima. The issue here is not really one of branding; it is more fundamental, existential even. Japanese Prime Minister Naoto Kan has attempted to set out a future energy policy for Japan that is less reliant on nuclear energy, but he has encountered enormous resistance from vested political and business interests associated with the nuclear industry. In a speech to mark the 66th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Prime Minister Kan clearly articulated his desire to reduce the country's dependence on nuclear energy: "We will deeply reflect over the conventional belief that nuclear energy is safe, thoroughly look into the cause of the accident and – to secure safety – implement fundamental measures." He went on to say: "I will reduce Japan's reliance on nuclear power, aiming at creating a society that will not rely on atomic power generation." Unfortunately for Kan and those who support his stance, it looks far from certain whether any fundamental change to Japan's energy policy will actually take place. Kan's popularity sank so low during the crisis that mounting pressure led him to announce his intention to resign as prime minister. It remains to be seen whether his successor has the desire or ability to take on the powerful conservative forces that support an expansion of the country's nuclear power industry.

CHART 2

The category flow model of nation branding



Source: Dinnie, K., Nation Branding – Concepts, Issues, Practice (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2008)

In the future, if there is a lack of transparency on the part of the relevant authorities, harmful rumors will continue to abound regarding any incidents that occur at nuclear power plants, whether it is at Fukushima or elsewhere. The DPJ government has taken steps in the right direction to address this issue, with Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano announcing on August 15 that Japan's nuclear safety agency will be placed under the control of the country's Environment Ministry rather than under the control of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, which has promoted the use of nuclear energy. Greater transparency will increase public trust in the information they are being provided with, but clearly the deeper issue is whether Japan reins back its reliance on nuclear energy or not.

Regardless of the political decisions that are made on the question of Japan's future energy policy, there exists some scope for nation branding strategy to strengthen perceptions of Japan held by foreign audiences, so that Japan's country image is not excessively determined by the disasters that inevitably occur within any country that lies in an earthquake zone. When foreign audiences know little or nothing about a country, then media coverage of disasters that happen there will dominate perceptions to the exclusion of all the good things that characterize the country. Therefore it is incumbent upon governments at national, regional and civic levels to actively develop their place brands, establishing a reservoir of goodwill and familiarity that can mitigate the negativity and drama that surround sudden and unforeseen disasters.

As the model in *Chart 2* shows, one of the key properties or characteristics of nation branding is 'uncontrollability.' Countless factors are beyond the control of policymakers as they attempt to develop their country's nation branding strategy. Not only natural disasters such as the March 11 earthquake and tsunami, but also the behavior of individual citizens or politicians, the performances of sporting teams, portrayals of the country in films or television shows, and a plethora of other factors defy any attempts to control them. The response of some people to this scale of uncontrollability is to shrug their shoulders and not even attempt to conduct nation branding, given the difficulty of operating in an environment of such high uncertainty and unpredictability. But such an attitude is defeatist and leaves the country's brand completely at the mercy of external forces, which will rarely be benign.

A more respectable response is to acknowledge that, although some of the nation brand's environment is uncontrollable, there are many areas in which policymakers can make positive interventions. In the case of Japan, this needs to go beyond reliance on manga, anime, and kawaii ambassadors. It could be argued that in Japan, the most imaginative and strategic place branding is conducted at city and regional level rather than at national level. Interesting short case studies of local place branding in Japan have been published by the Japan Local Government Centre (http://www.jlgc.org.uk/en/pdfs/casestudies/march2011-regionalPR.pdf), highlighting the strategies recently employed to promote Yamanashi Prefecture, Nara Prefecture, and Kumamoto Prefecture.

Yamanashi Prefecture's focus has been on promoting the Koshu variety of grape and the wine that is produced in the 80 vineyards of that region. A collaborative approach has been adopted, uniting various stakeholders that together form the Koshu of Japan Association, including the Kofu Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Yamanashi Wine-Makers Association and the Koshu City Chamber of Commerce. Nara Prefecture has taken a different approach to its place promotion, investing in a design-led strategy based on the Sento-kun mascot designed by famous sculptor Satoshi Yabuuchi. Although initially criticized for not being kawaii enough, the Sento-kun mascot rode out its negative reception and is claimed to have generated income from licensing of over 4.8bn yen. Kumamoto Prefecture has used a celebrity ambassador approach to its place branding in the form of Kumamoto-born Suzanne, targeting Tokyo residents through a weekly radio broadcast, a music video, and numerous personal appearances to promote the prefecture.

In their different ways these place branding strategies at regional level contribute to the overarching country image of Japan and help ensure that when bad news arrives due to uncontrollable factors, harmful rumors do not constitute the sole source of perceptions about the country. JS

Dr. Keith Dinnie is senior lecturer in international marketing at Breda University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. He is the author of "Nation Branding – Concepts, Issues, Practice," the world's first academic textbook on nation branding, and director of the Centre for Nation Branding (www.centrefornationbranding.com).