

Can SA's brand image recover in time for Confed Cup?

 By [Dr Nikolaus Eberl](#)

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Commenting on South Africa's decision to ban the Dalai Lama from attending the now-postponed 2010 Peace Conference, CNN correspondent Nkepile Mabuse concluded that “organisers wanted to use this conference to showcase the nation as a champion of human rights” and that “this decision by the South African government has tainted the country's image”. This begs the question: how severe a tainting has Brand South Africa suffered from this incident?

What can be done in the remaining 80 days to reverse the damage done, when 9 billion viewers from 130 countries are expected to turn their attention to the host of the Confederations Cup and the international media will look for savory stories from the hosting nation?

And just what exactly is at stake when it comes to recovering the national brand image?

Acts as a shortcut

As with commercial brands, the name of a country brand acts as our shortcut to an informed buying decision. Says Simon Anholt, author of the quarterly Nation Brand Index:

“ Whether we're thinking about going somewhere on holiday, buying a product that's made in a certain country, applying for an overseas job, moving to a new town, donating money to a war-torn or famine-struck region, or choosing between films or plays or CDs made by artists in different countries, we rely on our perception of those places to make the decision-making process a bit easier, a bit faster, a bit more efficient.” ”

This is why the benefits of a strong nation brand are manifold - from increased foreign direct investment (FDI) to a boost in tourism, a higher demand for exports, and an influx in top talent.

In fact, previous FIFA host Germany experienced a dramatic change in her branding fortunes when the world experienced the other side of the German people in 2006 - not just the efficiency and effectiveness of great engineers, but the friendliness and warmth of ordinary citizens. Within one year of hosting the world's biggest sporting event, Germany recorded a 33% increase in tourism, exports went up by 14%, FDI by 19%, and almost a million new jobs were created, especially in the SME sector.

Branding power

Referring to the branding power of hosting 2010 in his recent State of the Nation Address, President Kgalema Motlanthe said South Africa must use the 2010 FIFA World Cup to showcase the humanity of the country and the entire continent: “The true legacy of the event will be in our ability to showcase South African and African hospitality and humanity - to change once and for all perceptions of our country and our continent among peoples of the world. That depends on all of us, and to that we can attach no price.”

Since Q2/2005 when the first Nation Brand Index was published, Brand SA has slipped from 22nd place to 37th in Q2/2008, out of 50 nations surveyed. This indicates that SA's brand promise “Alive with Possibility” is not delivered optimally to investors and visitors alike, and that major brand touch-points (such as safety, telecommunications, investor relations and corporate governance) are currently out of alignment with the national brand promise.

From a branding point of view, possibly the greatest threat to SA's brand image is what political analyst Chalmers Johnson calls “blowback”: the unintended consequences of an unsympathetic or cynical foreign policy.

Backlash and blowback

What consumer backlash is to a brand, blowback is to a nation: when the disconnect between the brand message and corporate behaviour becomes too great, then public protest tends to be intense in proportion to the strength of the brand. This is because, according to Anholt,

“ a brand, as the clear, highly visible manifestation of a country or a corporation, is as much an invitation to complain — indeed, a target for grudges — as it is a guarantee of quality... the higher you raise people's expectations with a brand, and the more you invest in making big public promises, the greater the disappointment when you fail to keep them. ”

The latest exhibit that testifies to the power of nation branding comes from the US - at a time when international confidence levels in Brand America had dropped to record lows and, as President Obama observed in his inaugural address, “a sapping of confidence across our land - a nagging fear that America's decline is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights” had taken hold of its citizens.

Commenting on the sudden reversal of America's international brand image, Germany's daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* summed up the transformation of Brand America thus:

“ America's weaknesses were not only George W Bush and his clique, but rather the intellectual position that spread throughout the country: an imperialist megalomania, a power trip, that didn't leave room for friends. It led the country to lose its attraction for the first time. Obama's greatest achievement was that he has reactivated this magnetism. Suddenly people across the world are looking benevolently at America, at this positive and dynamic society that allows so much freedom. ”

To paraphrase JFK, maybe we should not so much ask what 2010 can do for us, but what we can do for 2010 - and in particular how each and every action we take within the next 80 days will either strengthen or detract from the national brand image?

Task of nation branding

It was the founding father of our nation, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, who summed up the task of nation branding when he said in his inaugural address in 1994 that change “needs unity of purpose. It needs action. It requires us all to work together to bring an end to division, an end to suspicion and build a nation united in our diversity.”

Also in his inaugural speech, Obama made it very clear that it is the product, not the packaging, that ultimately makes or breaks a national brand:

“ Those values upon which our success depends - hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism - ... have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility - a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. ”

To make the 2010 vision come true “to strengthen the South African and African image”, we need to ask the tough questions when assessing the perceptions that the world has of both the country and continental brand.

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