

Marketing Innovations for Sustainable Destinations

19 Marketing and Managing Nation Branding during Prolonged Crisis: the Case of Israel

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Introduction

The Middle East generally and Israel specifically draw much attention in the international media. Positive coverage and esteem for Israel's achievements have been accompanied by reports of the wars with its Arab neighbours, violent conflicts, and terror attacks as central components of the country's international media coverage since the 1970s, and even earlier. The result is a problematic public image of Israel, which has impeded tourism, investment, and immigration. Israel's decisions makers, foreign and tourism ministries, Jewish organizations and other players face an extremely difficult challenge regarding the country's problematic media and public image. These players believe that the country's special attractions, diverse culture and history, its centrality to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and its advanced economy and technology can potentially attain a much better public image and make Israel more attractive. Using the multi-step model for altering a place's image (Avraham & Ketter, 2008a) this chapter analyses strategies that have been applied to restore Israel's positive image. The analysis of Israel's image and its marketing efforts can help us better understand how marketers manage nation branding and marketing during prolonged crises and under constant conflict.

Nation's Image, Branding and Public Diplomacy

A country's image has many components, including location, leadership, kind of regime, economic situation, government stability and more (Kunczik, 1997). Although the design of an image seems highly dynamic, it is actually based on a stereotype. We think of a country in a stereotypical manner, hence these images are so hard to change (Elizur, 1987). Many places internalize the importance of their image, and invest much time and effort to improve it. A nation's media image has to be kept distinct from its public image: the former concerns the country's portrayal in the mass media, the latter its perception in international public opinion (Avraham, 2000). A foremost field of knowledge used by marketers to create countries' positive images is 'place promotion'. This concept has acquired many definitions (see Short et al., 2000), but Nielsen (2001) stresses the difficulty of achieving a positive image, especially regarding an image-related crisis: 'Promoting a destination in normal circumstances is a difficult task, but promoting a destination that faces tourism challenges – whether from negative press, or from infrastructure damage caused by natural disasters or man-made disasters – is an altogether more arduous task' (pp. 207-208).

To improve both their media and their public image, nations apply the tool of public diplomacy, a term with many different definitions. Malon (1985, in Gilboa, 2006: 717) claims that policymakers typically define public diplomacy as ‘a direct communication with foreign people, with the aim of affecting their thinking and ultimately, that of their government’; in most cases the goal is to create a favorable image of nation’s policies, actions, political and economical system (Gilboa, 2000). According to Hassman (2008), who offers many definitions of public diplomacy, it means expanding the dialogue among the nation’s citizens, establishing relationships among the different communities, and understanding each one’s culture and needs; these goals are achieved through the press, electronic media, the Internet, and also through promoting cultural, educational and scientific exchange, mounting art exhibitions, and providing information to journalists. Recent years have seen increasing use of ‘branding’ in place marketing and place image-making. The academic literature contains analyses of many case studies of countries and tourist destinations that have sought to re-brand themselves (e.g., Anholt, 2005; Dinnie, 2008).

Managing a Nation’s Image During Crises

When dealing with a nation’s image crisis, Parsons (1996, in Ritchie et al., 2003) suggests a method to distinguish three types of crisis: (1) immediate crises, where little or no warning exists, as in the case of the 2004 tsunami in South-East Asia; (2) emerging crises, which develop slowly, and may be stopped or limited, as in the UK foot-and-mouth epidemic; (3) sustained crises, which may last for weeks, months or years. In any of the three types of crisis listed, the media play a significant part in handling the situation. The crisis in the Middle East in general and in Israel specifically belongs to the third kind of crisis. Since the Western powers departed the region in the 1940s, conflicts and wars have characterized it. The result is a problematic image of an unsafe area, dangerous for tourists with every case of violence reported in the media turning into a prolonged tourism crisis in all the surrounding countries. Mansfeld (1994), for example, describes tourism to Israel as rising and falling cycles of numbers of visitors, depending on the particular conflict the country was involved in.

Israel’s International Image 1948-2009

Israel public and media image has undergone major changes over the years. After World War II there was generally little international interest in the Middle East. Following Israel’s establishment in 1948 the country was perceived as a place for Jewish immigrants who were building the only democratic country in the region, with manifold economic difficulties; its very survival was subject to doubt. Israel was perceived as the David, against the Goliath of the Arab countries, which failed to destroy it (Elizur, 1987). Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six Day War moved the power component to the center of Israel’s international image; its control of the territories, the next wars with Arab states (1973, 1982, 1991, 2006), and two Palestinian intifadas (1987, 2000 and the Gaza conflict in 2009) have reinforced the centrality of this component in the country’s image. The media’s tendency to sympathize with the weaker side of a conflict (the Palestinians), the Arab states’ intensive exploitation of international organizations, their public relations and their sophisticated promotion of the ‘victim image’ of the Palestinians have made Israel the Goliath in the conflict (Gilboa, 2006; Navon, 2006; Galloway, 2005). While this general description of Israel’s media image holds true around the world, there is a difference between its perception in the American and European media. In America,

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