

'BRAND CANADA' OR BRANDED CANADIAN?

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The federal government is trying to provide Canada with a recognizable international "brand." Recently the focus has been on our role as high-tech innovators. The dangers in such a narrow focus are that the brand will be of only temporary use and won't be relevant in all applications. We should aim instead to project brands that derive from our "master brand," our national character. To discover that character we need to promote the study of Canadian history.

Le gouvernement fédéral cherche à créer une « image de marque » qui distinguerait le Canada sur la scène internationale. On a récemment mis l'accent sur la capacité d'innovation technologique du pays. Mais c'est là une voie très étroite dont l'usage risque de n'être que provisoire et les champs d'application fort limités. Mieux vaudrait privilégier une image induite par ce « marqueur » originel qu'est notre identité nationale. Encore faudrait-il découvrir cette identité et pour ce faire, il faudra favoriser l'étude de notre histoire.

The notion of a "Brand Canada" to enhance Canada's international presence and economic interests has been making the rounds recently. While not a new idea, it has gained currency in the globalizing "new" economy. Nations have marketed themselves for a long time, but branding is quite a different matter, not to be undertaken lightly or haphazardly.

A "brand" is the market perception of a commercial item—the psychological anchoring of that thing, often by association to experience, preferably good experience. Its purpose is to provide a personality or a sensory shorthand symbol to represent all the desirable ideas about the thing, so as to increase the market's understanding and acceptance of it. The goal, of course, is increased sales. Well-regarded brands and their icons generate hidden assets, or "brand equity," that give them distinct advantages and deliver tremendous marketing value.

The *brand-as-organization* perspective, which is more relevant to branding a state, focuses on associations with people, culture, programs, and values. It identifies the origin of an item and differentiates it from its competitors. Branding thus appears to be a natural extension of the nation-state's

marketing efforts. Global integration and the resulting caprice of trade flows create particular urgency about branding. Moreover, the high priests of capitalism evidently understand—or at least appreciate—branding. Thus Canada becomes a land of "dynamic, high-tech innovators" to interest global capital and customers. It may not show especial independence or integrity, but the objective here is favourable financial results.

Canada's branding effort can manifest itself in many ways. It affects and is affected by every action and statement from the government and its agents domestically and abroad. It's in the government's website design and content. It's inherent in the "Team Canada" efforts, both sporting and commercial, not just in the teams' actions and words but in their very existence and carriage. The nation-state's brand inheres within its people just as a corporate brand is tied to the corporate culture.

The goal of Canada's branding effort is similar to typical commercial goals, but branding a nation is much grander than branding a business. Some uses of national branding, such as encouraging global capital to locate in the

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country, are vital to the economy and its future. Along with supporting Canadian commercial ventures extra-nationally, this is the most obvious commercial rationale for a Brand Canada. Non-commercially, the maple leaf itself is already a brand that means, "Treat me well, I'm a decent and pleasant North American."

Creating and perpetuating a brand forces the assumption of and adherence to a particular overriding persona. But a state as economically, culturally, and politically diverse as Canada can not be reduced to a single interest. What works for one industrial sector, region, or market may not work in another. An effective brand image must apply broadly to the entire nation and its many markets. Any brand designed to suit the short-term needs of a single national interest is inherently unstable. To make it the foundation of a strategic image change is folly. Too many other factors affect the nation's brand, some in ways that can't be anticipated or measured. Thus Ron Richardson and Jim Story of the Asia-Pacific Foundation argue that current initiatives to create a Brand Canada focusing on high-tech commerce are misguided. Perceptions of Canadianism that might not be directly relevant to being a high-tech innovator (the Brand Canada endorsed by the federal ministries of industry, trade and finance), may be significant to other external audiences. They note, for instance, that "an entrepreneurial high-tech 'brand' is not necessarily the key to developing Asian markets."

The creation and development of an international perception is important, even crucial. But rather than focus on this commercial brand, Canada would be better off developing a core "master" brand, from which sub-brand images could flow. For example, if Americans win at any cost, as their master brand suggests, then US high-tech industry will innovate dynamically and aggressively. If Germans are precise, as German engineering and literature suggest, Germans may be innovative, but precisely so. For Canada, the "high-tech innovator" message may be a suitable sub-brand if it is consistent with the master brand (whatever that may be). But it must be created with long-term intent. How long will the sector be hot, and how long will these specific traits be positive "triggers"? At the very least, during the long lag while a perceptual shift takes place in the market the ideal international commercial brand may revert to "productive" or "conservative" or so forth. These things are cyclical, as any study of recent history will attest.

In fact, Canada's master brand already exists. It is a brand-as-organization image that rests in the country's national character, which is itself a special part of the accepted collective understanding of the past sometimes referred to as the national myth. Out of this myth arises not only our character but our master brand. Our character is our master brand. And it continues to evolve.

The paradigm of national character and myth both creating and being refined by history is not new, but its parallel to the commercial branding experience is striking. A product is released and positioned in the market. The market develops its conception of the product based on the original brand positioning and its own inferences, conceptions, and associations. Based on feedback, the marketer then refines the brand position and applies the message to entrench it in the market psyche.

As with commercial brands, consistent presentation of the national character is essential. For most Europeans, a millennium of activity informs their brand. The Germanic and Gallic characters, for instance, have been developing since Roman times. Other nations have more or less of a shared past to draw upon (contrast Japan and Canada, for example).

Typically, a national character is relatively easy to perpetuate because of a well-refined cultural homogeneity in the more significant aspects of the national myth. Consider the United States. It tells the world by word and deed that it is aggressive, outgoing, competitive. That reputation precedes it, both in areas where such a reputation helps but also where it hurts.

Unfortunately, we Canadians have difficulty isolating our master brand. So, the notion of the Canadian character shifts and develops *ad hoc* as immediate need warrants. Finding a satisfactory Canadian master brand may be tricky because of the inherently disconnected Canadian character resulting from geography, law, politics, etc. There is also the (possibly superficial) matter of reconciling a singular master brand-national characterization with the Canadian experience of embracing and enshrining the historic nationalities of its immigrants, rather than assimilating them within a homogenous Canadian identity.

An obviously formidable first step in creating and sustaining a national brand is having the entire nation accept and live that character. To do so, especially within the Canadian context, the national character must be animated by

the central consistency which informs its history. Despite the absence of a larger-than-life civil war and no romantic secession, there is in the Canadian past a noble history of making a society work.

If Canadians' interest in the televised re-enactment of the Canadian experience, *Canada: A People's History*, is any indication, we are institutionally—not personally—ambivalent about our past. Of course, Canada's missing sense of national identity cannot be overcome by keeping the legacy generations well-fed with American culture, however alluring. A nation's historical view of itself is crucial to the perpetuation of national character, so a consistent Canadian history is an important part of the childhood educational curriculum across the country. Unfortunately, the deep thinkers who have all but erased history study from the classroom blackboard have lost sight of—or deliberately ignored—the connection between the nation's character and its understanding of its history, not to mention the further connection between that character or brand and the nation's strength, prosperity and cohesiveness. Ignorance of this link leads us to see interregional disputes and disaffection as diseases themselves, rather than as symptoms of a more fundamental ailment. We fail to cohere because we don't know why we should. That is inconsistent with brand building.

Where does all this leave Canada? Our national government is trying to remain relevant for the high-tech world of the future and is branding Canada to address specific, sectoral needs. In other words, a political entity that represents a diversity of interests and purposes at home and abroad is implementing a commercial concept that demands an unfailingly singular image and message. Branding requires focus. The only way it will work is if the government takes a concerted approach employing the master brand/sub-brand methodology. The sub-brands should augment the master brand with particular need-specific positioning—for example, putting the power of the brand to work in the new economy. The master brand, on the other hand, has to speak categorically, meaningfully, and believably to each and every Canadian interest. Because at bottom the nation is really nothing more than its citizenry, the only thing that can achieve that objective with integrity is the national character. The larger problem, then, is stepping back to arrive at an acceptable, honest definition of the Canadian character.

Will Canadian regionalism prevent this? The regional peculiarities of the UK, the US, Belgium and Switzerland have not been a significant obstacle to their branding experiences. Despite many powerful regional idiosyncrasies, core constituents were isolated to establish national characters and brands. In any event, if the broader national character is to be of any use, particularly in matters of international concern, regionally-specific identities must be secondary.

Creating an image that is not reinforced by action, both deliberate and otherwise, will not work. Without continual, consistent behaviour to support a managed brand image, the market will become confused and disbelief (“cognitive dissonance”) will set in. Confusing incongruities give the brand an air of fraud and render it impotent. Thus an historically-based long view of brand needs to be taken.

We ought to be mindful in our quest for a new national brand that we are not merely making clapboard sets for a grand global stage play. In massaging the national character to found a master brand, the state must not act purely to serve the interests of an external audience. The development of a characterization and brand has to be as much or more for internal purposes as it is for others. Not doing so will result in schizophrenia or, at the very least, a national absence of “self.” The centre may hold, but it will be dubious. What's more, such whorish behaviour will lock the country into a hollow pattern of repositioning to please the audience and acquire its money. On the basis of market research and mathematical authority, companies will change, reposition and otherwise reinvent their brands to suit the market's whimsical tastes. Nations cannot.

Success at understanding, developing, and perpetuating a strong national myth and character is a slow process and will not have an immediate effect on today's Brand Canada. In the longer run, however, doing branding properly would be extraordinarily beneficial to the country, its citizens and our many international interests. The absence of a broadly known and accepted history does little for the long-term health of Canada itself. Without it, the notion of a “Brand Canada” is a sham.

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