

# Nation Branding and National Identity: Desperately Seeking Singapore

## INTRODUCTION

This September some 25,000 visitors converged in Singapore for the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund and related activities. The government spent approximately \$100 million (not including the labour costs of all the public sector employees involved) on the preparations for meetings, which ranged from heightened security measures to wiping down railings and planting flowers. About 2000 volunteers pitched in, and private sponsorship contributed \$30 million to the funding. Economic returns were estimated at \$110 million in contracts and business opportunities for companies here, \$50 million revenue in tourism and retail receipts and \$10 million in spending by financial institutions organising events.<sup>1</sup> But the main argument put forward was that the real pay-off was more intangible: branding Singapore.

While the meetings were underway, the National Marketing Action Committee was in the process of hiring a company to conduct an 'umbrella positioning exercise' for Singapore. One aim of this exercise is to develop a guide for ministries and statutory boards which now carry out their own marketing using a plethora of different taglines and images (e.g. "Uniquely Singapore"—STB; "City in the Garden"—URA; "Global City, World of Opportunities"—Singapore 2006).

In seeking to strengthen its national brand, Singapore is following in the footsteps of countries like Spain, India and New Zealand. Country or nation brands have existed as long as countries themselves. France is associated with romance, the United States with opportunity or liberty, Switzerland with precision and efficiency. In a more globalised, high-tech and information-rich world, there is heightened international competition for investments, tourists and talent. The challenge has become one of seizing the attention and engaging the hearts and minds of the audience. Some academics argue that places—and by extension, countries—offer "the greatest untapped branding opportunities."<sup>2</sup> One paper has argued that even financial decisions supposedly guided by hard data are affected by the general impressions that decision-makers have of a country.

A national brand is thus no longer seen as an optional nicety nor should nations simply accept the brand conferred on them by the vagaries of history; increasingly, branding is becoming a key competitive asset. What is a country's reputation worth? A recent survey by a leading nation brand specialist, Stephen Anholt, attempted to calculate the value of nation brands and put the value of the Singapore brand at US\$106 billion or 100% of 2004 GDP (25<sup>th</sup> out of 32 countries).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Figures in the paragraph from Li Xueying "A well-oiled event - Thanks to Team S'pore", *The Straits Times*, 22 Sep 2006, Erica Tay, "PM thanks S'poreans for making meetings a success," *The Straits Times*, 21 Sep 2006 and Lim Wei Chean, "Building 1,032 offices in 45 days for mega event", *The Straits Times*, 12 May 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Nigel Morgan, Annette Pritchard and Roger Pride, "Introduction", *Destination Branding: Creating the Unique Destination Proposition* 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann: 2004).

<sup>3</sup>GMI. *How the World Views the World: The Anholt Nation Brands Index* (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2005), <http://www.nationbrandindex.com/nbiregister.php?id=nbicq3> (accessed on Oct 7, 2006).

Several aspects of the process of nation branding since the 1990s distinguish it from earlier attempts. First, now that countries are gradually recognizing the potential value of their brands, they are beginning to employ professional marketing methods and strategies (and professionals) once used mainly by multi-national corporations like Sony. While some countries like the US have always been more open to employing business practices in the public sector, others, like the UK, regard this move with more ambivalence and its nation branding efforts are sometime hampered by a deep cultural gulf between the public and private sectors.

Second, countries are devoting more attention and resources to harness the public relations opportunities provided by major international events to promote their image to the world. For instance, the 2000 Sydney Olympics is thought to have fundamentally transformed international impressions of Australia and contributed to its current status as the country most people aspire to visit.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the role of the media and technology in a shaping country's international image has grown disproportionately. New Zealand's tourism received a significant boost from having its striking landscape appear in "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy of films. It maximized the benefits of such media exposure and assisting in having related articles appeared in key publications such as *National Geographic*, *Conde Naste Traveller* and *The Sunday Times*. (Its digital animation industry also garnered attention from having produced the special effects for the films.<sup>5</sup>) On a less spectacular scale, a country's website is now seen as a crucial element of its branding efforts especially with regards to tourism. The internet enables small countries to engage in more sophisticated and targeted marketing in a manner that would not have been cost-efficient in the past.

## LESSONS AND QUESTIONS FOR SINGAPORE

The countries whose branding efforts have been repeatedly cited as successes recently are Spain, New Zealand, Australia and Ireland. The United Kingdom Cool Britannia campaign in the 1990s sought to shake off the UK's rather staid image of a country rooted in the past and replace it with one of the UK as modern and cosmopolitan. This has received less attention from academics who see it as only partly successful as it failed to reflect some of Britain's key strengths and the reality of life for a significant proportion of the population. Interest is now also developing in India whose nation brand seems to have evolved in more spontaneous manner since about 2000<sup>6</sup> and in Dubai which has made rapid strides in recent years.<sup>7</sup> Below is a summary of the main points that appear in the academic literature on the subject and the questions they raise for Singapore.

Any brand is basically social — it provides emotional and identity value to users. Singapore is better known for efficiency and pragmatism, and its security, stability, business-orientation and infrastructure which make up the tangible and functional

<sup>4</sup> GMI. *How the World Sees the World: The Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index* (Second Quarter, 2005), <http://www.nationbrandindex.com/nbiregister.php?id=nbig2> (accessed on Oct 7 2006). Also see Nigel Morgan, Annette Pritchard & Rachel Piggott, "New Zealand, 100% Pure: The creation of a powerful niche destination brand," *Journal of Brand Management* (April 2002): 341.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan et al. "New Zealand, 100% Pure."

<sup>6</sup> Randall Frost, "Mapping a Country's Future". brand.channel.com, 19 April 2004. [www.brandchannel.com/features\\_effect.asp?pf\\_id=206](http://www.brandchannel.com/features_effect.asp?pf_id=206) (accessed on Oct 9, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Sunil Varughese, "Dubai- mirage?" brand.channel.com, 27 June 2005 [http://www.brandchannel.com/features\\_profile.asp?pr\\_id=238](http://www.brandchannel.com/features_profile.asp?pr_id=238) (accessed on 8 Oct, 2006).

components of branding. Is Singapore equipped to manage and play up the emotive aspects of a brand which can sometimes be the key differentiating factor? What has it learnt from previous branding efforts?

The cornerstone of successful nation branding is objective and ongoing research to understand how target audiences perceive the country. Usually this cannot be done effectively by people from that country as it is extremely difficult to remove the narrative filters built up over a life-time. Research will also yield the gaps in the marketplace that the country brand can fill. As the many branding efforts of the agencies demonstrate, Singapore has multiple and varied target audiences ranging from MNCs to tourists coming for health check-ups. Who are the primary audiences for the nation brand (and who decides who these are), and what are their current perceptions of Singapore?

Developing a successful nation brand involves charting a course through difficult terrain. First, the brand must be rooted in reality and be credible. Otherwise the audience(s) will sense the dissonance and lose trust in the brand. A good example is the failure of initial attempt to improve the image of the United States among Muslims through public relations (e.g. TV shows, a magazine) without altering its basic foreign policy orientation.<sup>8</sup> Next, a country brand must have some focus and be distinctive. If it tries to do everything, it risks being bland and failing to distinguish itself from other countries – think of all the forgettable and bland country taglines with the words 'life' or 'experience'. Complicating the process is the fact that country brands do not have the luxury of starting with a blank slate in the same way that a new product might. As one academic put it: "more accurately what they [marketers] are attempting to do is to co-ordinate an existing brand relationship, to work with and often gradually change existing perceptions (and misperceptions) of places."<sup>9</sup> In fact, some academics argue that it is easier to create new positive associations than it is to refute old ones.

According to one survey, Singapore's brand ranks first in terms of all-roundedness and consistency<sup>10</sup> and it generally fares well in surveys of the economic environment and governance.<sup>11</sup> It is now trying to develop new positive associations such as being a place of opportunity, creativity, research and development. Are there other existing positive associations that should be emphasized? What qualities are both unique and appealing? What negative associations does Singapore have, especially in the western media, and how can the nation branding exercise address these? How much energy should be spent doing so?

Consistency and coordination across different parts of government are necessary to successful nation branding. It cannot be seen purely as a communications issue and left to a communications office to manage. Nor is country branding the same as tourism branding even though in many countries, tourism offices command the largest proportion of the budget for branding and are integral to the process. At times, the image projected by a tourism authority can be at odds with other aims. Ireland and Scotland, for example, promoted themselves as tourist destinations by using images of the countryside, quaint old-world charm, and warm but unsophisticated people. This was not the image that

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<sup>8</sup> Morgan, Kotler and Gertner, "Country as Brand, Product and Beyond" in *Destination Branding*.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan and Pritchett, "Meeting the Destination Branding Challenge" in *Destination Branding*.

<sup>10</sup> GMI. *How the World Sees the World: The Anholt Nation Brands Index* (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2005): 5, <http://www.nationbrandindex.com/nbiregister.php?id=nbig4> (accessed 7 Oct 2006).

<sup>11</sup> For example, the rankings by the World Bank, PERC and BERI.

would attract American and Japanese IT companies to locate their semi-conductor plants there.<sup>12</sup>

Views of countries are formed not just by what a country says about itself, but by what it does (and how), by its products, by what it looks like (or what people think it looks like), by what people say about it and by the company it keeps.<sup>13</sup> It would never be possible to align all of these elements, which encompass everything from foreign policy to manufacturing. However, what level of coordination should Singapore aim for in order to strengthen its brand? Who will be responsible for coordination in the long-run? What changes to processes and structures will this require at different levels? How will a balance be established between an umbrella nation brand and the sub-brands of the various agencies and ministries which target different audiences?

The involvement of the private sector and even individuals is also important to nation branding. Spain's re-branding used Joan Miro's sun symbol "to unify a myriad of activities, publicity events and ads even though the different programmes are driven by both the public and private sectors." Designer Adolfo Dominguez, architect Santiago Calatrava and filmmaker Pedro Almodovar pooled their talent to assisted the Spanish government. The expansion of Spanish MNCs like Telefonica also contributed to Spain's rebranding.<sup>14</sup> Korea is also seeking to leverage on its private sector brands. Its "Vision for Brand Power Korea 2010", aims to have 70% of total exports in Korean brand-name products and to have at least ten Korean brand names in the world's 100 most recognizable brands by 2010.<sup>15</sup> It is now using the nation brand "Dynamic Korea". To meet this goal it has established a Brand Management Centre to provide brand consulting and developed a brand database where companies can find information such as best practices, market trends, overseas market analysis and export trends for Korean brands. How can Singapore involve other sectors more? Which companies and prominent individuals can play a greater role? Can the government do more to work with leading Singapore brands?

Success usually takes place over a long period of time and is bolstered by other elements such as economic reform even if the image seems to have changed rapidly (e.g. Spain and Ireland).<sup>16</sup> A successful country brand is one that can endure in the long run with only minor adjustments. How much time is Singapore willing to invest now to build a country brand that will last? Have adequate resources been allocated for the long term?

## A MATTER OF IDENTITY

While a deep understanding of how others see Singapore is essential, nation branding is also linked with how a nation sees itself. As a young nation which exhibits considerable angst about its identity, this complicates Singapore's nation branding somewhat. Little research has been carried out on the impact of nation branding on the local population, and of the latter's role in the process. One academic suggests that young countries may have an advantage in that the weight of history does not hang so heavily—

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Anholt, *Brand New Justice: How Branding Places and Products Can help the Developing World*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK : Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann: 2005), 126.

<sup>13</sup> GMI, *How the World Sees the World: The Anholt Nation Brands Index* (2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Fiona Gilmore. "A country - Can it be repositioned? Spain - The success story of country branding". *Journal of Brand Management*. 9.4-5 (April 2002): 281-293.

<sup>15</sup> Sung-Ah Lee, "Branding Korea" *International Trade Forum* Issue 4/2005,

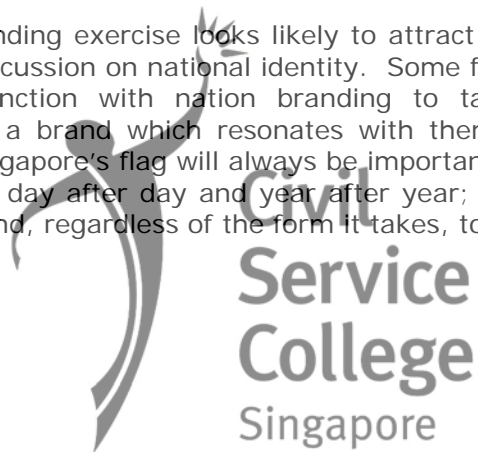
[http://www.tradeforum.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/978/Branding\\_Korea\\_.html](http://www.tradeforum.org/news/fullstory.php/aid/978/Branding_Korea_.html) (accessed on Oct 9, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> Morgan and Pritchett, "Meeting the Destination Branding Challenge" in *Destination Branding*, 73.

there are usually fewer negative perceptions to contend with—and the domestic audience may be more open to and supportive of nation branding efforts.<sup>17</sup> Another academic examines the tourism in Singapore and concludes there is hardly any distinction between tourist and local audiences: messages originally developed for tourists also go out to a local audience and reinforce officially-sanctioned identities (e.g. ethnic categories) and thus have been incorporated into nation building.<sup>18</sup>

But do citizens merely constitute a subset of the larger target audience, or do they play a fundamentally different role? Anholt draws a parallel between citizens to employees. He argues that just as the employees need to 'live the brand' for the brand to be successful, citizens need to 'live' their nation brand. Interestingly, Singapore scores lower in self-image than almost all countries with top country brands.<sup>19</sup> While Singapore's relatively low estimate of its own standing could be put down to a cultural tendency for modesty or realism, it could suggest that more fundamental issues of national confidence and self-identity need to be addressed.

The upcoming branding exercise looks likely to attract much attention in the local media and to generate discussion on national identity. Some form of nation building could be carried out in conjunction with nation branding to tap the evident passion of Singaporeans to develop a brand which resonates with them. Although international friends who help to fly Singapore's flag will always be important, citizens are the ones who embody the nation brand day after day and year after year; and without their buy-in, it will be difficult for the brand, regardless of the form it takes, to succeed.



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<sup>17</sup> Gilmore, 282.

<sup>18</sup> Ooi Can Seng. "State–Civil Society Relations and Tourism: Singaporeanizing Tourists, Touristifying Singapore". *Sojourn* 20.2 (2005): 249–72.

<sup>19</sup>GMI. *How the World Views the World: The Anholt Nation Brands Index*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 2005.

## ANNEX A

**OTHER PERCEPTIONS OF SINGAPORE**

Most of Singapore's overt nation-branding efforts so far have been directed externally to attract foreign investments, tourists and more recently, talent. The 2006 WB/IMF meetings reinforced its traditional reputation for efficiency, business-friendliness, and stability. However, international media coverage of the restrictions imposed on civil society organizations overshadowed attention that might otherwise have gone to other activities like the Singapore Biennale which tried to showcase a different side of Singapore.

Below is a quick selective survey of other recent mentions of Singapore in the international media not related to the economy or the WB/IMF meetings. It yields some unexpected finds which better reflect Singapore's range.

**Architecture and Urban Planning**

The inaugural edition of the *New York Times Real Estate Magazine, Key*, featured bomb-shelters in HDB flats ("It's the Bomb [Shelter]", Fall 2006). *Dwell*, a significant design and architecture monthly, had a feature and cover picture on a renovated shophouse (July 2006). The *Asian Wall Street Journal* had an article which discussed the gentrification of Chinatown led by entrepreneurs rather than the government ("Singapore Gets Hip, By Accident", 24 June).

**Innovation**

The *World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report* for 2006-2007 ranked Singapore 9<sup>th</sup> out of 125 countries for innovation and 15 for innovation factors.

**Public Sector Expertise**

*Gulf Times* ("Singapore offers expertise to Qatar", 25 Sep) carried an interview with SM on Qatar-Singapore relations. SM said Singapore could share its expertise in architecture, landscaping, irrigation, waste treatment and human resources management.

**Singapore as a Hub**

The *Vancouver Sun* published an article by Bloomberg columnist, Andy Mukherjee, on how Singapore was making itself into a centre for a wide range of activities ("Vegas casinos, U.S. universities – city state Singapore wants it all," 2 Oct). It described the way Singapore saw opportunity in the setting up of disaster recovery centres for IT systems of global companies and the way the Singapore Government made this happen.

**Press Restrictions**

There was coverage in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) (October issue), *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, the *International Herald Tribune* and the *Financial Times* and the wires about FEER's permit to be sold and circulated being revoked after it failed to comply with the conditions imposed under Section 24 of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. FEER includes generally negative articles about whether Singapore's meritocracy stands up to scrutiny ("The Charade of Meritocracy"), the government's control of the local media ("Singapore's founding myths vs. freedom") and whether Singapore can succeed as a financial centre ("Financial center pipedreams").

### Lifestyle and Recreation

Anthony Bourdain raved about the diversity and quality of hawker food in the *New York Times Magazine* ("Getting Lost in Foodie Heaven", 26 Sep). In the *New York Times*, R.W. Apple Jr. recommends top restaurants in Singapore ("Singapore: A Repressed City-State? Not in Its Kitchens", 1 Oct).

The *South China Morning Post* had a lukewarm review on the Singapore Biennale ("Beyond belief: Censorship-happy Singapore let its inaugural biennale off remarkably lightly", 24 Sep). A review in *The Daily Yomiuri* (Tokyo) commented positively on ethnic and religious diversity in the biennale ("Singapore aims to shake artless reputation" 23 Sep). The *Sydney Morning Herald* review had some negative asides but concluded that the Biennale showed that there was a 'darker, funnier side to this city of shopaholics' ("As the conservative city-state digests images of pornography and teen suicide, Mark Chipperfield wonders if its first biennale will also be its last", 11 Oct).

The Metropolis feature of *Wallpaper\** describes Singapore fusion cuisine in glowing terms (July). The *Financial Times* "Wallpaper\* City Guide" series remarks positively on dining and entertainment options in Singapore ("24 hours in Singapore THE WALLPAPER\* CITY GUIDE TO . . .", Sep 23). A article on golf calls the Sentosa golf course 'surprisingly scenic' and notes in passing the pleasure of smoking a cigar on his hotel room balcony (which the writer was not allowed to do in Scotland) (Sep 2).

