

America Is Not A Hamburger

President Bush's attempts to rebrand the United States are doomed

Naomi Klein

When the White House decided it was time to address the rising tides of anti-Americanism around the world, it didn't look to a career diplomat for help. Instead, in keeping with the Bush administration's philosophy that anything the public sector can do the private sector can do better, it hired one of Madison Avenue's top brand managers. As undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, Charlotte Beers' assignment was not to improve relations with other countries but rather to perform an overhaul of the US image abroad. Beers had no previous diplomatic experience but she had held the top job at both the J Walter Thompson and Ogilvy & Mather ad agencies, and built brands for everything from dog food to power drills.

Now she was being asked to work her magic on the greatest branding challenge of all: to sell the US and its war on terrorism to an increasingly hostile world. The appointment of an ad woman to this post raised some criticism but Colin Powell, the secretary of state, shrugged it off: "There is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something. We are selling a product. We need someone who can rebrand American foreign policy, rebrand diplomacy." Besides, he said, "She got me to buy Uncle Ben's rice."

So why, only five months on, does the campaign for a new and improved Brand USA seem in disarray? Several of its announcements have been exposed for playing fast and loose with the facts. And when Ms Beers went on a mission to Egypt in January to improve the image of the US among Arab "opinion makers," it didn't go well. Muhammad Abdel Hadi, an editor at the newspaper Al Ahram, left his meeting with Ms Beers frustrated that she seemed more interested in talking about vague American values than about specific US policies. "No matter how hard you try to make them understand," he said, "they don't."

The misunderstanding probably stemmed from the fact that Beers views the US tattered international image as little more than a communications problem. Somehow America still hasn't managed, in Beers' words, to "get out there and tell our story". In fact, the problem is just the opposite: America's marketing of itself has been too effective. Schoolchildren can recite its claims to democracy, liberty and equal opportunity as readily as they can associate McDonald's with family fun and Nike with athletic prowess. And they expect the US to live up to its claims.

If they are angry, as millions clearly are, it's because they have seen those promises betrayed by US policy. Despite President Bush's insistence that America's enemies resent its liberties, most critics of the US don't actually object to America's stated values. Instead, they point to US unilateralism in the face of international laws, widening wealth disparities, crackdowns on immigrants and human rights violations, most recently in Guantanamo Bay. The anger comes not only from the facts of each case but also from a clear perception of false advertising. In other words, America's problem is not with its brand - which could scarcely be stronger - but with its product.

There is another, more profound obstacle facing the relaunch of Brand USA: the values Beers is charged with selling are democracy and diversity. Many of America's staunchest critics already feel bullied into conformity by the US government (bristling at phrases like "rogue state"), and America's branding campaign could well backfire, and backfire badly.

In the corporate world, once a "brand identity" is settled upon, it is enforced with military precision throughout a company's operations. The brand identity may be tailored to accommodate local language and cultural preferences (like McDonald's serving pasta in Italy), but its core features - aesthetic, message, logo - remain unchanged. This consistency is what brand managers call "the

promise" of a brand: it's a pledge that wherever you go in the world, your experience at Wal-Mart, Holiday Inn or a Disney theme park will be comfortable and familiar. At its core, branding is about rigorously controlled one-way messages, sent out in their glossiest form, then sealed off from those who would turn corporate monologue into social dialogue.

The most important tools in launching a strong brand may be research, creativity and design, but after that, libel and copyright laws are a brand's best friends. When brand managers transfer their skills from the corporate to the political world, they invariably bring this fanaticism for homogeneity with them. For instance, when Wally Olins, co-founder of the Wolff Olins brand consultancy, was asked for his take on America's image problem, he complained that people don't have a single clear idea about what the country stands for, but rather have dozens, if not hundreds, of ideas that "are mixed up in people's heads ... you will often find people both admiring and abusing America, even in the same sentence."

From a branding perspective, it would certainly be tiresome if we found ourselves simultaneously admiring and abusing our washing powder. But when it comes to our relationship with governments, particularly the government of the most powerful and richest nation in the world, surely some complexity is in order. Having conflicting views about the US - admiring its creativity, for instance, but resenting its double standards - doesn't mean you are "mixed up"; it means you have been paying attention.

Besides, much of the anger directed at the US stems from a belief - voiced as readily in Argentina as in France, in India as in Saudi Arabia - that the US already demands far too much "consistency and discipline" from other nations; that beneath its stated commitment to democracy and sovereignty,

it is deeply intolerant of deviations from the economic model known as "the Washington consensus".

There is another reason to be wary of mixing the logic of branding with the practice of governance. When companies try to implement global image consistency, they look like generic franchises. But when governments do the same, they can look distinctly authoritarian. It's no coincidence that the political leaders most preoccupied with branding themselves and their parties were also allergic to democracy and diversity. Historically, this has been the ugly flipside of politicians striving for consistency of brand: centralised information, state-controlled media, re-education camps, purging of dissidents and much worse.

Democracy, thankfully, has other ideas. Unlike strong brands, which are predictable and disciplined, democracy is messy and fractious, if not outright rebellious. Beers and her colleagues may have convinced Colin Powell to buy Uncle Ben's, but the US is not made up of identical grains of rice or hamburgers or Gap khakis. Its strongest "brand attribute" is its embrace of diversity, a value Ms Beers is now, ironically, attempting to stamp with cookie-cutter uniformity around the world. The task is not only futile but dangerous.

Making his pitch for Brand USA in Beijing recently, President Bush argued that "in a free society, diversity is not disorder. Debate is not strife". The audience applauded politely. The message may have proved more persuasive if those values were better reflected in the Bush administration's communications with the outside world - both in its image and, more importantly, in its policies. Because as President Bush rightly points out, diversity and debate are the lifeblood of liberty. And they are enemies of branding.

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