

Re-branding Israel? If only I could...

By RON FRIEDMAN

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"In today's media environment, we don't have the time to make a good argument," laments the diplomat who is battling to change the int'l perception of militaristic Israel.

With most of the talks at the annual Israel Tourism Conference in Tel Aviv focusing on innovation and creativity, there was a feeling of optimism in the air, especially with the recent announcement of record numbers of incoming tourists in the beginning of 2010. Then Ido Aharoni took to the podium and put everything into proportion.

Aharoni is the head of the Foreign Ministry's brand management team and his message to the tourism professionals on Wednesday was straightforward: the world's perception of Israel is completely dominated by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and even if people back Israel ideologically, it doesn't translate into a positive image.

For now, the brand called Israel is still associated with war and occupation.

For the past two-and-a-half years, Aharoni has had the Herculean task of re-branding Israel. His goal: to change outsiders' perception of Israel as a militaristic and conservative country into something closer to how Israelis see themselves – "largely sababa (cool)."

Aharoni showed a short video that illustrated perfectly what he was talking about. In the clip, a survey group of adult Americans chosen at random were asked to perform a free association exercise. The group was asked to describe what houses representing different countries would look and feel like. While the Italian house drew comments like "warm," "welcoming" and "festive," when asked to describe the Israeli house, the responses were far different.

"Big gates and bars on the windows," said one man. "Mostly cement, no lawn, no garden," said another. One woman said that she thought she wouldn't be welcomed in the Israeli house. "It's very Orthodox with a strict vibe about it," she said. An African-American man said he thought he wouldn't be accepted there because of his skin color.

“They weren’t describing a house, they were describing a fortified bunker,” said Aharoni.

He said that for 60 years Israel has been presenting itself through hasbara (public diplomacy), trying to convince decision-makers and the public that Israel is in the right and backing it up with historic, legal and moral facts. That’s well and good and it might make them favor Israel in polls or on election day, said Aharoni, but what it also does is cement in people’s minds the notion of Israel as a country in conflict. These people are potential tourists, but they tire of the debate before they ever get here and see firsthand that what they hear in the news is not reflective of reality.

“Tourism is a cardinal element of building relations between a consumer and a place, because it provides firsthand experience,” said Aharoni. “I was recently in Amsterdam for the first time and I now have a personal relationship with Holland. And it has nothing to do with the Dutch government’s policies. We [in Israel] never bothered to make those connections.”

Israel’s brand troubles grew from the gap between the high quality product that it offers and the low image it has, he said. “That gap not only carries an economic burden, but also weighs Israel down in its marketing efforts and in the effectiveness of its foreign policy.”

Putting up a photo of an Israeli tank confronting a Palestinian youth throwing a stone, Aharoni said that hasbara’s job is to convince people that the tank is the victim.

“Given enough time I can make a good argument that that is actually the case, but in today’s media environment, we don’t have the time. We have about three seconds to grasp a viewer’s attention and that, unfortunately, doesn’t allow enough time for presenting the facts. When we continue to try, it inevitably fails and that’s bad because it leaves the picture of the tank and the child in sight and harms the Israeli brand.”

Aharoni said that even if hasbara is successful at changing people’s minds about the conflict, it doesn’t help with tourism. “Political support doesn’t translate into consumer affinity. There is a disconnect between the emotional and the rational. In the modern age it is no less important to be attractive than it is to be in the right.”