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Brand Israel: Not by PR alone



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Ido Aharoni, Israel's New York-based Ambassador/Consul General is also a marketing guru, and I met with him to learn about his plans for Brand Israel. As the Consul General, Ido Aharoni represents the State of Israel to communities in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut region. He advances the positive reputation of

the country, enabling it to attract new investors and tourism. His mission is to build bridges and relationships.

A diplomat in the suit of a public relations executive, he represents Israel to the largest diaspora community in the world; the image he promotes is that Israel is among the most progressive and advanced nations in the world.

Marketing Not Politics

In the tone of an educator rather than a politician, Aharoni embraces the marketing concept with all the buzz words that start with setting organizational objectives and end with a completed sales transaction and acknowledgement of customer satisfaction. As with many destination marketing campaigns, success is measured one new (or repeat) tourist at a time.

The current Brand Israel marketing campaign takes a multi-focus approach and includes: lifestyle and leisure; technology, science and medicine; culture and the arts; ethnic and religious diversity; the environment and international aid. The objectives include: 1) Introduce/inform and educate the potential consumer that the product/destination exists, 2) Differentiate the product/destination from the competitors, 3) Encourage the selection and purchase of the product/destination and 4) Follow-up to cement customer satisfaction.

Based on Porters' theory of product differentiation and leadership, Israel has identified the areas for which it has a competitive advantage including: 1) a destination that welcomes the gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender

visitors; 2) a country that supports runners and other outdoor sports enthusiasts; 3) bird watchers' and environmentalists; 4) art/music/culture.

In the Very Beginning

At the very beginning of Israel there was no need for a Brand Manager. The first twenty years embraced a story that told itself: a holocaust, émigrés seeking a safe place as refuge, defeating attacks from Arabs and making the desert bloom. Over time, however, Israel as a country of strong willed, strong minded pioneers was pre-empted by the Palestinian story where this market segment was portrayed as a victim struggling for its own identify.

Lost in the Rhetoric

Somewhere in the telling of the tales, the core of Israel was lost in the rhetoric of who is right and who is wrong and the political agendas of other nations stepped in the way of Brand Israel. Who and what is Israel, as a nation, as a people, as a tourism destination is now being reviewed and revised, based on its core values.

Marketing: A Means to an End

As recently as 2002, the Consulate of Israel did not see the country as a brand and could not clearly identify its core competencies. It was not until 2004 the first branding concept was formed and a group of architecture and design travel writers from North America were invited to Israel. While they may have had different views of Israeli politics they all had a passion for architecture and design. Going forward from this point, new markets were identified

(including wine, cuisine and sports) and the concept of marketing with a branding focus was born.

In 2006, when Aharoni was in the Foreign Ministry he noted that, "... Israel's brand image does not serve its interests right now." What encouraged Aharoni to focus on a new brand marketing strategy was research on what non-Jewish markets thought of Israel. The study showed that the potential non-Jewish visitor did not have a realistic perception of Israeli hearth and home. Life in Israel was perceived as stern, strict, dangerous, unwelcoming and unhappy. Recognizing that perception is reality – he knew that he needed to bring the reality of Israeli life, loves and successes to the fore: To focus on the strengths and opportunities available in the country.

Core Values

Research indicates that Israel has at its core the concept of Tikkun olam – Repairing the World. The words appear in the Mishna, and throughout Jewish history it states that it is the ethical and moral responsibility of the Jewish people to help other nations and societies; to contribute to them without compensation. If we were to live-stream the life and times of contemporary Israelis – we would find many examples of Tikkun olam.

More than High Tech and Intellectual Prowess

While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spends days with the high-tech geniuses and leaders in California developing new technology and signing pro-business agreements with Governor Jerry Brown, the real stories of

Israeli life and caring come in under the radar. The real Israel is in all of us and Aharoni is interested in “broadening the conversation” so this core concept is recognized and accepted.

Israel in All of Us

7 things I did not know about Israel:

1. The former Miss Israel (2013) is 21-year old Yityish “Titi” Aynaw, the first Ethiopian immigrant to win the title. Born in a small African village, she lost both her parents by age 12. She came to Israel and created a new life. Today, there are approximately 121,000 citizens of Ethiopian descent living in Israel.
2. In 2013 when the country of Haiti experienced a devastating earthquake, leveling Port-au-Prince – it was the Israeli medical team that was first on the ground – a nation 5,000 miles away.
3. Israel is the first and only country in the Middle East to recognize same-sex unions. Even though couples can’t actually get married here, the country does recognize marriages performed elsewhere.
4. New York Knicks power forward Amar’e Stoudemire recently applied for Israeli citizenship; there may be ancestral ties to the region through his mother. He also acquired partial ownership of the Israeli basketball club - Hapoel Jerusalem.
5. Want to experience Israel while sharing? There are many voluntour opportunities including Save a Child’s Heart.

Volunteers comfort children with heart disease who travel to Tel Aviv from around the world for treatment.

6. Looking for venture capital for Israeli and global venture start-ups? OurCrowd, an equity-based crowd funding platform built for a group of accredited investors is changing the way start-ups raise capital.

7. Innovation: Africa - is a non-profit organization that brings Israeli innovation to African villages. Since 2008 it has completed over 71 solar and agricultural projects in Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi and Uganda.

Israel SWOT

It is incredibly easy to do a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) for Israel. Information on what it is and what it does appears at the top of daily newsfeeds, and frequently as the lead story on prime-time news. However, the reporters and the media they represent often filter the information through a political lens which can distort the data.

With an attempt at objectivity:

Strengths

1. Agriculture. Although most of the region is desert, exports include avocados, citrus fruit, water melon, vegetables and cotton
2. High Tech
3. Pressure Irrigation
4. Human Capital
5. Strong Economy. It received “gold stars” from the IMF

6. Biotechnology
7. Life Sciences
8. Venture Capital

Weaknesses

1. Distance to markets
2. Limited Arable Land
3. Geography

Opportunities

1. Tourism
2. Construction
3. Chemical Industry
4. Cosmetic Industry

Threats

1. Terrorism
2. Crime
3. Geo-politics

Going Forward

Brand Israel is not accepted in all markets as the answer, or even the pathway, to reframing the global image of the country. Perfection is not the goal but rather an acknowledgement that Israel is more than its problems.

Perhaps the reluctance for some markets to disagree or reject the image of Israel without a conflict-focus is a problem not with the Israeli marketing campaign, but rather a need for some market segments to remain in grid-lock. While there is comfort in the past (even if it was dreadful),

there are challenges associated with change and research supports the unwillingness of people to accept what is new and different.

Artists, investors and technology gurus should look for ways to support these men and women by opening their wallets, malls, offices and homes and to encourage and applaud their accomplishments. We can all find a way to support Brand Israel, even it is means buying one more bottle of Israeli wine, planting one more tree in Israel, or spending at least part of a holiday enjoying the new restaurants and night clubs in Tel Aviv.