



Israel Branding Project Targets Toronto

By PAUL LUNGEN, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — The government of Israel is partnering with Jewish community organizations in Toronto to improve Israel's image and to get Canadians thinking of the country outside "the narrow prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

A two-day "brainstorming" meeting was held last week in Toronto to discuss ways of implementing the Israeli Foreign Ministry's "Brand Israel" program, which will focus on a "more creative, eclectic and yet more accurate picture of Israel," said Ido Aharoni, founder of the ministry's Brand Israel concept.

Toronto is one of eight markets, including Tokyo and London, selected for the pilot program, he said.

Aharoni was in Toronto last week for the meetings with representatives of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto, Canadian Jewish Congress, the Canada-Israel Committee, Hillel and Hadassah-WIZO, as well as marketing and public relations specialists with ties to the Jewish community.

Aharoni said the ministry has conducted market research over the past few years that showed "Israel is viewed solely through the narrow prism of the Arab-Israeli conflict... Israel's personality is 90 per cent dominated by conflict-related images and some religious connotations," he said. "Those of us who know the brand intimately are disturbed by the divergence of brand and the perception."

That is compounded by Israelis' own focus on security matters – a concern they express when they travel abroad, reinforcing others' perception of the country.

While security considerations are important to Israel, that does not reflect the totality of the country, Aharoni said.

Other aspects of Israel are worthy of promotion, including its culture and arts; its accomplishments on environmental matters such as water desalination, solar energy and clean technology; its high-tech

successes and achievements in higher education; and its involvement in international aid, he added.

Getting Canadians – both Jewish and non-Jewish – to see Israel in that light is part of the branding effort. Not only would that change Israel's image, it could lead to more tourism and investment, educational exchanges and other benefits, Aharoni said.

Federation spokesperson Howard English said his organization and other federated communities across the country are committed to supporting the branding initiative and mobilizing the Jewish community behind the effort.

"It's a matter of letting the Jewish community know that Israel is much more than the conflict and the military-diplomatic debate," he said.

"We have the means of information dissemination to be able to turn the brand initiative into reality and turn theory into practice.

"We consider this to be an historic enterprise."

Aharoni said the pilot program will likely be launched in the next year or so. He said the branding process is a long-term strategy – it could take decades to change Israel's "persona" – and will include several aspects. It could involve sponsoring a film festival, supporting cultural and sport exchanges, or junkets to Israel for Canadian opinion-makers. Once a brand is built, it becomes entrenched in the public's mind.

He pointed to the United States, whose image, in large measure, was formed by its entertainment industry, not its foreign policy. Think of Brazil, he suggested, and whether it's soccer or carnival costumes, you're not likely to see the country as the world's crime capital, he said.

As for Canada, the country has "a very strong brand. Canada has a wonderful image in Israel as a multicultural, tolerant, open-minded supporter of Israel."

But unlike Israelis, "the average Canadian does not go to bed at night wondering if he will have a country the next day," he said.

Amir Gissin, Israel's consul general in Toronto, said the branding initiative is still in its early stages, and the slogans, logos and visual representations haven't been determined yet.

"More important are the qualities" that will be promoted.

“Israelis’ ingenuity, their passion, fusion, all those qualities Israelis find pride in” could form the brand essence, he said.

At the end of the day, Gissin hopes all major Jewish organizations will support the branding initiative. “The effort we are taking to make Israel more relevant to Canadians does not ask you to compromise or change your political or religious beliefs.”

It only asks people “to see what is good and attractive in Israel,” he said.