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COUNTRIES ARE COUNTRIES, NOT BRANDS

The World Cup approaches and, once again, the English nation hopes against hope that it can win the tournament and finally end 44 years of hurt. Meanwhile, in South Africa the dreams are just as bold but aimed in a very different direction. FIFA's World Cup presents its hosts with, what they believe to be, their biggest ever opportunity to build a stronger country brand.

That's a shame because, despite its growing popularity and firm establishment within marketing, the business of "country branding" or "nation branding" is nonsense. Countries are not brands. They are countries. Brand strategy should be reserved for brands. I may have a hammer, but it doesn't mean that every problem is shaped like a nail. Real expertise in a field is to know the limitations of that field and behave accordingly.

I can appreciate the attractions of country branding. Selling a brand strategy to a public servant in Finland or Ghana must be a lot easier than pitching to a trained marketer from the likes of Unilever or Ford. And I can also appreciate that even the gigantic budgets of P&G or HSBC are dwarfed by a nation's coffers. I can imagine, too, that measuring the impact of a country branding strategy is far less taxing than the typical corporate branding work, where sales figures and brand equity scores always influence the assessment of impact. But the core problem endures: conceptualising a country as if it were a brand is stupid.

For starters, the concept of brand does not fit something as wide and variable as the perception of a country. Aside from tourism (where destination branding makes sense) you don't ever buy a country – you buy a product or service from a country. Country of origin does have an impact on a product's perception, but that impact varies from category to category. You might agree with FutureBrand's recent assessment of the US as the strongest country brand in the world, for example, if you are looking for investment banking or fast food. But what if you were interested in eco-resorts or super-hip nightclubs? Wouldn't Brazil, which FutureBrand deems a much weaker country brand than the US, prove a better alternative?

Which brings us to another problem with country branding. Am I the only marketer who is outraged when countries and cultures are relegated to the bottom of the pile based on very basic analytical data? Corporations and brands are capitalist entities and I am entirely comfortable with ranking them on their relative value. But is it acceptable to tell the people of Cuba their country brand is only three-quarters as good as Canada or



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Switzerland? That's what GFK claimed in its 2009 Nation Branding Index. And are you comfortable with GFK's relegation of Iran as the least valuable country brand on Earth? Doesn't a nation with 70 million inhabitants and a heritage going back more than 9,000 years before the birth of Christ deserve more respect and cultural sensitivity?

Even if country branding were possible in theory, how could it ever work in practice? The whole premise of brand strategy is to change every aspect of the brand's operations to deliver on core positioning. The superficial, unimportant aspects of a country branding strategy like a logo or ad campaign are entirely possible, but how about all the crucial operational stuff? An effective country brand strategy would have to change laws, policing, street names, unemployment benefit, health policies, family planning guidelines – all to fit the country brand positioning. Insanity.

Proof of country branding's nonsensical status is in the embarrassing and ineffective campaigns that have emerged over the years: the work of Russo, Marsh & Rogers and its strategy for Kurdistan that positioned the country as "The Other Iraq"; the £750,000 Interbrand charged Estonia for a country branding strategy that centred on the unforgettable slogan "Welcome to Estonia"; the current "Good People, Great Nation" branding campaign in Nigeria that has recently been lambasted by Nigerian marketers for its total lack of data, positioning or tracking.

The tragedy in all of this is that many of the nations seeking a "stronger country brand" have much more endemic, structural problems. But, because they have been told their solution lies in country branding, vital resources are spent on an illusory, nonsensical quest instead of essential and practical solutions. South Africa does not need a stronger country brand. It needs to provide water to the 20 million people in its country who don't have a reliable supply. It needs to reduce the proportion of its citizens murdered each day, given that its current murder rate is among the highest on Earth. It needs a President who does not sleep with a woman with HIV and then reassures the population he is fine because he took a shower.

Let's start there, rather than the futile, shameful practice of country branding. ●