

COUNTRY BRANDING IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD. THE CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract

Country branding or nation branding refers to the common images, perceptions and associations people have about a country or a nation. Therefore this concept can be an important tool used by countries to create, change or promote a distinct self-image and to gain international reputation.

A country's brand is strongly related to its image, both the self-image created and transmitted by its citizens and the image projected and interpreted by foreigners. At present in the context of globalization the strategy of positioning a country in front of the other "world players" has a key role in the international arena for commercial, economic and political purposes. That is why the aim of the present paper is to analyse the concept of country branding as well as the related concepts and to critically examine Romania's branding campaigns and their effects, while also putting forward some suggestions for changing the stereotypes about Romania.

Keywords: country branding/ nation branding, branding campaign, country image, globalization, international reputation

1. Introductory remarks

The issue of country image has evolved over the last decades from an approach which studied the role played by a country image to the success of products exported from that country (country image, country-of-origin effect) and an approach which studied a country image as a tourist destination (tourist destination branding) to a holistic approach which integrates many elements and theories from different fields related to the marketing of a country, such as: communication, tourism, management and public administration, investment, sociology, culture, diplomacy, international relations, economic modelling, etc. Researchers and practitioners in these fields have started debates and the literature, almost non-existent a decade ago, grows at a great pace.

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A country's or a nation's brand generally refers to the common images, perceptions and associations people have about that nation. Therefore, country branding or nation branding is an important instrument used by countries to create, change or promote a distinct self-image and international reputation and to serve the country's interests in a positive and effective way.

At present, in the context of globalization, the strategy of positioning a country in front of other world players is much more important. That is why the brand each country creates for itself has a key role in international relations and many countries in all continents have become more concerned with their image internationally, for commercial, economic or political purposes.

In this context, the topic of my paper is one of real interest for every country, particularly for those in transition, as it is the case of Romania. Therefore the aim of the present paper is to analyse the concept of country-branding as well as the related concepts and to examine Romania's branding campaigns and their effects. According to F. Randall (2004), the image we have of another country says a lot about how we view it as a tourist destination, a place to invest or a source of consumer goods.

2. Country branding - theoretical approaches

The concept of country branding or nation branding is relatively new. It began to be used in the mid 1990's in order to support countries in a highly competitive environment. A powerful brand and a strong positive image of a country give it a crucial competitive advantage. That is why every country should pay much attention to its image, how it is constructed and how it is perceived by foreigners.

The brand of a country is very complex having a multitude of facets and consequently country branding is a very long process which requires constant efforts from all the participants.

According to Ruxandra I. Popescu (2013: 14), country branding consists of a set of programs which make one state different from another. This process is meant to give that country an identity, forming a real image, positive and attractive. Actually it is the state's 'business card'.

Another definition given by Melissa Aronczyk (2008) considers country branding or nation branding rather from an economic point of view. She says:

Country brand allows national governments to better manage and control the image they project to the world and to attract the right kinds of investment,

tourism, trade and talent, successfully competing with a growing pool of national contenders for a shrinking set of available resources. (Aronczyk, 2008: 42)

A nation brand should therefore have a competitive identity, to evoke the desirable image and to enhance nation competitiveness (Akotia, 2010).

Therefore there are some characteristics a country brand should have: first, a country brand or a nation brand is strongly related to the image that country or nation has. Managing a country brand means positioning a particular country or nation in the minds of the 'public audience'. Each country has a brand, more or less defined, better or worse managed and they compete with one another in the same international market or in smaller markets (local, regional). This concern about country brands has led to country/ nation branding campaigns. According to H. Khalid (2009), an effective campaign "accelerates the country's economic growth and the citizens feel dignified".

Although we can easily associate country branding with country image or country identity, they remain separate concepts: *a country image* represents its "spiritual portrait, the amount of beliefs and impressions that people keeps of the country" (Popescu, 2013: 13); the *identity of a country* refers to the way a country perceives itself. The ideal situation for a country is to create a perfect balance between its image and its identity.

3. Beyond the country or nation brand

Other terms that can be used to describe *country branding* are *destination branding* or *place branding*.

According to William Davidson Institute's Research Associates (2009: 1), in destination branding, places are treated as brands. The purpose of destination brands is to attract and win over customers from around the world. The market for destination brands is global, chaotic and competitive.

In his study, A. Marazza (2007) examines countries as complex products. They are attractions for the public, like products, they have certain features and can be sold on the market. The difference is that countries are bigger, they are a sum of products and services and the market that offers them is far more complex, divided by boundaries. Besides all the material things that define a country, there are also intangible things related to culture, language, traditions, religion, etc. Considering the complexity of a country/nation brand, Marazza concludes that we cannot reduce it to a simple logo (2007: 3).

In his work for Landor Institute, Marazza (2007: 5) sets eight golden rules that each country should observe in order to have a powerful brand. The eight golden rules are:

- focusing on the brand;
- differentiation which is the key in highly competitive situations;
- the brand's unique and relevant proposition should be central and mandatory in all brand expressions;
- stereotypes and clichés should be avoided;
- the destination brand's identity and related promotional activities should not lead to offensive or misleading interpretations by any country, religion, or culture;
- simplicity and flexibility enhance the impact of the destination brand;
- the brand's logo and identity should conform to a set of rules. These rules should be easy to apply and adaptable to circumstances;
- building a destination brand is an ongoing process. It requires feedback and an open attitude from all stakeholders.

As country branding/nation branding is a complex concept, in her study *Nation branding. Toward an agenda for critical research*, N. Kaneva (2011: 120) analyses nation branding from several perspectives: technical, economic, political and cultural. She concludes that the discourse on nation branding finds its strongest representation in the field of marketing.

4. Why is country branding necessary?

For some people, the fact that countries need a brand is obvious for other is not. Epic Global Media Associations claim that in today's globalized market it is important that a strong brand strategy should define the most realistic, competitive and compelling strategic vision for the country.

The terms country branding or nation branding became popular only in the third millennium. In 2005, *the New York Times Magazine* listed nation branding as one of the most notable ideas of the year (Kaneva, 2011: 117).

As I have already stated country branding has implications in many areas. From a political point of view, a country with good politicians is a more listened voice in the international arena and consequently more powerful. Economically, there are two important factors generated by country branding: tourists and foreign investors.

5. Creating and administering a country brand

Over the last 20 years, the strategies of creating a country brand have evolved significantly. Once created, it should be well administered as the environment is dynamic and changes rapidly.

Below I will present the process of creating a brand for a country and how it should be administered.

According to Simon Anholt (2011), a nation brand can be enhanced by three things: *strategy*, *substance* and *symbolic actions*. By *strategy*, Anholt refers to the fact that a country should know where it is, where it wants to be or what it wants to become and how to get to the desired position. The *substance* refers to the actions that should be taken in order to bring a change in the economic, political, cultural/social fields, etc. The *symbolic actions* are strongly related to the substance. They are the part that makes the brand remarkable and memorable.

According to R. Popescu (2013: 20), the development of a country brand begins by creating an "umbrella" concept or an essential message rooted in reality.

Country branding requires a good understanding of the relativity of its competitive position. A country brand has more dimensions which should be taken into consideration, but they should be used strategically. Before creating a strategy, you should carefully identify your market by segmentation and targeting the potential customers.

William Davidson Institute's Research Associates identify five steps necessary to implement a good country-branding strategy (2009: 2). These five steps are:

1. Where are we now? Understanding the current state of the nation's brand.
2. Identify the factors that affect the nation's brand.
3. Where do we want to be? Developing a strategic plan.
4. How do we get there? Implementing nation-branding strategy.
5. Tracking process to evaluate the progress and the success of the campaign.

To carry out such a complex activity, Teslik (2007) states that:

Most countries work with communications consultants or PR firms, though the specific kinds of guidance they seek depend greatly on the circumstances faced by the country. (Teslik, 2007)

The strategies and tactics are different from one country to another. Romania is a country in progress for development. In this situation, according to Teslik (2007), tourism promotion has traditionally dominated nation-branding efforts among the developing countries.

6. The brand of Romania

Analyzing the role and challenges of country branding in transition countries, Gyorgy Szondi (2007) asserts that “Developing a coherent and comprehensive country brand is of vital importance for transitional countries as branding can contribute to the success of transition” (Szondi, 2007).

According to foreigners, Romania is characterized on one hand by Dracula, Transylvania, Hagi, Nadia Comănici and Dacia cars, and on the other hand, by crime, poverty and orphans. Where is Romanian's brand situated on the international market? Has Romania managed to become a real brand?

The first real attempts to create a brand for Romania were made in 1996. In 2012, a research study conducted by *Future Brand* – “Country Brand Index” survey on a sample of 118 countries ranked Romania at 100.

In the research study conducted by *Future Brand* Romania is mentioned as a brand with a declining score in terms of the quality of life, most probably as a result of the economic crisis.

Another study made by *Bloom Consulting* in 2014 places Romania far better with a slightly strong mark for its country brand. In this study Romania is the 29th best rated European country brand, ranking better than ten other European countries (Serbia, Lithuania, Latvia, Albania, Macedonia, Moldova, etc) and worse than 28 other European countries. On an international level, it was classified on the 74th place out of a total of 186, with rating A (slightly strong brand). This rating is the result of four different variables: tourism, economic performance, online search demand, the accuracy of each branding strategy and visibility online, on websites and social media.

7. The brand of Romania in the mass-media

The image of Romania has been controversial for years, both in the Romanian and the foreign media. As I have mentioned before, in building the brand of a country both the domestic and the foreign perspective matters.

Most writings about the country brand of Romania in the national press have a negative connotation. In his article “Romania. Country without country brand” (2011), G. Barliga underlines that people are more important than a logo, a slogan, or a website, their actions, good or bad, have an impact in the formation of images, opinions, ideas about the country. In his opinion, the change should start with the politicians and the other influential persons in the country, but this is very unlikely to happen in Romania because of the lack of entrepreneurship culture.

The article “Country brands of Romania: the past, the present and no future” (PRO TV, 2010) also concludes negatively: “Romania had as many tourist brands as leaders succeeded in the Ministry of Tourism. From Dracula to Hagi, all the strategies have failed and all were abandoned even though they spent a lot of money on them”.

An article has revealed a scandal which broke in 2010 over Romania's country branding: *Romania. Explore the Carpathian Garden*, with a leaf as the main part of the logo. The leaf raised many controversies just before the brand was released officially because of its similarity with the symbol of a British company. The scandal appeared both in the national and the international press. The Economist stated that: “Attracting tourists through a campaign that began with a plagiarism scandal is not the most orthodox way, but in Romania it might happen” (HotNews, 2010).

The article “Romania – a lost identity” issued by Aspen Institute also reveals the negative aspect of Romania's country branding. The author states that Romania should take advantage of its true brands, such as: IT industry, Dacia cars, Romanian wines and the bio products.

Other articles on websites are also very critical of Romania's brand.

The positive news or articles to present a good image of Romania are extremely few. In a research study regarding Romania's reputation in the international media “The image of Romania under scrutiny. Country branding and rebranding” (2014), L. Nicolescu states that contrary to what people may think, there is a balance between positive, negative and neutral articles in the world press. She analyses the image of Romanians and Romania in the eyes of foreigners at the time of Romania's integration in the European Union. She concludes that foreigners do not know much about Romania and generally speaking they focus their attention on Romania's politics and international relations. Romania has a good reputation in economy and IT domain and a bad one regarding infrastructure and pollution. Romanians are perceived as hospitable, friendly, open, hardworking, but selfish, materialistic, hypocritical, with low self-esteem and generally having a bad opinion of their own country (Nicolescu, 2014: 22-23).

8. Romania's branding campaigns

In this section I will briefly describe the country branding campaigns designed and carried out in Romania.

“*The Eternal and Fascinating Romania*” (1995) was the first “business card of Romania”. Its aim was to attract foreign investors and most likely to change the bad image the country had at that time; for various reasons the campaign failed to reach its target and ended up as a subject of jokes and ironies.

“*Made in Romania*” (2000) was a successful campaign. It was meant to regain the confidence of Romanian consumers in Romanian-made products, at a time when the domestic market was flooded with imports. The campaign had a positive impact even on the international market.

“*Dracula Park*” (2001) was focused on a project to build an amusement park based on the story of Dracula vampire. It aimed to attract one million tourists a year. The campaign failed for lack of funds and Romanians’ aversion to such bloody characters.

“*Romania, Always Surprising*” (2004) was actually the first destination branding; it had a logo, a slogan, website pages, support of embassies, etc. Unfortunately it was unsuccessful because it did not manage to build a clear-cut image of Romania and to catch the essence of the country.

“*Fabulospirit*” (2006) was a reaction to the previous campaign. It focused on the spirit of the Romanians and it was meant to make them known to the European Union members. The only drawback was that the campaign was a little too sophisticated for ordinary people.

“*Romanians in Europe*” (2008) presented the Romanian immigrants as honest, simple and hardworking at a time when a lot of Romanians were going to Spain and Italy and some of them were badly perceived in the countries of destination.

“*Romania, Land of Choice*” (2009-2012) aimed to present Romania as an attractive and diverse tourist destination; it used as endorsers some famous Romanian sports personalities: Nadia Comănici, Gheorghe Hagi and Ilie Năstase. They acted as ambassadors for Romanian tourism.

“*Romania. Explore the Carpathian Garden*” (2010-present) is the ongoing Romania's country-branding campaign and Andreea Sepi (2013) underlined that:

Its aim is to double the number of foreigners who can think of something unique and positive about Romania, to give Romania a clear identity and location in the minds of prospective tourists, to promote tourism. More generally speaking, to clarify and improve Romania's image abroad. (Sepi, 2013: 9)

Although the campaign had a strong identity, it generated criticism.

Last but not least, I will present another campaign carried out mainly on online with marketing tools. E-marketing through Facebook and blogs reaches a different target, young people who spend most of their time navigating on the Internet. The message is disseminated at higher speed and the feedback is received in real time.

The campaign “*Romanians are smart*” was a successful campaign created by the agency *McCann Erickson – Romania* and carried out online on Facebook and blogs. It was meant as a reaction to the prejudices existing about Romanians in other countries on the internet.

The negative image of Romanians on the online was the main reason why ROM Autentic came up with the campaign “*Romanians are smart*”. ROM wanted Romania to be the first country to ever change its image on the online in only one-month time. The target was young, active people, aged 25-35, from urban and rural areas, both genders, and both students and employees.

ROM campaign “*Romanians are smart*” proved to be a very well thought and organized online campaign. McCann Erickson Agency managed to generate positive searches and considerable revenue with a comparatively low budget. In the end, Romanians changed the predictions existing on the internet. Romania was the first country in the world to change its image on the online.

Three years and a half after this campaign the image of Romania on the online is divided: in some countries the searches are still positive, on google.ro and google.fr, while in other countries the searches are the same as before the campaign, on google.it and google.es.

9. Conclusions

As we have noticed from the campaigns presented, despite all the efforts and the money invested, Romania's country brand remains diffuse. For some Europeans Romania and Romanians are still associated with low economy, gypsies, stray dogs and communism, on one hand, whereas on other hand with hospitable and amazing people, smart students, good food and drinks, beautiful women, classy clubs and night-life; the non-Europeans hardly know or heard anything about Romania.

Romania is considered a beautiful country by those who have had the chance to visit it. However, Romania has changed its brand and strategies, eight times in the last twenty years, which is also not very lucrative.

Is there any solution to save Romania as a brand? A possible solution could be to continue the country branding campaigns. They will manage to change stereotypes and clichés in the long run.

Additional to the country branding campaigns, Romania should invest in other promotional activities to raise its brand awareness.

Romania can improve its country brand and image by significant efforts run by the state. Both the campaigns and the promotional activities can help but in order to change the deeply rooted stereotypes sustained and concerted efforts are necessary for long period of time.

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