

John Fanning

Brand Nation Once Again

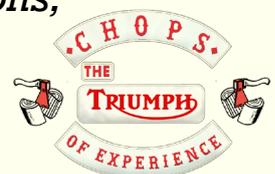


artillerybrand.com

I once used the term 'nation brand' in an Irish Times article and was immediately taken to task by a number of artists who objected violently that a crude commercial concept should be associated with the sacred nature of nationhood. I understood their point but felt, and still do, that they were being excessively precious. I am fully aware of the dangers of allowing the 'ghastly lexicon of managerialism' to encroach on other areas of life e.g. referring to the country as 'Ireland Inc' or regarding students in second or third level education as 'clients', but for better or worse the word brand has become so ubiquitous that it is now essentially meaningless; a bit like the wildly over-used 'passionate'.

Social media has forced a whole generation of adolescents to become curators (another word rapidly being clichéd into nothing) of their own personal brands. In these circumstances the safest course of action is to go back to first principles and define what exactly we mean by the term in the first place. Writing about this subject over fifteen years ago I conducted a survey of over fifty definitions of the term and in an attempt to clear my own mind I wrote my own version:

A brand represents the sum total of all the opinions, impressions, associations and ideas that people have about a product, service, organisation or even person.



In hindsight it's a bit prosaic, but what it lacks in style it more than makes up for in practicality and if you think about it in terms of a country it makes it clear why nations can be regarded as brands. We all have opinions, impressions, associations and ideas about different countries and it is easy to see how, when combined, they could influence a decision to invest in, buy goods from or visit that country.

It is also easy to see from this definition that the notion of trying to manipulate the impressions and associations that people have about a nation long pre-dates the concept of branding. The French revolutionaries of the late eighteenth century created a new logo, the Tricolour to replace the Fleur de Lys and adopted a new jingle: the Marseillaise. The emergence of America throughout the twentieth century has resulted in today's most powerful nation brand and successive administrations have been highly conscious of its power - without of course alluding publicly to the fact. Political scientist Joseph Nye came up with a more acceptable term in the 1990's: 'soft power'. In fact the Clinton administration was so taken with the whole idea that they hired a Madison Avenue hot shot to effectively run Brand America. She was given a substantial budget to fund a pan-Arab radio station designed to spread the gospel of US-style liberal democracy and consumerism across the Arab world. With an ancient civilisation that long pre-dates the US, the Arab world wasn't going to fall for that and the initiative floundered in the sand.



However, unlike most other US initiatives in the area it did so with no loss of life and the American brand remained strong until the Trumpian revolution that has seriously damaged their brand or reputation.

Yes, reputation in this context is another word for brand. The reason why I can state this with some authority is that the leading nation brand index says so. The measurement of nation brand images is a little tricky, but the Anholt Nation Brand Index has been operating for fifteen years and that's enough to have established some level of consistency and credibility. The final score is based on a complicated rating scale involving six metrics: governance, people, tourism, exports, culture and immigration. The latest, 2018, results indicate that from being the most powerful brand in the world in 2016 America's rating has now slipped to sixth position, the biggest single drop of any country since the index began. Ironically, Germany has now attained the highest ranking. It would be easy to criticise surveys like this and easier to query the six metrics in the rating scale, but the results do suggest that Brand America is suffering and that its 'soft power' is in decline. But the US is probably unique in also having a powerful sub-brand; Americana, which is still in rude good health.



Driven primarily by Hollywood with strong support from Tin Pan Alley, Americana's hold on the world's popular imagination shows no sign of loosening and is a powerful magnet for investment and export sales.

You may be wondering by now about our own nation brand image. Two hundred years ago Napper Tandy asked the same question; *Tell me how is Ireland and how does she stand?* Well, I'm sure the bould Napper would be delighted to know that we are no longer *the most distressful country that the world has ever seen*. In fact we're in pretty good shape, highly rated on most global comparison surveys. Strong assets include people and culture and although there was an element of self-interest in the backing we've received in the prolonged Brexit negotiations from the other EU member states, we have attracted admiration for our spectacular economic performance from the late 1960's to the 2008 recession and for our perseverance and resilience since the crash.

Louis MacNeice's famous and unfortunately justified criticism made almost eighty years to the day is no longer applicable:

*And she who gives her children neither sense nor money
Who slouch around the world with a gesture and a brogue
and a faggot of useless memories.*



We still have a residual attachment to 'cute hoor' tax arrangements but this is increasingly residual and there is, I believe, a better understanding now at the higher echelons of government and the civil service of the importance of a strong nation brand image. The fact that important political and administrative visitors are more likely to receive a signed first edition volume of poetry than a 'drop of the creatur' shows how far we've come.



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Chops was conceived by Eoghan Nolan.

Designed and typeset by Gerry McCloskey

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