

'Brand America: The mother of all brands'

Simon Anholt and Jeremy Hildreth

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'We hate you, but please send us *Baywatch*.' This is one of the great soundbites that are liberally scattered throughout Anholt and Hildreth's provocative text on America the brand. In some ways their book is a strange mixture of admiration and awe with regard to the power of brand America, tempered with an awareness and acknowledgment of the many and sometimes extremely destructive negative repercussions of the USA's behaviour on the international stage. The *Baywatch* reference illustrates the phenomenon of how the USA is hated in many parts of the world for its political system and military interventionism, while simultaneously its cultural output is devoured insatiably in the very same places.

As one of the first books focusing explicitly on the nation as a brand, 'Brand America' outlines the potential benefits to any nation in developing its brand reputation: it helps consumers make millions of everyday purchasing decisions; it can influence companies deciding where to set up their overseas operations; it can affect government decisions as to where to spend their foreign aid budgets; and it can play a role in international sporting bodies selecting which country will host their next event, and so on. The authors conclude that the brand image of a country has a profound impact on its

social, cultural, economic and political destiny.

Anholt and Hildreth caution that 'there is definitely something inflammatory about the language of marketing', however, and the vocabulary of marketing can sound cynical, arrogant and even sinister. Therefore, politicians should not imitate it too closely, no matter how modern they think it may make them sound. In response to one of the common objections that is made to nation branding, namely that the process is ethically dubious, the authors declare that the idea of nation branding, like any kind of statecraft, is ethically neutral and that it can be used as an instrument of democratic progress or as one of manipulation and deceit. Engaging the country's population in the nation branding project is advocated as one way to avoid the danger of deceptive practice in building a nation's brand.

Placing the USA in the context of other nation brands, the authors suggest that there are a handful of megabrand countries such as Japan, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and France with images so powerful and so positive that there might not appear to be any pressing need for these countries to manage their images. Each time a new brand emerges from one of these countries, suggest Anholt and Hildreth, it seems to have a head start over all its competitors.

In a class of its own and way ahead of its competitors is brand America, which is purported to lead the world in a number of domains, for example, the definitive youth lifestyle through brands such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, MTV, Levi's, Wrangler and so on; the definitive older male lifestyle through brands such as Marlboro, Budweiser, Jim Beam, Jack Daniel's, Harley-Davidson and Ray-Ban; sporting prowess via Nike, Reebok and NBA; technological supremacy through IBM, Compaq, Oracle, Dell, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, Apple, Intel, Microsoft and Xerox; retail through Wal-Mart, Amazon and Tower Records; and fashion through Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren. While this overall American dominance cannot be contested, there might be one or two eyebrows raised at claims of American leadership in areas such as technological supremacy (Japan having not a bad track record in that field) and fashion (France and Italy surely at least equals in that domain). But having enumerated the areas of dominance enjoyed by Brand America, the authors quickly note that some new negative ideas have recently started to join the list of things that the USA stands for.

These negative ideas include the increasingly widely held perceptions of America as bullying, polluting, domineering, imperialistic, ignorant, fat, selfish, inconsistent, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, hypocritical and

meddling. Quite an array of negative attributes for any brand, even one as powerful as brand America, to deal with. Anholt and Hildreth claim that this degeneration is relatively recent and that, for the most part, brand America has been managed with honour and integrity, or at least with the best intentions, as well as skill, inventiveness, vigour, consistency and passion, for a quarter of a millennium. It is such assertions that lend the book its provocative quality, as obviously many readers are going to be highly sceptical of the 'best intentions' with which the USA has acted over the course of its history.

It is in the final chapter, 'Just do it — Rejuvenating brand America', of this absorbing and entertaining book that Anholt and Hildreth proffer their advice to brand America on how to dig itself out of the hole that it increasingly seems to be getting stuck in. This chapter, although brief, contains some thought-provoking suggestions and is clearly based on work done by at least one of the authors in advising other countries on how to build their nation brands. Some of these suggestions are extremely enlightened and humane, and it would be good to think that the book might be read at some point by influential members of the Bush administration.

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