

Arvind Singhal: Rebranding India



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The benefits of a successful branding effort are well understood in the context of consumer products and services. Power brands provide a strong emotional connect between the marketer and the consumer that goes far beyond just the physical attributes of that product or service, leading to enhanced delight for the consumer and improved profitability and strategic advantage to the brand-owner.

The benefits of a successful branding effort in the context of businesses themselves are also well understood. Hence, decade after decade, icons such as GE, IBM, and McKinsey continue to enjoy respect and aspiration from not only those who directly deal with them, but the business community at large and then even beyond. In India, the Tata and the Birla groups enjoy a reputation and most of their businesses, a brand power that goes beyond their financial scale and reach.

The notion of branding of a nation, especially as diverse as India, and with a history which spans millennia, is far more complex. Obviously, most major countries evoke a mélange of emotions in people's heart across the world. For most, the national brand identity is not defined by one or two overpowering attributes but through a very complex multiplicity. Hence, brand USA may be seen as "affluent, powerful, successful, arrogant...", brand Italy as "fashionable, creative, chaotic...", and brand Japan as "organised, innovative, premium, rigid...". What does brand India stand for? As everything about India, it entirely depends upon the perspective. Some of the myriad defining attributes could include "heritage, culture, traditional creativity, rising economic power, poverty, disorganised, cheap, raw intellect, mediocrity...".

As India prepares for future that is qualitatively and quantitatively different and better than the present and its recent past, it also needs to take an objective look at what it should stand for in terms of its "brand". Should it be seen soullessly through the prism of GDP, economic growth, share in world trade, human development indicators, size of its population and the demographic implications, or should it make a futuristic, well thought of, concerted effort to be seen differently, even though on the socio-economic front it may still have miles to go? Indeed, if at all a "rebranding India" effort is consciously undertaken, it would be easier said than done, and even when done diligently, the impact may be seen in decades rather than in years.

So, perhaps a somewhat limited, more focused effort can be taken up. To use a term recently used by Mr Dayanidhi Maran in the context of Indian textile and clothing industry and its share in the global trade, India needs to create a "buzz" around it. There are some successful examples already. Incredible India/God's Own Country campaigns have yielded tangible, measurable outcomes for India in the context of a different, somewhat more up-market tourist destination, even though the physical infrastructure has failed to keep up with the opportunity created. Indian IT sector has already succeeded in creating a buzz around the globe in terms of India's technical prowess at least in the sector that it operates in. Can other industries/sectors now take up a collaborative effort to rebrand their respective sectors and create a new buzz? The automotive sector is already poised to take this up if it wishes to. The textile and clothing sector has always had the strongest of advantages – of history, tradition, craftsmanship and diversity. The health care sector, though still very nascent, can become another "globally impactful" sector for India. Education is yet another one where brand IIT and, increasingly, brand IIM go far and deep across the globe. Indeed, even the yet-to-be-organised Indian processed food industry has a global potential. What these sectors need to do is to first look inwards towards achieving competencies (product and business process innovation, quality orientation, marketing savvy, and all topped with bold entrepreneurial enthusiasm and energy) that can subsequently allow their products and services to first replace the "made-in-India-at-lowest-cost" with "crafted in India", "developed in India", "engineered in India", "innovated in India", "efficiently delivered in India or outside" type of monikers, and then go out boldly across the globe to be seen as a credible alternative to goods and services produced or delivered in the USA, Western Europe, Japan and South Korea rather than merely be seen as an alternative to China, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Thailand.

There is every reason to believe that such initiatives will be fully supported and backed by the government. It is up to the Indian industry and businesses to take the first few visionary, ambitious and determined steps in the potentially exciting and rewarding journey of rebranding of India.

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