

The Rising Importance of a National Brand for Organizations

Part 1: Branding Context & Impact

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We are all familiar with corporate brands, focused on either products, services or the overall organization. Solid brands impact recognition, enhance reputation, promote loyalty, influence behaviour and foster engagement.

For instance, since the start of its Olympic partnership in 2013, Canadian Tire has met with great success with its 'We all play for Canada' platform¹ "with heavy emphasis on the idea of inclusivity, play, and the importance of communities rallying together: values-based messaging about something that matters to us as a country."² Check out this moving [video](#)³ about combining play and inclusion.



Image retrieved from:

<https://www.resourcesforlife.com/docs/item14136>.

Brands are shaped by a complex set of interdependent factors such as values, vision, mission, strategy, culture, traditions, performance and aspirations. They evolve over time and fluctuate according to external factors like competitive pressures, and internal factors like crisis management: for instance, recalls in the pharmaceutical or auto industry can harm or restore a brand's image, depending on how they are handled. In the spring of 2018, Facebook data harvesting and sharing scandal⁴, resulted in a brand confidence breakdown, which prompted a worldwide conversation on strengthening privacy protection to safeguard democracy.⁵

Countries also have brands. In the book *Diplomacy in a Globalizing World: Theories and Practices*, authors define nation branding as "the application of corporate marketing concepts and techniques to countries, in the interest of enhancing their reputation in international relations."⁶

National brands are crafted by design, or happen by accident:

- When deliberate, they seek to build and promote a country's identity, manage its reputation, and increase its influence. When brand and actions align, national identity

¹ Canadian Tire Corporation, Limited. (2018, Feb 01). Canadian Tire Reminds Canadians that We All Play for Canada. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/canadian-tire-reminds-canadians-that-we-all-play-for-canada-672124153.html>.

² Dallaire, J. (2018, January 23). Canadian Tire forges ahead with 'We all play for Canada', Strategy Magazine. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://strategyonline.ca/2018/01/23/canadian-tire-forges-ahead-with-we-all-play-for-canada/>.

³ Canadian Tire "Wheels":60. Retrieved April 25, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pFuWUiHo-WI>

⁴ Understanding Facebook's data crisis: 5 essential reads. (2018, April 5). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://theconversation.com/understanding-facebooks-data-crisis-5-essential-reads-94066>.

⁵ Facebook is killing democracy with its personality profiling data. (2018, March 21). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://theconversation.com/facebook-is-killing-democracy-with-its-personality-profiling-data-93611>

⁶ Pamment, James (2013). *New Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century A comparative study of policy and practice*. New York: Routledge. p. 35-36.

becomes sharper, and trust increases in both the country and its brand. However, when a country's behaviour clashes with its brand, dissonance sets in, eroding trust and credibility.

- Meanwhile, accidental brands, not consciously driven by their country of origin, float around, lacking clarity and consistency, and are prone to tampering and takeovers.

Country Brands Matter

Countries with strong, positive brands generate good will, inviting collaboration and fostering inclusion. This represents a significant advantage in the current global arena where nations have to work together to solve global problems like climate change, pandemics, water supply, etc. Critical success factors include:

- Within the country of origin: clear brand articulation using extensive research, input from stakeholders, and featuring symbols, stories, slogans, visuals, etc.
- Outside the country of origin: communication strategy to leverage, promote, assess and monitor the brand's effectiveness and impact.

Sweden is a national branding best practice. *Brand Sweden* has been carefully defined, and is constantly monitored by organizations like the Swedish Institute to ensure the country presents and maintains a positive image.⁷ The Institute also collects data & feedback on Sweden's representations abroad. In addition, different events and campaigns have been set up to promote the brand over the years.

The Brand Sweden⁸ portal covers a variety of components such as: democracy, culture & traditions, nature, business, child care, economic vitality, climate change. For example:

- Famous Swedish innovations like the Pacemaker, Tetra Paks and portable refugee shelters.⁹
- World shaping Swedish companies like Ikea, Skype, Volvo, H&M, Ericsson and Spotify.¹⁰ With a population of only 10 million people, Sweden possesses an impressive number of internationally successful brands...
- Social democracy components like child and elderly care, accessibility, and gender equality,¹¹ which chronicles progress made so far (parental leave replaced maternity leave in 1974...), and outlines objectives for the future: gender balanced boards, pay equity enforcement, increased parliamentary representation, and workplace gender equality.

⁷ Swedish Institute. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://si.se/en/>.

⁸ Sweden (Official Site). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://sweden.se/>.

⁹ Brand management. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brand_management.

¹⁰ 10 world-shaping Swedish companies. (2018, January 10). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://sweden.se/business/10-world-shaping-swedish-companies/>.

¹¹ Sweden and gender equality. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://sweden.se/society/sweden-gender-equality/>.

Soft Power

A good brand exudes *soft power*: the ability to influence behaviour by persuasion, rather than coercion. Developing a national brand is the task of public diplomacy. “It’s about building awareness of our mutual interdependence in an interconnected world, and working for a common good. It’s also about building relationships of value to *all* parties; seeking the win-win scenario. As Simon Anholt states: ‘*There is only one super-power left on the planet — public opinion*’.”¹²

A country may obtain desirable outcomes in world politics because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it. Soft power co-opts people rather than coerces them.”¹³

Such a country is Australia: Australians are considered warm, bold, trustworthy, action-oriented, innovative and capable – they get things done. Hence their national brand: *Australia Unlimited*. “The platform weaves a new narrative based on collaboration, capability, confidence and creativity by presenting meaningful, contemporary Australian stories in an engaging way. The focus is on Australia’s greatest, unique asset: not our beaches, but our people, at home and abroad.”¹⁴ This [video](#)¹⁵ highlights stories of creativity and capability representing the contribution Australians are making to global issues.

For instance, their national innovation strategy is designed to “encourage new ideas in innovation & science, and harness new sources of growth to deliver the next age of economic prosperity. It also seeks to engage other countries to partner with Australia and access opportunities through international collaboration.”¹⁶ As a result



Image retrieved from <https://www.bellanaija.com/2015/09/attend-the-first-ever-australia-education-exhibition-in-africa-discover-a-future-unlimited-september-25th-26th/>.)

“Australia boasts the second-highest human development index (a composite of life expectancy,

¹² Public Diplomacy Explained: What it Means and Why it Matters. (2004, February 19). The Place Brand Observer. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://placebrandobserver.com/what-is-public-diplomacy/>.

¹³ Nye, Joseph. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

¹⁴ Australia’s Nation Brand. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://www.australiaunlimited.com/brand-australia/about-brand>.

¹⁵ Australia Unlimited. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ww4bxJFU_Mo.

¹⁶ Australia Global Innovation Strategy. Retrieved August 7, 2018 from <https://www.industry.gov.au/strategies-for-the-future/boosting-innovation-and-science>.

education and income per capita), and ranks highly in quality of life, health, education, economic freedom, as well as civil liberties and political rights”.¹⁷

Leveraging National Brands for Competitive & Reputational Advantage

Therefore, organizations can increase their impact by aligning strategies and operations to their country’s brand. For example, bold Australian organizations fit with the very successful National Innovation Strategy, and with the ‘relentless pursuit of possibilities’ theme at the core of *Australia Unlimited*... As a result, they gain credibility, positioning themselves as desirable and credible partners. Outsiders rapidly see how everything fits together.

Likewise, Swedish organizations can usefully leverage products and services by aligning with their country’s forward thinking social democratic framework, a global best practice. For instance, a recent Swedish innovation is [better shelter](#),¹⁸ an emergency shelter solution in a flat pack. “Designed to provide a sustainable and cost-efficient product that can be easily transported and assembled, thousands of Better Shelter units have been distributed to many different countries. Better Shelter has been developed in partnership with UNHCR and the IKEA Foundation.”¹⁹ Only Sweden could have come up with this idea!

At home, WestJet recently initiated heartwarming projects that fit our National brand. For instance, during the 2016 Fort McMurray fire, it airlifted victims to the safety of Edmonton. Through the 2018 NHL playoffs, it added Winnipeg/Vegas flights to accommodate Jets’ hockey fans.

As the company expands internationally, its reputation is enhanced through the cumulated impact of its own actions and that of our national brand. Landing at London’s Gatwick Airport



Image retrieved from <http://www.anna.aero/2016/05/10/westjet-says-london-calling/>.

in 2017, I was surprised to hear Westjet British employees sharing their pride in working for a Canadian company, and doing their best to ‘act Canadian’. When prompted on what that meant for them, they replied: “friendly, professional, collaborative, peaceful and funny.” Of course, I immediately showered them with praise.

¹⁷ Australia: World Audit Democracy Profile. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from, <http://www.worldaudit.org/countries/australia.htm>.

¹⁸ Better Shelter. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from, <http://www.bettershelter.org/>.

¹⁹ 10 innovations you didn’t know were Swedish. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from, <https://sweden.se/business/10-innovations-you-didnt-know-were-swedish/>.

Unfortunately, when individual or organizational actions clash with national brands, reputational damage ensues. For instance, Rob Ford negatively impacted the Canadian brand during his tenure as Toronto's mayor.²⁰ Likewise, Bombardier has been involved in a number of bribery and corruption scandals, and this has affected our image abroad.²¹

Finally, people can tell when individual, organizational and national actions are on or off brand. Dissonance hurts: President Obama affirmed the best of the American brand; Trump has almost destroyed it...

Local branding for global impact

"In order to compete against the backdrop of global cultural homogeneity, nations also strive to accentuate and promote local distinctiveness as a competitive advantage."²² This is a rising media trend, enabling TV viewers worldwide to not only enjoy greater programming variety, but expand cultural knowledge and appreciation.

The UK leads the pack in this regard, with international sensations like *Poldark*²³ and *Broadchurch*.²⁴ For example, "sales of British TV to China soared by 90% after Beijing became



Image retrieved from:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherlock_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherlock_(TV_series))

hooked on *Downton Abbey*²⁵ which plays to 160 million viewers. China is currently importing a British *cultural revolution*: BBC dramas such as *Sherlock*²⁶ are streamed by millions of viewers every month. As a vast middle class begins to take shape in China and other emerging economies, such as India and Brazil, there is an appetite for programs that provide a road map for these newly affluent lifestyles. Making quality TV is becoming recognized internationally as British trademark."²⁷

²⁰ Buchan-Terrell, A. (2013, May 21). The Impact of the Rob Ford Video Scandal on Toronto's Reputation. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://tvo.org/blog/current-affairs/inside-agenda/the-impact-of-the-rob-ford-video-scandal-on-torontos-reputation>.

²¹ Majka, C. (2016, December 20). As corruption hits close to home, we must remember there are alternatives to deregulated corporate capitalism. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/christophermajka/2016/12/corruption-hits-close-to-home-we-must-remember-there-are-alt>.

²² True, Jacqui (2006). "Globalization and Identity". In Raymond Miller. *Globalization and Identity*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press. p. 74.

²³ *Poldark* (2015 TV series). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poldark_\(2015_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poldark_(2015_TV_series)).

²⁴ *Broadchurch*. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broadchurch>.

²⁵ *Downton Abbey*. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downton_Abbey.

²⁶ *Sherlock* (TV series). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherlock_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherlock_(TV_series)).

²⁷ Burrell, I. (2017, July 7). Why British TV rules the world. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/why-british-tv-rules-the-world-9590481.html>

“This result is a cultural, ‘soft power’ benefit for British diplomacy... according to Tony Hall, BBC’s Director General”.²⁸

Nation Branding Survey

A brand’s reputation is an opinion about that entity, typically as a result of social evaluation on a set of criteria. “The Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM helps governments, organizations and businesses understand, monitor, and ultimately build a strong national image and reputation. It measures the power and quality of each country’s brand image, by combining the following six dimensions:²⁹



Image retrieved from <http://nation-brands.gfk.com/>.

1. **Exports:** The public’s image of a country’s products & services
2. **Governance:** Public opinion about national government competency and fairness, as well as its perceived commitment to global issues
3. **Culture & Heritage:** Global perceptions of nation’s heritage and appreciation for its contemporary culture
4. **People:** Population’s reputation for competence, openness and friendliness, and other qualities, such as tolerance
5. **Tourism:** Level of interest in visiting a country and the draw of natural and man-made tourist attractions
6. **Immigration/Investment:** The power of a country to attract people to live, work or study and how people perceive the country’s quality of life & business environment

2017 Results

“A country’s influence, to a considerable extent, is determined by what others think of it. This year’s Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM study finds that a robust, well-rounded reputation is the key to safeguarding or improving a nation’s overall reputation. More often than not, dominant nations lead on multiple dimensions. Consistency in image is crucial – seldom does a

²⁸ Sherwin, A. (2013, October 7). Not bad for a small island that no one listens to: British TV exports hit £1.2bn. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/not-bad-for-a-small-island-that-no-one-listens-to-british-tv-exports-hit-12bn-8864779.html>.

²⁹ Anholt GfK Nations Brand Index, 2017. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://nation-brands.gfk.com/>.

signature strength lift a nation's reputation into the top overall. Furthermore, relying on a single strength can create volatility in a nation's reputation year after year. In the wake of a substantial drop in global perception of the USA, Germany retakes the top overall ranking, while France climbs to second place. The UK regained the ground lost last year after the Brexit vote to hold onto third place, while Japan jumps into the top five for the first time since 2011, standing fourth-equal with Canada.”³⁰

Of the 50 countries measured in the study, *only the USA saw its overall NBI score drop this year*. It fell from 19th place to 23rd for Governance, a notably poor score for one of the world’s leading countries.

Nation	2017 rank	2016 rank	Score change 2017 vs. 2016
Germany	1	2	+0.99
France	2	5	+1.56
United Kingdom	3	3	+1.27
Canada	4	4	+0.96
Japan	4	7	+2.12
United States	6	1	-0.63
Italy	7	6	+0.74
Switzerland	8	8	+1.34
Australia	9	9	+0.76
Sweden	10	10	+1.30
<i>NBISM score changes: minor change: +/-0.26-0.50; medium: +/-0.51-1.00; large: > +/-1.00</i>			

Table 1: Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM (NBISM) study, released November 16, 2017.³¹

Canada remains # 1 one in the world for the second consecutive year in *three* of six categories measured in the study – People, Governance, and Immigration/Investment.

³⁰ Germany reclaims top nation brand ranking with USA dropping to sixth place. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://www.gfk.com/insights/press-release/germany-reclaims-top-nation-brand-ranking-with-usa-dropping-to-sixth-place/>.

³¹ Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM (NBISM) study. (2017, November 16). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://www.gfk.com/insights/press-release/germany-reclaims-top-nation-brand-ranking-with-usa-dropping-to-sixth-place/>.

	NBI SM	Exports	Governance	Culture	People	Tourism	Immigration/ Investment
1 st							
2 nd							
3 rd							--
4 th							
5 th	--						

Table 2: Top 5 nations across the Indices from Anholt-GfK Nation Brands IndexSM (NBISM) study, released November 16, 2017.³²

The data shows that:

- “People worldwide say they would want Canadians as close friends; they also feel they would be welcome when visiting the country and would willingly hire a well-qualified person from Canada.
- Canada is seen as having a competent and honest government – one that has a high respect for citizens’ rights and fair treatment. Canada is also highly rated in other aspects of the Governance category, such as behaviour in the areas of international peace and security, as well as environmental protection and world poverty reduction.
- Canada is thought to have a high quality of life and equal opportunity that strengthens its ability to attract talent and investment capital.”³³ At this point, Brand Canada is gaining visibility for a number of reasons.

Why Canada? Why Now?

US Decline

“More people now disapprove of U.S. leadership than approve. Germany has replaced the U.S. as the top-rated global power in the world. In Canada, 76% of respondents said they

³² *ibid.*

³³ Canada’s global brand ranks fourth in study of 50 nations – ties with Japan. (2017, November 16). Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <http://www.gfk.com/insights/press-release/canadas-global-brand-ranks-fourth-in-study-of-50-nations-ties-with-japan-1/>.

disapproved of the U.S. leadership performance.”³⁴ This widespread disapproval impacts trade, tourism, immigration, international relations and partnerships.

Influence Shifts

As the U.S. loses influence, a new leadership model is surfacing: factors like economic performance, size or military might, are being replaced by trustworthiness, stability, peacefulness, and the ability to leverage differences. In other words, how collaborative, respectful, fair and inclusive would country X be in dealing with global partners? How strongly would it demonstrate systems thinking, innovation, and resilience in solving global problems together?



Table 3: Top 10 Happiest Countries 2018³⁵

Interestingly, emerging powers share common features: peaceful, strong social democracies with extensive social nets, healthy economies and fair governance systems. They seem to *pull* through reputational power, rather than *push* through aggression.

³⁴ Panetta, A. (2018, January 18). World’s opinion of U.S. hits new low under Trump — especially in Canada: poll. The Canadian Press. Retrieved July 24, 2018, from <https://globalnews.ca/news/3973172/donald-trump-us-world-approval-canada/>.

³⁵ Top 10 Happiest Countries 2018. Retrieved July 24, 2018 from https://twitter.com/Happi_Research/status/973850139088613376. Based on Top 10 Happiest Countries in the world 2018. Retrieved July 24, 2018 from <https://www.theindiannewsupdate.com/2018/03/top-10-happiest-countries-in-the-world-2018/>.

“These nations also rank amongst the happiest countries in the world, according to six key variables: income, freedom, trust, healthy life expectancy, social support, and generosity. In 2018, there were no new entries. The countries listed in 2017 just exchanged places in 2018.” Like last year, Canada ranks 7th. It is seen as one of the most diplomatic, peaceful and stable countries in the world, with high life expectancy, beautiful and varied landscapes, and a wealth of opportunities.³⁶

This context represents a significant opportunity for Canada as well as a strategic challenge: As the world reduces in size and increases in complexity, success will belong to the *integrators*, not the *bullies*. As a country with a good reputation, an inclusive style, and solid process skills, we are well-positioned to influence. People are open to listen to us: but what will our message be? ‘We have to do something to help the world; we need to provide leadership based on ideas, ideals and values.’ - Pierre Morin, Former Director, Parks and Recreation, City of Montreal.³⁷

About the Author



Françoise Morissette, M.Ed., P.C.C., has been a facilitator at Queen’s IRC since 1994, and was made a Fellow in 2006. She played a key role in developing and implementing the Queen’s IRC’s Organizational Development curriculum and teaches on the *OD Foundations* and *Coaching Skills* programs. Françoise is a Certified Professional Coach, and she leverages coaching in her leadership practice, as well as training leaders and HR professionals on coaching skills.

Françoise is a major contributor to the OD field, with an emphasis on leadership and systems transformation, helping individuals, organizations and communities enhance their leadership capacity for performance and sustainability. In 2016, she certified as a LEADS facilitator. Her work takes her within Canada and internationally.

With HR expert Amal Henein, CHRP, Françoise wrote *Made in Canada Leadership*, the product of a large research project on leadership excellence and development. The book also explores ways to refine and leverage our national leadership brand in the global world. She is a much in demand speaker in both official languages.

³⁶ Helliwell, J., Layard, R., & Sachs, J. (2018). World Happiness Report 2018, New York: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

³⁷ Quoted in Henein, A. & Morissette, F. (2007). *Made in Canada Leadership*, Wiley Canada. p.223.

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