National tourism slogans abound throughout Asia, as countries in the region seek to tap into the growing pool of regional and global travellers, and some of those slogans have caught on. But in the more complex task of nation branding and the conduct of public diplomacy, Asian countries still have a long way to go, writes nation-branding expert Keith Dinnie.

Malaysia claims to be “Truly Asia,” South Korea is “Sparkling,” India “Incredible,” Thailand “Amazing,” and everything is “More Fun” in the Philippines. Such simplistic attempts at encapsulating a nation in one or two words may smack of crass reductionism, but they are symptomatic of a growing desire by governments to manage international perceptions of their nations. Throughout Asia, as in the rest of the world, recent years have witnessed a dramatic rise in the prominence of nation branding and public diplomacy. Most countries are now engaging in nation branding or are considering how to approach the challenge of developing an effective nation-branding strategy.

It can be argued that there is little that is new about nation branding, given that nations have historically branded themselves through icons such as flags, military uniforms, currencies, anthems and so on. However, what is new is the borrowing of branding techniques from the commercial sector and the application of these techniques to whole countries rather than merely to products or corporate brands. The key objectives of nation branding and public diplomacy are usually export promotion, the
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The attraction of inward investment, tourism promotion and an increase in international influence.

A strategic approach to nation branding and public diplomacy needs to go beyond facile slogans. Rather, countries should adopt a policy of stakeholder engagement to ensure that the nation brand is founded on an inclusiveness that allows the full richness of the country’s identity to be expressed in diverse ways to multiple audiences. In this light, it is interesting to compare the varying approaches that three Asian nations — Japan, China and South Korea — have taken with regard to their nation branding and public diplomacy strategies.

**Japan**

The main impetus for Japan’s nation branding emanated from former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, under whom a series of initiatives was launched in 2002, culminating in the creation in 2004 of the Japan Brand Working Group. The focus of the group was mainly on the promotion of Japanese cultural assets related to food culture, local brands and fashion. However, the rapid turnover of prime ministers since that time has militated against the development of a sustained nation branding strategy. Koizumi’s successors do not appear to have shared his enthusiasm for the branding and it is difficult to detect any coherent strategy in recent years.

For progress to be made in terms of Japan’s nation branding, in addition to private sector individuals and organizations, key public sector stakeholders should ideally be involved including, but not limited to, the government; the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry; the Japan External Trade Organization; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Japan National Tourism Organization; the Japan Foundation; the cities and regions of Japan and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. To this list should be added the citizens of Japan and also the Japanese diaspora. In other words, it is a virtually total national effort.

Policy-makers of any country, not just Japan, are naturally hesitant to throw open nation brand strategy formulation to the general public, for fear of losing control of such an undertaking. However, a balance needs to be struck between achieving a reasonable level of inclusiveness while maintaining the ability to take executive decisions on strategy direction. The development of citizen ambassador programs provides a positive solution to this conundrum. Citizen ambassadors have been recruited by many cities as an important component of their place-branding strategy, and there is potential for more regions and nations to do likewise. Berlin, for example, has instituted a citizen ambassador program in which citizens are invited to tell the story of how they personally have changed Berlin. These stories are powerful in creating a human face — often literally, through the use of photographs of individual ambassadors on websites and elsewhere — and providing a more authentically grounded and ethically acceptable form of place branding than the lazy use of facile slogans and expensive logos.
Citizen ambassador programs can stimulate civic pride; increase buy-in and acceptance of place-branding initiatives; demonstrate that inclusiveness goes beyond token consultations with local people and draw upon the social networks of residents and members of the diaspora. These benefits can only be achieved by committing the necessary resources to managing the citizen ambassador program, that is, a named individual or organization needs to have the responsibility of recruiting appropriate citizen ambassadors and then communicating with them the expectations of their roles. To date, there has unfortunately been very little relationship building between the Japanese government and the Japanese diaspora. Consequently, the diaspora network that could play a significant role in Japan’s nation branding has been overlooked.

South Korea

South Korea has in recent years been the most energetically committed country in Asia in attempting to manage its nation brand in a strategic rather than ad hoc manner.

A Presidential Council on Nation Branding established by President Lee Myung-bak represents a serious effort to manage international perceptions of the country rather than passively accepting stereotyping and other forms of negative branding by the international media and other third parties. The council has 47 members, 16 of whom are senior government figures while 31 are from various private sector backgrounds. The council is structured into five teams that have responsibility for the following functions: international co-operation, corporate and information technology, culture and tourism, the global community and overall co-ordination.

The South Korean approach is characterized by a clear recognition of the need for the strategy to be rooted in Korean culture and to display and enact openness towards the rest of the world. A wide-ranging strategy has been developed comprising the following key dimensions: promotion of Taekwondo; sending 3,000 volunteers abroad on a humanitarian basis; the Korean Wave program; the Global Korea Scholarship; the Campus Asia Program; increase in external aid; development of state of the art technologies; promotion of the culture and tourism industries; helping Koreans become “global citizens;” and a drive to encourage local citizens to treat foreigners and multicultural families better.

While there has been criticism of the Presidential Council on Nation Branding, it is too early to judge the success of the Korean approach. As in other nations, one risk is that when a new leader is elected, as will happen later this year in South Korea, the existing nation-branding strategy will be discarded for no other reason than a desire to make a clean break from the previous regime. Achieving continuity in nation-branding policy is thus problematic.

China

China has prioritized soft power projection through public diplomacy initiatives rather than employing the more explicitly brand-related strategies of Japan and South Korea. The focus on soft power reflects China’s need to reassure its neighbors as well as the world at large that despite its growing military might, the country’s intentions are benign. In Japan, for example, China has implemented a public diplomacy strategy comprising the following key components: use of the media through conferences with the Japanese Press Association, and the provision of explanations of policy changes by the Chinese Communist Party; visits of celebrities such as Chinese movie stars to events like Tokyo Movie Week; events and projects such as the Chinese National Day celebrations held in a large hotel; and a drive to encourage local citizens to treat foreigners and multicultural families better.

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Overcoming Obstacles to Nation Branding

In conclusion, despite the proliferation of nation branding and public diplomacy initiatives in Asia, examples of best practice have been slow to emerge. Numerous obstacles are yet to be overcome. For example, countries have struggled to persuade all the relevant stakeholders to work together in a nation branding strategy, especially if those stakeholders do not know anything about nation branding. Education is thus a prerequisite. Stakeholders need to gain a reasonable level of awareness regarding the nature and objectives of nation branding and public diplomacy. A further problem is that in many countries, the primary player in nation branding (even if they do not use the term “nation branding”) is the national tourism organization, and if that body possesses a large budget and a high degree of autonomy, it may not want to collaborate with other stakeholders such as export and investment promotion agencies. The national tourism organization may wish to continue to dominate the projection of the nation’s image and be unwilling to collaborate with other parties.

Unfortunately, tourism is an incredibly politicized domain, as can be seen from the constant, politically driven restructurings in many countries of their national tourism organizations.

Other challenges to greater co-ordination are manifested in the culture clash of professional backgrounds. Diplomats and business people, for example, frequently exhibit radically different mindsets that render such individuals incapable of or unwilling to work together. In many countries, the diplomatic corps rejects the “commercial” mentality of marketing and branding. At the same time, branding specialists may be ignorant of the complex interplay that characterizes international relations between countries. It can be difficult to establish common ground between such conflicting mindsets. In developing a coherent and co-ordinated nation brand strategy, there needs to be a firm and clearly signaled commitment by the country’s political leaders regarding the need for diplomacy, tourism, export promotion and inward investment to work together. In Asia, it is probably Singapore that has come closest to achieving this. Whether such cross-sector co-ordination can also be achieved in the more complex environments of much larger nations like China, South Korea and Japan, remains to be seen.