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Branding, a mind game

By L.S. Sya

THERE is a Latin term or maxim frequently used in intellectual discourse called a fortiori. Loosely translated, it means "all the more so!"

In today's popular parlance, you could say it means "more power to my argument".

How can this maxim apply to the concept of Branding Malaysia? To illustrate the point further, we shall also look at a few branding principles that relates to the issue under discussion today.

Many equate national branding with tourist promotion. However, we know that it is much more than that. It is clear that our perception of a country can influence whether we decide to invest or take a holiday or even buy its products.

That, in a nutshell, encapsulates the Doctrine of Country Branding Effects.

Once established, the country brand will emit an aura over all the country's products and services. This can be either positive or negative.

The National Branding effort is, therefore, exigent as it is inextricably linked to the products, corporate brands and services of the country.

This issue of Branding Malaysia is of critical importance.

This is especially so in the light of the declared objectives of Vision 2020 - which is to put Malaysia up in the echelons of the developed nations.

Mention the word "French" and it will conjure up an image of sophistication, haute couture, fine wines and cosmetics.

Consequently, if it is at all possible for the "Made in Malaysia" label to carry connotations of quality, excellence, innovation and at the same time capture the Malaysian spirit, we would have achieved our brand vision.

Malaysian manufacturers such as Proton, Perodua and Naza have shown a remarkable commitment to quality, design and innovation.

Malaysian services companies, especially insurance companies such as MAA, have been very innovative with their insurance products.

The heartening thing to note is that they are beginning to take their services to other parts of the world.

Malaysia Airlines, which together with the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board, has been the main standard bearers for Brand Malaysia and has received multiple awards for its inflight service.

Malaysia has also given the world the celebrated shoemaker Datuk Jimmy Choo, actress Datuk Michele Yeoh, YTL Corp, the Shangri-La Hotel chain and Tun Dr Mahathir Muhamad, a visionary bar none.

All of them are clear proof that Malaysians and their corporations, when they set their minds to it, can do as well as and, often times, even better than others.

I have travelled a bit and I have visited more than 150 cities worldwide. I must say that I have yet to see a planned township as beautiful as Putrajaya. I have always made it a point to take foreign visitors and guests there.

The sheer beauty and functional aesthetics of the infrastructure and the landscaping have always taken their breath away. The consensus among my guests is that Putrajaya is simply stunning and world class.

The Government should set up a Think Tank or a National Branding Council

to oversee this development of our national brand and encourage a culture of a singular commitment to world class quality and innovation.

A massive Change Management and Communications Programme should be instituted to achieve this important mind set change among all stakeholders ranging from the private sector, the population at large, right up to every staff in the statutory bodies.

Malaysian manufacturers should be encouraged to move up the quality chain.

Germany, through the all encompassing influence of their traditional craft guilds, have emerged from the ravages of World War Two to become known for their automotive excellence.

A clarion call should go out to all Malaysians, from musicians and artistes to little companies and corporations to emulate the Brand Ambassadors and venture out.

Let us take a look at China which has earned the moniker of "Factory to the World".

Unfortunately, like Japan in the early 50s and 60s (before the Edward Demmings quality influence started to bear fruit), Chinese goods have had to fight a worldwide perception of low quality.

In a clear demonstration of the Chinese government's commitment to building up its country brand, no less than six high-powered government departments are currently working in concert on several national branding initiatives and activities.

One Chinese brand, Haier (a literal translation from the Chinese word for Seagull), originally state owned and producing low quality electrical goods for the domestic market, had an interesting solution.

They established their headquarters in an impressive building in New York. Adopting a new business philosophy and policy resting on the three planks of "Brand First", "Innovation" and "World Class Quality", they went on to build a large plant in Camden, South Carolina.

Now manufacturing high quality refrigerators, washing machines, wine coolers, and etc, Haier stamped every product with the "Made in USA" label.

The response from the American market, which is notoriously competitive and brand name conscious, was simply overwhelming.

Despite competing in the luxury home appliance and specialty refrigerator sector, Haier has gained impressive market share in every state in the United States.

Questions have been raised if

"Malaysia, Truly Asia" is the right tagline to express our identity.

Let us examine the effectiveness of this campaign.

Malaysia had chosen, with this campaign, to offer the tourist a multi-cultural experience. In my view, there is nothing wrong with that. After all, we are a melting pot of different cultures.

However, some people have argued that the top of mind recall of Asia is one of dirt, grime and cheap labour. Others have pointed out that tourists who are seeking a culture experience will go to the birthplace of the culture for it - that is, to India, China, etc.

Yet others have observed that Hong Kong has also used the same message calling itself "Asia's World City" whilst Singapore has used the tagline "New Asia".

Indonesia carries on the same theme with "Endless Beauty of Diversity".

Now we know that the power of strong brands is that they differentiate. The key to successful branding is the perception of a difference between competing brands.

If you succeed on this score, you will attract customers to your product or service without having to chase after them.

With so many countries in the region selling the same message, it may appear at first sight to violate this essential principle of branding.

However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In my view, this campaign has been successful as it has resulted in increased tourist arrivals.

On the other hand, if the Tourist Development Corporation can find a message that captures the Malaysian spirit effectively and is appealing to tourists, this will a fortiori help to build up our country brand.

The country brand will emit an aura that will benefit every single product, service or corporate brand competing in the world market.

In view of the fact that Malaysia has numerous states, the Brand Architecture of this campaign has to be carefully planned.

Brand Architecture, simply put, is how each sub-brand should fit in with a "master brand".

A case in point would be Canon, National and Sharp. Although they market different categories of products, every product will still carry their brand.

Another approach is that of the fast moving consumable manufacturers, such as Nestle and Lever Brothers, who assign a different brand name to each product.

Each State will have competing and, sometimes, conflicting tourism objectives and agendas.

They may be motivated to attract visitors to their own State as it will benefit their residents and businesses there. There's nothing wrong with that.

However, if their branding effort could be co-ordinated and integrated with the national branding campaign, a fortiori the States will emerge winners as the national brand will, in turn, benefit every product or service emanating from each state.

The national brand, in turn, gains from the obvious synergistic and symbiotic relationship. Such an approach will also prevent duplicity of efforts and wastage of resources

Another critical success factor is the concept of "Inclusivity".

This simply means that without widespread buy-in from every stakeholder across every government department, the private sector and every citizen, all national campaigns are doomed.

As you will see, even Parliament and the courts have a role to play. For instance, the best tourism advertising campaign will be impotent if an innocent tourist, upon entry, has an unpleasant experience at the Immigration and Customs gates.

A taxi driver who fleeces a tourist will also undermine the national branding effort.

Singapore, for so long considered a case study in nation branding, almost nullified decades of exemplary national brand management by something as seemingly insignificant as banning chewing gum and meting out excessive punishment to an international student for a minor infraction.

The current image of Singapore as a cold and clinical place was not entirely accidental - in a sense, it was self induced.

That is why multi-national corporations place so much emphasis on Brand Management.

Branding is after all, a mind game. A brand, whether it is a product or country brand is a collection of perceptions.

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