

MARKETING PAKISTAN'S IMAGE

People buy brands, not products. That is the age-old, established fact supported by extensive research that every marketer worth his or her salt would always stand by. The interesting thing is that these days, development and pursuance of a successful brand strategy is no longer the sole domain of corporate entities alone, but has seen a cross-over to politics and Governments also. Indeed, many Government now endeavor to transform themselves and operate as corporate entities. Malaysia Inc. is one example. So branding is the key to success. Having said that, the marketers in this audience will vouch that branding is an extremely difficult, specialized job that often entails juggling with science and art and grappling with nebulous ideas for concrete objectives. So we see in the cola wars for example, that some people prefer Coke to Pepsi not simply because of the difference in how they taste, but because of certain **mental associations** they have with that taste. The principal challenge that we thus face as a nation is to develop these 'mental associations' that would ultimately lead towards the development of a brand called Pakistan.

There are two aspects to the development of a brand: one, identifying the attributes, which constitute the brand; and two, deciding on the manner in which they are packaged and presented. I would like to dilate upon the attributes first.

At the moment, there is no brand called 'Pakistan'. What we do have are disjointed, largely negative, fragments of our country's attributes, which form the basis for the world's judgment. I must hasten to add here that these negative images are—unfortunately—ingrained in our own minds as well, hence making our task all that much more difficult. Recent geo-political and terrorist events have rendered this image all the more vulnerable. But in conducting a SWOT analysis, we should take this geo-political baggage as a given and work around it, rather than continue to wade in areas of controversy. Successful marketing is a function of how well the strengths are used and built on. It is important for us to be aware of our weaknesses and the threats, but even more important to channel our strengths towards seizing the opportunities.

So what are our strengths?

- ✍ Population of over 140 million people that represents a large market size
- ✍ A per capita income in terms of Purchasing Power Parity of \$2000
- ✍ Growth over a 40-year period at an annual average rate of 6%, one of the highest in the developing world
- ✍ Self-sufficiency in food production
- ✍ Emergence of a large middle class with ever increasing demands for better quality Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) and consumer durable goods such as automobiles as well as services.
- ✍ Abundance of natural resources like natural gas, minerals and coal.
- ✍ An increasingly liberal trade and foreign exchange regime
- ✍ A competitive and open financial sector

But these strengths are meaningless unless they translate into success stories and that is where the challenge lies. While it is always a healthy sign for people to be modest about their own worth, this examination must not be allowed to always end up in cynicism and a defeatist mentality. Societies that do not believe in themselves wither away. We must therefore curb our tendency to heavily discount all that we have achieved, do or plan to do. You will all agree that the success stories are there and already in a branded form: Sindhri, Basmati, Ajrak, scientists like Dr. Abdul Salaam and even our sports heroes like Jehangir Khan and Imran Khan, to name just a few of our demi-brands. Perhaps I should add 'reverse swing' to that list. We all know that these may be far and few in between and need to be augmented but they do exist. While some of you may say that this association between products and services and the development of a brand for a nation is not appropriate, I would encourage them to look at how aspects of products and services such as their quality, efficiency and durability are linked with national characteristics. Thus Italy is associated with style, Switzerland with mechanical efficiency, Japan with technological development. There is a clear linkage between some of the greatest brands of the world, like McDonalds, Coke, Microsoft and the concept of the American Dream, the little guy (meaning the entrepreneur) taking on the odds and winning. Closer to home, India has been able to merge its history and its culture with its national image. In any case, in the globalised market of today, 192 countries are competing against each other for economic supremacy, so our efforts at branding must be guided by the overarching aim to find our economic niche in the world market through increased competitiveness and efficiency.

So if all these countries have done it, why can't we?

This question brings us to the second aspect of our branding strategy and that is the manner in which we present and package ourselves. You would all appreciate that almost all battles are won or lost without firing a single bullet, for almost all battles are economic battles. The media—electronic in particular—is now the battleground and we have poor standing on that front. Whatever exposure we do have is negative and that's where the problem lies and that is where this audience and others like you can play a role.

You will agree that every message has a credibility factor. So far, our efforts at improving our national image and at creating a brand called 'Pakistan' have been driven by the Government. Given that the Government itself has been a part of the problem, this creates obvious hurdles for the development of a positive brand image. So we must think out of the box and come up with alternative strategies. I look towards you—the successful businessmen and women, thought leaders, entrepreneurs and the distinguished elite of our society—as the Marketing Agents. This is not to suggest that the Government must shirk from its responsibilities, for in the current scenario where Economic Diplomacy is fast replacing traditional diplomacy, the Government has a new role to play. But I have no doubts in my mind that the change in the image and the development of Pakistan as a successful, positive brand must come from you. As Ambassadors of Goodwill, the business community needs to forge close links with trade bodies and association; our thought leaders must become more active in international think tanks and academic circles and our media must

adopt a more positive approach towards our own people. We must get out of this inward looking syndrome and open our minds to all that is happening around us. It is time to not only work hard, but also think smart.

I need not remind this audience that Marketing is divided into four areas; the Product, the Pricing, the Promotion and the Place. We have touched upon these four in a limited way, but I would like to add two other Ps here: People and Positioning.

By People, I refer to my request to all of you to emerge out of this cynical view of our own selves. Our people and all they have achieved or are capable of achieving are our strength. We produce goods for Adidas, Nike, Levis and Ikea, yet feel inadequate to compete with the best. During my frequent interaction with other members of the international financial systems, I am surprised myself as to how far ahead we are on certain fronts such as liberalization of economic policies. This is not to suggest that we become complacent, but that we not be in a denial mode all the time and build on the many positives of our people.

And as for Positioning, the days of captive markets are long gone. One cannot succeed with generic strategies and say for example that 'Be Pakistani, Buy Pakistani' or 'East West Pakistan Is The Best'. We need to be more targeted, more focused and aim for particular niches in the economic and political markets. The clarity of our positioning statement would thus determine to a great extent, our success in developing a brand for the country. A good example would be the current positioning of Malaysia as "Truly Asia", hence

portraying Malaysia and its airline, its hospitality industry and its Government as symbolizing the values of Asian societies. So exactly how do we want to position ourselves? Again, this is an area where we rely on your contribution.

In the end, I would just like to underscore a basic point: the development of a brand called Pakistan and the subsequent marketing of a positive image for Pakistan requires a **collective** effort, but one where people like you must assume a greater responsibility.