Country as Brand – A Marketing Information System for Developing Countries Case Study of Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a marketing information system to help Ethiopians market their diverse goods and services to Ethiopians living in the United States (U.S.). It is a work-in-progress submittal. This system begins with the development of a positive brand identity strategy for Ethiopian goods and services. It then tests this strategy with Ethiopians living in the U.S. Once validated, the brand identity strategy is overlaid into a web-based prototype to be used for e-commerce of Ethiopian goods and services by Ethiopians living in the U.S. This is defined by the author as a Country of Origin website. The project includes user task analysis and survey data to develop Ethiopia's brand identity by Ethiopians who currently live in the United States. The paper suggests a new strategy to help developing countries find markets for their unique products and services.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of branding countries, while controversial, has lead to new studies that warrant consideration. Holt (2002, p.87) discusses brands as "citizen-artists" and their focus as a "cultural resource." Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002, p. 296) state that people have a need to "chunk" information due to potential overload and that there is an image associated with places that sometimes is beyond the marketer's control. Van Ham (2001, p.3) argues that essential elements of brand equity are reputation and image. Unfortunately, there are countries in the world that are stigmatized globally. Higginson (1999) discusses regional stigmas and notes that companies are "tarred with the territorial brush of the country…". The purpose of this study is first, to execute a brand equity study with Ethiopians that live in the United States to determine positive perceptions and attitudes about the country and its products and services. Brand equity as defined by Braunstein and Levine (2000, p.26) is "an indelible mark made on the mind of a stakeholder." Other synonyms include "brand assets", "brand inventory", "brand hierarchy" and "brand positioning". The study will include a user task analysis and survey that will translate into a prototype design of branding elements for Ethiopia. According to Braunstein and Levine (2000, p. 36), elements included in branding strategies are what are "meaningful", "unique", and emote "passion" by the group served with products or services. Those elements will then be incorporated into a web-based prototype to be used for e-commerce of Ethiopian goods and services by Ethiopians living in the U.S. A discussion about the conceptual considerations for this marketing information system, Ethiopia's challenges, products, and technological considerations are highlighted.

CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Change Agent

There is a thrust to look at culture as an integral consideration of global information systems. Myers and Tan (2002, p.13) suggest that researchers in IS view "culture as contested, temporal and emergent." It is time to think out of the box for developing countries. The current system of industrialization does not work for many of them, such as Ethiopia. Lodge (2002, p. 14) states that poverty is unable to be eradicated by globalization. He argues that a "new means" is needed to ensure that poverty's causes are attacked. Could there be other ways to help countries help themselves? Furthermore, is it possible to translate what companies are experiencing and doing to help countries? Currently, corporations are seeking alternate ways of competing. Hamel (2002, p.25) refers to "discontinuous change" where companies use creative, new methods that are unconventional to develop competitive advantage.

This paper addresses a way for Ethiopians that live in the United States to be able to exchange goods and services for money that is needed by people in Ethiopia. It creates a knowledge community via the Internet. Afele (2003, viii) describes knowledge communities as a place where "talents and ideas are identified; creativity is nourished, capitalized, and translated into tangible services and products for the primary impact zone." With in this marketing information system, people that have wants and needs related to Ethiopia's brand unique meanings, such as symbolic, experiential or functional (Hsieh, 2001, p. 48) have a means to access those wants and needs. This access will, in turn, contribute to the welfare of individuals and groups living in diverse regions of Ethiopia. Hsieh (2001, p. 63) states the Internet will aid in "cross-national exposure" to the message and programs of brands.

Ethiopia- Challenges

Ethiopia has a stigma in the United States and is perceived as a country of poverty, famine and disease. Clearly, much of what is perceived is media-driven. However, the facts validate the perception. Over 6 million people are facing food shortages after a severe drought. Its population is estimated at 66 million of which half are considered chronically poor. Life expectancy is 45 years. Furthermore, overall literacy is 35.5%. Ethiopia is an extensively fragmented society. It is made up of 168 different tribes possessing their own culture and language. Its leadership is inconsistent and its government is unstable. (The World Fact Book, 2002.) Given its many challenges, Ethiopia must consider other means of development and assume that current constraining factors of economic development are not going to change in the near future.

Ethiopia- Products

Currently, *coffee* is the most important product, earning $260 million in 2000 through exporting. (The World Fact Book, 2002.) It is the place of origin for organic coffee (Coffee Production, 1999.) Ethiopia is also known for its *fabrics*, hand made *jewelry*, and *artifacts*. There has been a strong

increase in jewelry consumption by the Middle and Far East. (Duncan, J. 2000.) Ethiopia currently has four state owned *beer* breweries and four new breweries currently under construction. Most of the breweries produce for the export market. (Economic and Commercial Office, 2001.) The textile industry is the largest manufacturing industry in Ethiopia. The industry employs 30,000 workers, which is 36% of the manufacturing industry. The textiles produced include cotton and polyester with consumption of 93 million pounds in 2001. The principle importers of cotton are Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, and Thailand. (Raines, 2002.) Other valuable exports of Ethiopia are livestock products. Ethiopian highland sheepskin has gained an international reputation in glove manufacturing. A few other exports of Ethiopia are seeds and pulses, tea, and natural gum. Tourism is also growing. There are 40 agencies available to give tours in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has three primary Resort areas, Sodere, Rift Valley Lakes and Wando Genet. There are closely 22 hotels in Ethiopia including a Sheraton and a Hilton. There were 693 million tourists traveling worldwide in 2001 of which 28% visited Africa (The World Tourism Organization, 2001.) Furthermore, Ethiopia's main exporters include Germany (6%), Japan (13%), Djibouti (10%), and Saudi Arabia (7%). The major importers are Saudi Arabia (28%), Italy (10%), Russia (7%), and the United States (6%).

Ethiopia also has many organizations and countries that are interested in aiding them. According to the 1998 Agency Performance Report, The United States ranked first among bilateral donors to Ethiopia, followed by Germany, Japan, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Italy. Major multilateral donors include International Development Association, the United Nations Development Program, the World Food Program, and the World Bank. There are many organizations that donate food, water, shelter, medical care, and educational support.

TECHNOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The sole provider for Internet services within Ethiopia is The Ethiopian Telecommunications Corporation (ETC), established in 1996. The ETC handles the operation, expansion and development of telecommunications throughout Ethiopia, while the Ethiopian Privatization Agency (EPA) handles its regulation. In late 1999, the EPA announced its search for an internationally recognized consulting firm for guidance regarding the privatization of the ETC. It is hoped that this development might lead to more connections and lower prices for Ethiopian users. Ethiopia also has the ability to use wireless communications. Other African nations are developing computer technology to aid country growth. Ghana hopes to have at least 100,000 computer jobs throughout the country. More Ghanaians own computers, televisions, radios, cell phones, and satellite dishes than ever before. They hope to increase their living standard with IT (Zachary, 2002.) Another nation that has greatly benefited from a surge of technology is Mauritius, situated in the Indian Ocean. Due to a fiber optic cable placement strategically located near Mauritius, it has taken to marketing itself as a Cyber Island (an information technology hub for Africa and the Middle East.) (In Mauritius…, 2002.)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1) What are the positive brand-unique meanings (symbolic, experiential, functional) that Ethiopians living in the U.S. have in demanding the products and services and cultural aspects of their homeland?
2) How can these positive meanings be translated into a brand identity strategy for Ethiopian goods and services?
3) Can this Ethiopian brand identity strategy then be translated into a prototype design for a Country of Origin website?

RESEARCH DESIGN

A user task analysis of 10 Ethiopians living in the United States will first be conducted to provide an in-depth understanding of those positive meanings most identified by Ethiopians. This analysis will use a contextual design, incorporating ethnographic interviews. (Harvey, 1997, p. 132-146.) Once complete, a survey will be distributed to a larger sample of Ethiopians living in the U.S. (approximately 300) in order to validate those positive symbolic, experiential and functional benefits derived from Ethiopian products and services by Ethiopians living in the U.S. The survey will be designed using existing brand equity questionnaire techniques. Key findings will be translated into an Ethiopian brand identity strategy. That brand identity strategy will be illustrated using prototype concept boards and shared with the 10 Ethio-

pians living in the U.S. involved in the user task analysis. Once validated, concepts will be translated into a Country of Origin website.

TIME FRAME

The results of the user task analysis and survey will be available summer of 2004. The Country of Origin web-based prototype design is expected to be available summer of 2005.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Countries around the world are looking at branding to help create positive perceptions for world markets. Current studies include New Zealand, Australia, Korea, Ireland and the U.S. Developing countries such as Ethiopia that face extensive internal challenges such as leadership, fragmented cultures, famine, disease and war must look at alternative solutions to develop unique competitive advantage. A Country of Origin website with positive Ethiopian brand identity that finds people to serve with its vast array of culturally rich products and services may be a long-term solution. This research intends to advance those efforts to help Ethiopia help itself develop within its current environmental frame.

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