

BRAND SINGAPORE



How businesses can align with their country's branding in a Covid-19-plagued world.

By Koh Buck Song

As the world gets a better grip on the Covid-19 pandemic, one outcome is becoming clear: Place branding—in particular, nation branding—is becoming more important than ever before.

Debate over nationhood's very survival has intensified ever since the 1995 book *The End of the Nation State* by Kenichi Ohmae¹ prophesied its demise. But now, this pandemic has seen a kind of renaissance of the nation state, as it stamps its authority anew with force.

With border controls enforced everywhere, life across the globe is being lived mostly within the confines of each nation, and in isolation from others. Hence, the increased value of a nation's reputation—its brand, and its ability to attract attention, investment, and support from other countries.

For example, the U.K., cast adrift from the European Union, must rebuild brand Britain post-Brexit. In doing so, the new Britain can aim to revive the glories of the old empire, while contending with more recent and challenging global perceptions. In the U.S., the biggest foreign policy challenge of the new Biden administration is how to rebuild brand America so that exports can grow again.

With more economic activity moving online, brand building will also be increasingly conducted through virtual means. A few things follow from this. One is that online meetings can go only so far in building human relations, and face-to-face interaction remains the ideal way to win rapport. Another is that conventional word-of-mouth now has a much wider reach, so brand building efforts must weigh a brand at any one time against what is being communicated by its entire digital presence.

With a greater influence of nation states on all economic activities and as long as pandemic border controls are necessary, impressions of any commercial brand will be affected by existing perceptions of the nation brands of the countries of origin. What this means is that, more and more, the digital entities of businesses will be tied to their nation brands, whether they like it or not, even if only on a subconscious level.

A deeper search for value arising from Covid-19

Many people confuse marketing and branding. Pandemic deprivation has forced more clarity. In boom times, a lot is taken for granted about brand building, or that it can be deferred to the next occasion. Marketing takes more of the spotlight, promoting aspects of a product, discounts, and good deals. But when market activity is low, the focus shifts to branding, which is much more about character, and intangible facets such as reliability, and longer-term aspects like value for money.

This pandemic has made everyone more value-conscious. Investors, trade partners, tourists, and immigrants will gravitate to places that are seen as safe, trustworthy, and welcoming. Hygiene itself has become the most vital hygiene factor.

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This is why country-brand advertising in these times, by nations such as New Zealand, is not about where to go or what to do. It is focused on communicating characteristics and brand attributes such as friendliness towards foreigners, or simply basic family values.

As businesses seek to build back better for a post-Covid-19 world, aligning with the nation brand is one way to accentuate facets of a commercial brand, thereby helping it to explore fresh opportunities. Enterprises and enterprising individuals in Singapore, for instance, have a strong nation brand in the backdrop to 'plug into' in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Brand Singapore strengthens despite the pandemic

Singapore, after having dealt with an outbreak of cases in foreign worker dormitories in 2020, has kept cases and fatalities low compared to most other countries, without the need for more lockdowns. Moving from 'gold standard' to cautionary tale, Singapore is like a top student in class who did badly on one or two tests, but has done well overall. The country's international standing has since been strengthened further by recent developments.

Foreign direct investments in 2020 remained high nonetheless, and investor confidence remains strong, as seen in iconic commercial openings such as the world's first floating Apple store in Marina Bay in September 2020.² The most significant endorsement by the global community came from the World Economic Forum's announcement of its choice of Singapore as the location to host its annual meeting in August 2021.³ Even if, in the worst-case scenario, the global situation takes a turn for the worse and the event is called off, the initial selection of Singapore as the host city is already a compliment of the highest order.

Singapore is powering forward with new initiatives that will refresh and enhance its nation brand. The Green Plan 2030 will turn this 'little red dot' into a 'bright green spark'⁴ through a 'whole-of-nation movement' to advance the national agenda on sustainable development, including transitioning to electric vehicles and planting a million more trees.

This master plan positions Singapore at the leading edge of making cities more sustainable and liveable. It joins other efforts including the 'City in Nature'⁵ vision to infuse more of nature into the urban fabric, with measures going back in time such as turning concrete canals back into waterways with vegetated banks and recreational amenities.

The initiatives provide a rich background and resources for businesses and enterprising individuals to orientate

and align what they are doing in their own spheres with the positive impressions that the country has earned through nation brand building developments. Businesses can ride on Singapore's overall efforts in advancing sustainability to promote their own messaging in this area.

'Passion Made Possible' as a brand platform

Brand Singapore is in a position of considerable strength, despite the disruptions brought about by the pandemic. The current country brand concept 'Passion Made Possible'⁶, launched in 2017, centres on the idea that the Republic is a highly conducive place for those with the drive to realise their hopes and dreams, whether as business creators or consumers.

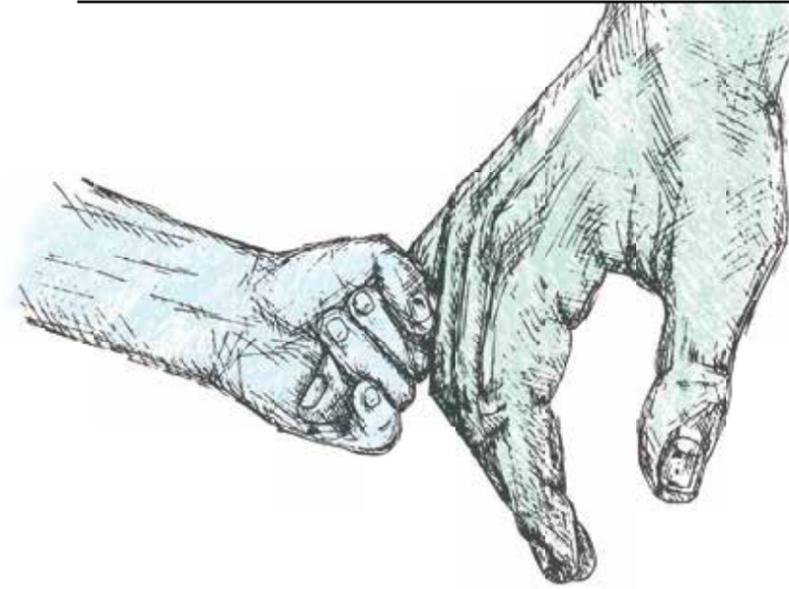
'Passion Made Possible' is the first brand concept developed by the Singapore Tourism Board not solely for tourism, but for Singapore overall, in collaboration with the Economic Development Board (EDB). EDB, through its 'Singapore: The Impossible Story'⁷ branding, portrays passion from a different angle—through entrepreneurs who made it in Singapore, "the special place for those who love proving the world wrong".

When Covid-19 led to closed borders, sending international tourism into suspended animation, the 'Made With Passion' sub-branding campaign was launched to promote Singapore-based lifestyle brands mainly to a domestic audience. Passion was what these brands had in common, expressed in a love for experimentation, a commitment to tradition, or a drive to foster innovation.

When the pandemic eventually subsides and international borders reopen, this 'Made With Passion' sub-branding can also be extended to overseas markets. If businesses continue to align with this branding, Singaporean enterprises could be seen as 'hunting in a pack', as part of the Singapore 'mother brand'. This kind of coordinated brand building would be something that observers had for years said was lacking in the country's efforts at overseas expansion.

'Passion Made Possible' is the best nation branding concept so far, because it has essentially been fleshed out by profiling actual persons with their real-life stories, and showcasing citizens themselves instead of hired actors.

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Similarly, Singapore-based businesses can take a leaf from this authentic approach by featuring real-life staff members, partners, and customers, and highlight their attributes such as determination, ambition, resourcefulness, and optimism.

The power of brand consistency

Some people wonder if 'passion' is incongruous with the stereotypical impression of Singapore as a regimented place, full of rules, whose citizens conform to regulations such as the ban on import of chewing gum.

But there is actually no contradiction as passion in Singapore embraces as much of the Western notion of the flamboyance of a flamenco dancer as of the Asian idea of a pianist whose excellence is honed by hours of effort and practice. This blend of the best of both worlds is also something that businesses can highlight in their products and services.

In earlier decades, Singapore's reputation for state-imposed order earned it what I call the nation 'brand keloid' of being a 'nanny state', always interfering in, and influencing, even aspects of private life. A 'brand keloid'—a term I coined in my book *Brand Singapore*⁸—refers to a persistently negative perception that lingers like a flesh keloid, a scar that is

difficult and painful to remove, and best left alone, to be safely ignored in time to come.

Today, the brand keloid of being overly controlled has become a prized asset, with competent and trusted governance, and the ability to marshal citizen cooperation, perceived as the keys to managing the pandemic. In a world devastated by Covid-19, a government that acts like a nanny to look after its citizens would be much preferred to one that leaves its people to fend for themselves.

Indeed, nations that manage the pandemic best will be among the first to recover from the economic setback. A major reset of perceptions of this particular aspect of Singapore could well be in the making.

The Asian emphasis on discipline as the foundation for flair is exemplified by examples such as the stipulated shade of eyeshadow worn by Singapore Airlines (SIA) stewardesses. Building on this foundation of style, SIA's crew have gone on to earn the admiration they hold for their poise and elegance. This has become part of the hallmark of consistent brand delivery that is the basis of SIA's longstanding success.

In the same way, what SIA has earned for Singapore in terms of worldwide recognition and awareness of excellent service and reliability is something businesses can piggyback on, to promote similar attributes in their own staff, services, and products.

During these times, Singapore has also built on its brand attribute of discipline in other aspects, such as strengthening its hub status in supply chain efficiency and diversification, not only for ordinary goods but also for pandemic-related supplies.

Multiculturalism's X factor

Another nation-brand attribute of Singapore that has come to the fore in these pandemic times is social cohesion. What has enabled some countries like Singapore to keep Covid-19 infections and fatalities low, and minimise the resulting economic impact, is the willingness of citizens to trust the authorities, make some personal sacrifices, and rally together for the common good.

Such social capital is the fruit of multiculturalism, what I consider the X factor of brand Singapore. This quality has become even more precious in a world that has seen a rise in negative sentiments such as protectionism and nativism, sometimes boiling over into xenophobia and racism.

Multiculturalism is part of the cultural DNA of Singaporeans, fostered in unique ways such as the ethnic quota policy in public housing that prevents the formation of racial enclaves. This rare social milieu, in which people of

different backgrounds live together in harmony, is apparent everywhere in a society that has a Malay woman President, an Indian Leader of the Opposition, and a Eurasian Olympic gold medallist.

Multiculturalism will also be a springboard for recovery after the pandemic. The rebuilding of economic ties will move smoothly wherever there is already a foundation of trust and familiarity that cannot be easily forged over Zoom meetings, but is the outcome of decades of socialisation. Businesses can tap into this reservoir of goodwill to find new opportunities for brand building, to generate growth for the domestic market and attract audiences overseas.

The future for Singaporean enterprises

There was a time, in earlier decades, when Singaporean companies and business people were clearly not known to wear their nationality on their sleeves. Typically, Singaporean business people were not as obvious as, say, their American counterparts, who waved the stars and stripes everywhere they went, figuratively, and often literally.

The international power of brand Singapore is predominantly the fruit of efforts master-planned by the government, and then realised through the work and example of many Singaporeans. Throughout this time, the private sector has traditionally played less of a leadership role. SIA is the torch-bearing leader in this space, but the two other most prominent Singapore brands—Raffles Hotel and Tiger Beer—have been sold in recent years, and direct control over these brands has thus been lost.

There is, therefore, a brand Singapore deficit in the local private sector. For instance, one Singaporean enterprise overseas used to have a logo that looked like an old-fashioned coat of arms, and it was quite happy for the misperception to persist that it was a European company. This aspect of diffidence towards identifying with the national brand has ‘improved’ a lot in recent years, as national self-confidence increased in tandem with the growth of brand Singapore.

Take the food and beverage (F&B) sector for example. Singapore has always been known for its good food, but this only applied for inbound business, that is, food available in the country. Singaporean restaurants around the world are few and far between, and hardly heard of. Singaporean cuisine is therefore far, far behind in terms of international presence, as compared to, say, Japanese or Thai cuisine.

Once again, the situation is changing today. The inclusion of Singapore’s hawker centre culture on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020⁹ is a boost for confidence, a vital ingredient for success and growth. Old Chang Kee is an example of a Singaporean F&B company that has physical stores not only in neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia, but also in Australia and the United Kingdom. With the greater rise of e-commerce driven by the pandemic, Singapore-made products like Irvin’s salted egg fish skin can now be ordered online and delivered to countries as far as the United States.

The way ahead may be uncertain post-Covid-19, but Singapore’s enterprises and enterprising individuals who can connect with the nation brand can feel surer of themselves as they move forward.

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