

ASPECTS REGARDING THE DIFICULT PROCESS OF BUILDING A ROMANIAN TOURISM BRAND

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The image we have about a country has a huge impact on how we view it as a tourist destination, a place to invest in, or a place to buy the brands we love from. In today's globalised market the battle for tourism, exports, and inward investment is extremely intense as brands have become more and more the vehicles for communicating national identity.

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1. Defining the key concepts of the paper

As an introduction, the key concepts of the paper are briefly defined.

Brand

The American Marketing Association defines the term “brand” as followed: “A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name”.

We find it necessary to mention that the Romanian theoretical concepts of “brand” and “trademark” have spawned controversy, regarding the differences and similarities between the ways they are used. Most of the times the ones responsible for this “conceptual war” are the same unspecialized translators that also marked the beginning of yet another linguistic controversy between the terms “commercial” and “publicity”⁸⁵⁶. Without insisting on the issue, we would like to mention that the following paper considers the two theoretical concepts as being synonyms.

Country Brand

A **nation brand** or **country brand** is believed to be a country's identity that has been proactively distilled, interpreted, internalized and projected internationally in order to gain recognition and to construct a favorable national image. A country brand strategy therefore is a plan for defining the most realistic, most competitive and most compelling strategic vision for the country.

Country branding harmonizes national policies as varied as acts and policies of government, the values and behaviors of citizenry, education, culture, sports, health, taxation, public diplomacy, the look and feel of settlements, export and investment promotion, and infrastructure development.

Image⁸⁵⁷

In terms of marketing, an **image** is a mental representation, on an individual or group level, as a result of perceiving and organizing information about a product, person, group, organization, political party or country.

Country Image

⁸⁵⁶ Sasu D V. Diferențe și similitudini între marcă și brand in The Journal of the Faculty of Economics - Economic Science Series, TOM XIII, Oradea, 2004, p.332.

⁸⁵⁷ Bucur-Sabo M in Florescu C, Mălcomete P, Pop N A. Marketing – Dicționar explicativ, București, Ed. Economică, 2003, p.291.

There are many definitions surrounding this concept, but reviewing them we could say that “**country image**” represents a set of beliefs and perceptions that people have about a given country. Further on, we can make the assumption that country image is constituted of history, geography, art, music, citizens, events and a diverse package of variables and auxiliary factors.

2. Assessing the situation

We are witnessing a paradox. On one hand, Romania’s tourism potential indicates that it can compete with surrounding countries; therefore it has been chosen, by the government, as a strategic orientation for Romania’s Sustainable Development Strategy⁸⁵⁸, where the most important measures aim for sustainable capitalization of the cultural heritage and natural resources with tourism potential and also the improvement of tourist recreation and housing infrastructure. On the other hand, foreign tourism demand for Romania as a tourist destination is recording a downfall trend (not only compared to previous years, but also compared to other neighbourly countries – Annex 1) due to a complex number of factors ever so diverse. Curiously domestic tourism demand has had a constant accession in the last 6 years

Table 1: Arrival of tourists that check in at a hotel or similar establishment ⁸⁵⁹

	Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Number of tourists (x1000)	Non-residents	1.104	1.359	1.429	1.379	1.550	1.465
	Residents	3.951	4.279	4.375	4.836	5.420	5.659

Romania’s problem regarding tourism and the attempts to identify the main weaknesses in this field are not recent issues. The relative novelty for this subject is considering the lack and need of a strong tourism brand, part of a general country brand, as one of the main causes for Romania’s tourism problems.

Building a county brand, a tourism brand or a regional brand is a difficult task, but it is not impossible. Creating a brand involves developing a brand program, which underlies the brand identity and positioning. Thus the brand’s reason for being, its vision, core values, and know-how must be clearly defined, internalized and communicated. Country branding plans should exhibit the clear, simple, differentiating propositions often built around emotional qualities expressing some kind of superiority, which can be readily symbolized both verbally and visually. Therefore, in principle the product, service, corporate or country branding are the same. However, the methods differ.

As Simon Anholt, a reputable advisor for the British government, specializing in the field of nation branding, states on numerous articles on his personal web-site⁸⁶⁰, one of the most critical challenges facing nation branding is finding a strategy which is believable, relevant to the consumer audience, true to reality, and the aspirations of the country. The fact that products can be de-listed or modified, re-launched and re-positioned, or replaced by improved products is yet another difficulty encountered by country branding, one that product branding does not have to face. Countries, however, do not have many of these choices and their image problems may be founded in structural handicaps that take years to fix. For example, even The European Union finds it hard to build a coherent regional brand, as Wally Olins, also known as “The Branding Guru”, President of “Saffron Brand Consultants” states his opinion during an interview for IqAds: “Europe has not been able to build something like this [meaning a

⁸⁵⁸ “ The National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania - Horizon 2013-2020-2030”, The Romanian Government, Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, The United Nations Program for Development, The National Center for Sustainable Development, 2008, p.116 at <http://strategia.ncsd.ro/>

⁸⁵⁹ <https://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

⁸⁶⁰ <http://www.simonanholt.com>

regional brand] yet, but it will probably succeed in time. We can find models in the past. Going as far back in time as The Austrian Empire, The Austro-Hungarian Empire or if we take a look at the Ottoman Empire, [...], we will discover that it is possible for such an entity to exist, one that reunites different cultures and tongues, joint together by identity⁸⁶¹.” Although exaggerating a bit, we can agree that there are inspirational resources for brand building that date as far back as the Old Continent goes.

As regarding tourist country brand, the recipe for success is out there. Here are a few examples of countries that have a strong tourist country brand:

*Top 10 Country Brand Index*⁸⁶² (CBI⁸⁶³) by FutureBrand

1.USA; 2.Canada; 3.Australia; 4.New Zealand; 5.France; 6.Italy; 7.Japan; 8.United Kingdom; 9.Germany; 10.Spain – Romania ranks number 81 in 102 countries.

Or countries that have active country branding programs: South Africa – Alive with possibility; Spain – San Siro; India – Incredible India; Thailand – Amazing Thailand; Malaysia – Truly Asia; Iceland – Iceland naturally; Egypt – Destination Egypt; Estonia – Positively Transforming.

Building a strong brand creates equity which is „a set of characteristics that make a brand seem different and better to both consumer and businesses⁸⁶⁴”. But in order to do that, „a branding program needs all its involved participants to take on the resulting responsibilities, in the same way if we are talking about a corporation, a church, a store or a country⁸⁶⁵” and it also needs to be based on concrete and tangible characteristics.

Philip Kotler says that „in order to avoid the failure trap of an undifferentiated brand, marketers need to start from the belief that anything can be differentiated⁸⁶⁶”. So he frames 4 differentiation strategies: 1.Product, 2. Personnel, 3. Distribution channel and 4.**Image** differentiation.

When choosing image differentiation, one needs to take into consideration the fact that an image, in order to serve its goals has to be⁸⁶⁷: 1.Valid (anchored into reality), 2. Credible, 3.Simple, 4.Appealing, and 5. Distinctive.

The questions for Romania are: “What differentiates our country from all the other countries? And are those characteristics relevant enough to build a strong tourism brand?”

3. Romania's options and what is being done

Since Kotler encourages us to think that anything can be differentiated, maybe that's where we have to start. Of course Romania can differentiate itself from other countries; we only have to choose the right way to do that and we cannot make the unpardonable mistake of trying to appeal to everyone. The answer to that is positioning, the process by which marketers try to create an image or identity in the minds of their target markets for their product, brand, or organization. The next logical step is to establish your target markets and focus on them. And that is yet another chapter at which Romania's tourism fails, because it targets everyone. Romania wants to be “The land of choice”, but unfortunately not even we can say whose choice Romania is supposed to be.

When the target markets are set, one needs to bear in mind that advertising targets need to also be set. The advertising target has a wider range than the target market, and includes consumers, but also other individuals that can influence the target market. In terms of volume, the advertising target is superior to the target market, unless a selective policy is established⁸⁶⁸.

⁸⁶¹http://www.iqads.ro/interviul_12129/wally_olins_sintagma_land_of_choice_nu_mi_spune_absolut_nimic.html

⁸⁶²<http://www.futurebrand.com/think/reports-studies/cbi/2009/rankings>

⁸⁶³CBI features expert opinions, statistics and proprietary global quantitative data to create the largest study of its kind. Assessing 102 countries across 29 image attributes and seven measures of brand strength.

⁸⁶⁴Clow E K, Baack D. Integrated advertising, promotion and marketing communications, New Jersey, Pearson, Prentice Hall, 2007, p.5.

⁸⁶⁵Ries A, Trout J. Poziționarea: Lupta pentru un loc în mintea ta, București, Ed. Brandbuilders, 2004, p.195.

⁸⁶⁶Kotler P, Keller K L. Managementul Marketingului–ediția V, București, Ed. Teora, 2008, p.465.

⁸⁶⁷Kotler P, Haider H D, Rein I. Marketingul locurilor, București, Ed. Teora, 2001, p.159.

⁸⁶⁸Marcenac L, Milon A, Saint Michel S H. Strategii publicitare, București, Ed.Polirom, 2006, p. 86.

After doing that, instead of trying to “*push*” new destinations, new offers, new experiences towards tourists, why not “*pull*” the tourists towards destinations that established themselves as attractive to foreigners. “New” is not always the best approach. The destinations foreign tourists are *already* interested in can become premises for building our tourism brand.

Table 2: Favorite Romanian destinations for foreign tourists

Country of origin	Favorite destinations
Japan	Maramureș County, the monasteries of Bucovina, Sighișoara, Brașov, Bucharest
USA	Transylvania’s medieval cities, Bucharest, the monasteries of Bucovina, traditional villages
Germany	The Black Sea shore, balneary resorts
Italy	Northern Moldavia, Bucovina, Bucharest, The Danube Delta, Prahova Valley
Sweden, Norway and Denmark	The Black Sea shore, balneary resorts
Poland	The Black Sea shore, skiing resorts, Bucovina
Hungary	The Black Sea shore
Holland and Israel	balneary resorts

Some of these destinations cannot compete with similar ones abroad. For example, if we are being practical about it, the Romanian Black Sea shore cannot compete with the beaches in Greece, nor can Prahova Valley compete with similar mountain resorts in Austria or Germany simply because nature is just different. *But* other destinations like Sighișoara, Bucovina, the old fortresses in The Orăștie Mountains, are a gold mine. According to Jean-Claude Baumgarten, president of the World Travel&Toursim Council, Romania has been gifted with a seventh of the worlds total cultural heritage⁸⁶⁹. Maybe, taking all this into consideration, we need to reassess our priorities.

The Ministry of Tourism has initiated a program called “Tourist in Romania”, promoting the destinations mentioned above, but the program only targets Romanian tourists. The <http://turistinromania.com> web-site is not even available in any foreign language and it is poorly designed, with scarce information.

Another issue revolves around the fact that not much has been done when it comes to finding the country an *up-to-date identity*. Romania’s country brand also depends on how the country is perceived in terms of its popular and high culture: ranging from films, TV, sport, and music to history, art and literature, even popular local products, and including not just elevated cultural achievements, but also popular celebrities. Romania’s identity and image hangs on the notable figures of the past, but these are not enough to be brand ambassadors in *today’s world*. Romanian “products”(including people) need to make their mark. Sadly, there are very few truly prominent people identifiable as Romanians and with whom outsiders can relate to.

A campaign that promotes our country as a tourist destination was launched following a collaboration protocol between the Ministry of Tourism and BRD Societe Generale. Headed by the key line “Romania.Land of Choice,” the campaign has at its forefront three Romanian sports legends- gymnast Nadia Comăneci, soccer player Gheorghe Hagi and tennisman Ilie Năstase. According to the Tourism Minister, the entire campaign will cost several million euros, of which 2 million euros will be used for running the campaign on two popular international TV channels. She also made clear the distinction between this campaign and the country brand.

⁸⁶⁹Sasu D V, Coita D C. Aspecte privind opțiunile strategice de dezvoltare turistică a României in The Journal of the Faculty of Economics - Economic Science Series, vol.1, TOM XV, Oradea, 2006, p. 963.

Previous branding campaigns have failed. This is actually not the first effort to brand Romania. In 2004, a campaign was made by Ogilvy&Mather, which required 1.7 million USD and which was called "Romania, simply surprising". It was cancelled three years later by Richard Batchelor, leader of the World Tourism Organization International Consultants team, because "it did not communicate Romania's essence to potential visitors."

A second failed attempt was a campaign initiated by the Ministry of External Affairs with the slogan "Fabulous Spirit" which cost 110,000 USD. The spokesman for the Ministry of External Affairs at that time said the reason for which previous efforts have failed was because building a branding strategy was one of the most difficult communication strategy projects. The brand strategy should convey that "Romania equals the most beautiful adventure in Europe". "The symbols and people used in it should be compatible and representative for this direction", said the spokesman.

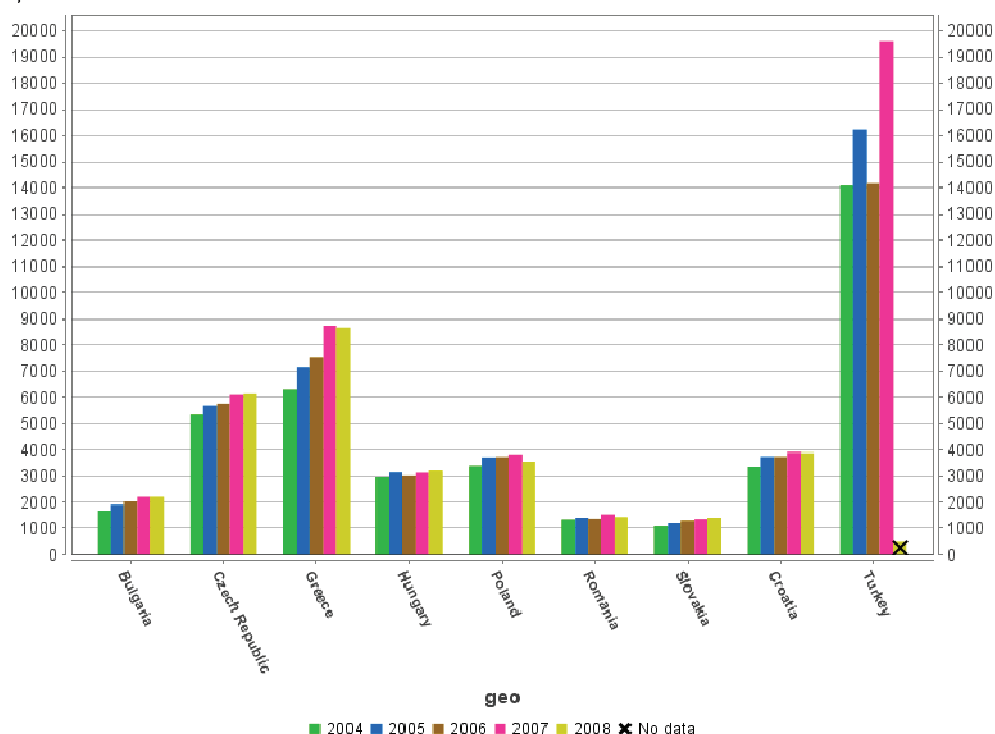
Regarding the process of Branding Romania, actions are being taken as we speak. An agency that will create the Romanian tourism brand will be selected by the Ministry of Tourism, following an international bid. Among the criteria that participants will have to meet is to have worked on at least one similar project. The creation of the brand will cost 2 million euros, while other 73 million euros, from European Union funds, will be used for implementing it.⁸⁷⁰

Only time will tell if Romania's Tourism Brand will become a successful story. But one thing is for sure, considerable efforts will be necessary in order to re-sketch our country image and build a solid, long-lasting, efficient brand.

ANNEX 1

Source: <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/tourism/data/database>

Arrivals in hotels and similar establishments
(1 000)



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