



Banking on a good brand: Micro-marketing campaign seeks to spruce up Israel's image

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Ido Aharoni sees his native Israel as a modern nation, friendly, creative and cutting edge. But he concedes much of the world doesn't view Israel that way. "They see a bunker," he says, "closed off."

As head of brand management for Israel, Aharoni has a mission to change that. That's what brought him to the Bay Area recently as part of a national tour sponsored by the Jewish National Fund.

His ongoing government branding project has worked below the radar to show Israel in a more positive light worldwide.

Or, to use his terminology, to improve Israel's personality. "Every place has a personality," Aharoni says, "like a human being. Usually it evolves naturally and organically."

He cites Brazil as an example of good national branding. "[Brazil's] personality is all about fun," Aharoni says. "The samba, Carnaval, beaches, coffee. But few people will mention crime. Brazil is one of the most dangerous places for tourists."

In contrast, he notes, Israel's brand is all about conflict, despite strides Israel has made in arts, culture, science, business, medicine and technology.

"Brand capital is worth a lot," Aharoni adds. "An attractive personality means more tourists, more foreign investment, better performance by Israeli sub-brands." ("Sub-brands" refers to Israeli companies and iconic institutions like the Israel Defense Forces and the City of Tel Aviv).

Aharoni distinguishes between his rebranding efforts and hasbarah, Israel's long-standing overseas public relations campaign, usually aiming to present government policies in a good light.

"God forbid!" he says. "This has nothing to do with hasbarah. It is much broader and deeper. You can never thrive on crisis management. It's very limited in what it can achieve."

At nearly 6 feet, 6 inches tall, Aharoni cuts a commanding figure as he tries to sell the world on the Jewish state. A former public affairs consul at Israel's Consulates General in New York and Los Angeles, and a one-time senior adviser for former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Aharoni has worked on Israel's rebranding effort for years.

That effort began soon after 9/11, when Israeli government officials recognized the geopolitical landscape had changed. The Branding Israel Group (BIG) was formed,

launching extensive research in North America, Europe and elsewhere to probe the public's feelings about Israel.



Ido Aharoni

Group members were surprised by what the research showed: An overwhelming majority of people around the world were not in the least bit interested in the Middle East conflict, but even those who tended to side with Israel were not attracted to what the country represents.

Combine that deficit with a sensationalistic news media and the impact of the Internet on how people get their news, and Aharoni had his work cut out for him.

The brand management team decided to think small.

"Micro-marketing is the solution," he says. "If you identify your segments [of society], then you see results."

He cites as an example Israeli ornithologist Yossi Leshem, a leading expert on bird migration. Leshem boasts a database of 600,000 avid birders around the world, and has led numerous birding tours of Israel. In his small way, Leshem is a one-man PR machine for his country.

Aharoni wants to raise a flock of Leshems to turn Israel's image around. He cites other goodwill ambassadors like Israeli doctors treating AIDS patients in Africa, and Israeli animal husbandry experts teaching Chinese ranchers about cattle insemination.

Those hoping to follow Aharoni's efforts online will be out of luck. Neither he nor the rebranding effort have a Web site, which is how he wants it. He says the less attention drawn to himself, and the more directed toward Israel, the better.

He even turned down a feature story in the Economist because he feared it would have focused too much on him.

"Branding is a bad word," Aharoni adds. "It implies this is about advertising, slogans and logos. The right word might be 'positioning,' so the world will see Israel's contributions in building for the future."

While in the Bay Area, Aharoni met with several Jewish institutions, including the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation. He says getting the American Jewish community on board with the rebranding effort is essential.

"Every successful place branding requires a partnership," he notes. "The Jewish community is critical because the stakeholders are not just Israelis. Everyone who cares about Israel becomes a stakeholder."

Aharoni says the Israeli government and its ministries are fully behind the rebranding effort. After 60 years of striving to prove the correctness of Israel's political and moral stance, he believes it's time to try something new.

Says Aharoni: "It is no less important for Israel to be attractive than to be right."