



SPOTLIGHTS

LKI's *Spotlights* feature interviews with global thought leaders on aspects of contemporary international relations.

Building a Country Brand with Simon Bell

Interviewed by Anishka De Zylva*

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The Lakshman Kadirgamar Institute (LKI) recently interviewed Mr. Simon Bell, an international investor and consultant, to discuss country branding and its role in promoting the country’s identity and foreign policy. This interview is part of the LKI Spotlight series, which features interviews with thought leaders around the world, on current and emerging issues of international relations.

Simon Bell was previously a director on A.T. Kearney’s Global Business Policy Council, where he developed investment strategies for leading global corporations and assisted the development of several competitiveness indices, including the Globalization Index and the Global Services Location Index. He has also advised governments in more than 30 countries on strategies to accelerate investment and growth and contributed to the development of several national branding campaigns, including Creative Korea, Incredible India, Egypt ON, and Madagascar Île de Trésor.

See below for a lightly edited transcript of the interview, featuring Simon Bell’s responses to questions posed by Anishka De Zylva, Research Associate at LKI.

LKI: Simon, you have contributed to developing the branding campaigns of several countries, including India - which is the fastest growing economy in the world today - and South Korea, one of the most technically advanced countries. Therefore, to start, would it be possible for you to elaborate on *which countries have strong country brands and what factors have contributed to building those country brands?*

Simon Bell: When it comes to countries with strong positive brands, some countries like Switzerland are blessed with national brands that have been well established for centuries. The process of creating a country brand is unique to each country.

Switzerland: A Well-Established Brand

In the case of Switzerland, what is striking is how a single brand-image, like the Swiss flag, can be successfully applied across multiple products and services—a Swiss white-cross on a red background immediately conveys a sense of quality, whether it is on a pen-knife, a watch, a bar of chocolate, an airplane or a tourism poster.

New Zealand: A Unified Brand

More interesting are examples of countries that have deliberately crafted a unified national brand. New Zealand is probably the best-known example—in the late 1990s, policymakers developed an overarching brand image that could be applied across New Zealand’s international promotion activities; the resulting “100% Pure New Zealand” slogan and the Silver Fern logo are now applied consistently on all things New Zealand, from the national rugby and cricket teams, to New Zealand wines and honey, to tourism campaigns and innovations in areas like sailing technology.

South Korea: A Brand for Repositioning

The most interesting examples, however, are countries that have used branding as part of their repositioning strategy, as they seek to move up the global income-scale into higher value economic activities. In the early 2000s, South Korea was already a successful economy, it was known for heavy manufacturing industries, a hard-working labour-force and top-down decision-making. To escape from the middle-income trap, the country needed to reposition itself as a hub of innovation and creativity, capable of designing and owning world-class products, not just manufacturing them for others. The country launched a multi-year strategy to invest in education and science, open-up decision-making, encourage inward and outward investment and knowledge-exchange. Alongside these initiatives, it chose the “Creative Korea” brand to capture the dynamism of all things Korean. As with the Swiss and New Zealand examples, the Creative Korea brand can be applied to everything from food and fashion, to music and medical innovation.

LKI: Those are excellent examples that give a clear picture of successful country brands and the different contexts in which a country develops a brand. Let me take those points further by asking you *what strategies have countries employed to maintain their country brand, and keep their branding consistent through political and economic changes?*

Simon Bell: In all the examples of the most successful country brands, three key success factors stand out: consistency, distinctiveness, and credibility.

Consistent

First, the same brand message needs to be applied consistently across the country’s various promotion activities. Too many countries suffer from a clash between their tourism image (e.g. laid-back beaches, quaint and old-fashioned customs, fun party scene, etc.) and their desired image for promoting investment and exports (innovative, hard-working, quality-conscious, etc.). The most successful countries craft an image that somehow conveys the same sense of quality and purity, like in the case of New Zealand or Switzerland. The “Great Britain” campaign is another good example, which manages to apply the same ‘great’ positioning across diverse industries and activities: for example, ‘Innovation is GREAT,’ ‘Food is GREAT,’ ‘Music is GREAT,’ etc.

Distinctive

The second key to success is distinctiveness. Many countries have “me-too” tourism slogans, which could be equally applied to dozens of other countries. Crafting a distinctive image is tricky to achieve, but it is a question of finding some distinctive attribute, which may not be necessarily unique but somehow resonates or “fits” with the existing image of the country. This may be based on a distinctive aspect of the country’s geography (e.g. the wildness and purity of New Zealand’s natural landscape), or it may be a play on the country’s name (e.g. GREAT Britain, Incredible India), or a reference to the country’s cultural heritage (Malaysia Truly Asia)

or its economic strengths (the clean precision suggested by the Swiss flag, the creativity of K-Pop and Samsung, etc).

Credible

The third and most critical factor is credibility. Like any corporate brand, a brand that does not live up to its promise will fail. If the national brand emphasises natural purity, the country cannot afford to have a poor environmental track record or weak planning regulations that fail to protect areas of natural beauty or historic towns and cities. If the brand emphasises innovation and creativity, the country must have a progressive education system, appropriate policies and incentives to stimulate R&D, and a reputation for openness and diversity. The brand cannot be hollow—the country’s policies and initiatives must align with and support the brand.

LKI: That’s a very useful analysis of the success factors in country branding. To further emphasise the importance of those factors in country branding would it be possible for you to elaborate on the *various benefits of successful country branding?*

Simon Bell:

Ability to Charge a Premium Price

In the best cases, the successful brand enables producers from those countries to charge a premium for their products relative to competitors—whether this is for German engineering, Swiss chocolate, Colombian coffee, or Ceylon Tea.

Free Marketing and Communications

In other cases, the strength of the country’s image in particular sectors means that customers and investors, when seeking new suppliers or investment destinations, automatically assume that the country has the necessary capabilities—examples would include the Information Technology (IT) and Business process outsourcing (BPO) sector in India or tourism in Bali. IT/BPO suppliers and tourism operators in competing countries with weaker brand-images would have to spend time and money convincing customers and investors that their country has the necessary capabilities or attractions, before they can even begin to be considered. This is particularly important in cases where countries are trying to reposition themselves as sources of higher-value skills—as in the case of Singapore or Korea.

Capacity to Tackle Negative News

A strong national brand also helps countries to be more resilient in the event of bad news. After high-profile terrorism incidents, tourism numbers in places like London, Paris or Bali bounce back much more quickly than they do in less well-branded locations.

LKI: It is great that you mention “Ceylon Tea” as a successful country brand. Given that successful brands like “Ceylon Tea” and “Garments with Guilt” already exist in Sri Lanka, *why is it important for Sri Lanka to invest in building a country brand right now?*

Simon Bell: Building a stronger and more cohesive national brand is absolutely vital for Sri Lanka, at this stage of its development. Sri Lanka does have a positive brand-image in some sectors like tea, apparel and tourism, but the country still suffers from the poor image associated with the civil war and the tsunami. Additionally, in many sectors like high-tech manufacturing and services, Sri Lanka hardly has any visibility at all, overshadowed as it is by larger countries like India and Vietnam on the one hand, and by more advanced locations like Singapore or Dubai on the other hand. Even in successful sectors like tea and tourism, Sri Lanka’s image as a land of old-fashioned tea estates or laid-back beaches does not gel with the higher-value products and services that the country wants to be known for. Numerous companies in Sri Lanka (in IT and BPO, tea, rubber, apparel and tourism) are already creating high-value innovative products and services, but 90% of global investors and customers are completely unaware of this.

LKI: Those are useful insights on Sri Lanka’s current country brand position and the need for a more cohesive and comprehensive brand image. Taking those points into consideration, *what should Sri Lanka do when building its country brand?*

Simon Bell:

Ensure Consistency and Coordination

The first step is to establish consistency and coordination. Sri Lanka has multiple agencies promoting different images of the country often with inconsistent messages—from the Tea Board and Tourism Bureau, to the Board of Investment of Sri Lanka (BOI) and various Ministries. Not only does this result in a weak and inconsistent brand, but it also leads to the duplication of effort and sub-optimal utilisation of budgets and resources.

Like New Zealand in the 1990s or Korea in the 2000s, a national coordinating mechanism needs to be established, bringing together all relevant agencies and leaders of the private sector and civil society, to begin a broad consultative process to identify the common themes that the country wants to convey across its various promotional campaigns. This does not mean that the whole process and budget needs to be bureaucratically centralised; simply that a group, ideally at the level of the President or the Prime Minister, is established to coordinate and align activities and messages across different agencies and institutions.

Establish an Independent National Fund

Ideally, the government should establish an independent trust fund for national branding purposes, similar to the India Brand Equity Foundation, or the Costa Rican Investment

Promotion Agency. These independently funded and managed agencies ensure that the national brand is promoted consistently over time, independent of political transitions or budget cycles.

Use Digital Media

The key thing to avoid is the temptation to spend large amounts of money on expensive advertising campaigns or glamorous public relations firms. Thanks to the digital economy, the key audiences whose image of Sri Lanka we want to influence can be reached more effectively and cheaply via lower-cost online channels.

LKI: Let me take your last point further by asking *what are the best strategies to communicate a country brand, nationally and internationally?*

Simon Bell: The key is creative use of digital channels and coordinating and leveraging the various promotion channels that Sri Lanka already has at its disposal. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Sri Lanka already has multiple assets that can be used to reinforce the country's desired image—from the national cricket team and global tea and tourism fairs, to diplomatic missions and commercial representatives. What is required is creative thinking about the consistent image that the country wants to convey and attention-grabbing ways to use existing channels to get the message across.

LKI: You previously mentioned a critical point, which is that countries do not need to spend a lot of money on country branding and indeed, should avoid the temptation to do so. Let me then end by asking you a two-part question: *(1) How could Sri Lanka efficiently fund its country branding and, if money should not be considered a major barrier to country branding, and (2) What are the other major challenges involved in building a country brand?*

Simon Bell: If executed correctly, the additional financial costs required to build a cohesive national brand should be minimal. The combined promotion and communication budgets of EDB, BOI, ICTA, the Tea Board, Tourism Promotion Bureau, Sri Lankan Airlines, and various government Ministries are more than sufficient. The key is to leverage and coordinate these various channels and campaigns to promote the same consistent image. Any extra finances should be spent on establishing a core team of creative people in Sri Lanka, focused on creating compelling images and messages and devising innovative, low-cost ways to disseminate those images and messages globally.

The biggest challenge will be not financial, but institutional: getting sufficient attention from the country's leadership to spend time on coordinating this and encouraging diverse and sometimes competing government agencies and private associations to join forces for the common good.

Further Reading

Aharoni, I. and Grinstein, A. (2017). How to (Re)position a Country? A Case Study of the Power of Micro-marketing. *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 13(4), pp.293-307.

Che-Ha, N., Nguyen, B., Yahya, W., Melewar, T. and Chen, Y. (2015). Country Branding Emerging from Citizens' Emotions and the Perceptions of Competitive Advantage. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 22(1), pp.13-28.

Dinnie, K. (2016). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

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