

Wally Olins

Viewpoints

An Interview with Wally Olins:
How to Brand a Nation.

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Wally Olins is a co-founder of Wolff Olins and one of the world's most experienced experts on corporate identity and branding. He is now Chairman of Saffron, the Anglo Spanish brand consultancy based in London and Madrid. He studied history at St Peter's College, Oxford, and set up a branding consultancy that changed British Telecom into BT and invented the Orange name. He was awarded a CBE in 1999 and has written numerous books including the seminal *Corporate Identity*. He is currently teaching an elective at the Saïd Business School and has just finished a book on branding.

Q Why are you involved with the Saïd Business School?

A I have taught at a number of business schools and I am very interested in management education. It is very important that people who have had a career in business or management articulate to students what real management life is like. I am very pleased that Oxford, belatedly, has moved into management education. There is an interesting dichotomy in management education: on the one hand there is a tremendous drive for academics to be academic because that is their trade, on the other hand management is about managing people and about real life. This dichotomy cannot be easily bridged but in a place like Oxford where outsiders are brought in from time to time the issues can be dealt with.

Q Where do you see the value of an MBA programme?

MBA programmes teach students a valuable ABC – you need to know how to read a balance sheet and you need to know what the basic principles of management are. It is very good to be taught by people who have considerable knowledge about aspects of economics and finance, micro growth and macro growth; the significance of numbers has to be made clear. But many MBA courses fail to take regard of a whole series of other factors which are equally important: working together, leadership and the speed with which you can react to situations. Working together is key. Equally, exams as such and gradings are not what real life outside business school is like. In real life, people are judged on the basis of performance, not on the basis of exam results or rankings. Therefore it is crucial to have a leavening of people with practical experience.

Q How do you create an international brand for a business school?

A In most cases there is an agreement about what it is you want to say. Where you have to modulate your message is where you say it. You will not say the same things about Oxford executive education in the same way in Germany, in India or in Japan. The reputation of Oxford and the way Oxford is perceived in these countries varies; because of their colonial heritage Indians will have a different view of Oxford from German people. So while the underlying message will be the same, the tone and style that you adopt will vary according to whom you're dealing with. But provided the message is an attractive one there is no reason why you shouldn't be successful wherever you go. It is perfectly possible to create global programmes and the trick is to modulate for a local audience what you say in such a way that it relates to their own experiences and impressions and perceptions. But you don't say different things, you say things a bit differently.

Q Is there a difference between branding a nation and branding a mobile phone company as long as you know your own message?

A It is much more complicated to brand a nation! Opportunity and what actually happens, what is politically possible, is a key in national branding. The German brand, for example, is very interesting. Germany is an extremely diverse country because, like Italy, it has a very decentralized, fragmented past. Another issue in looking at Germany as a brand is that there are certain national characteristics that seem to emerge and

dominate others which are just as important but not perceived so clearly. For example: German creativity - because of the enormous visible power of the motor car industry - is seen largely through engineering. In fact, German creativity in music, art and architecture is staggering but not overt. There are things which you could emphasize that have been ignored or neglected. I would therefore always look at historical analogies.. I would consider the diversity of a country like Germany and try and present Germany, to itself primarily, in a more holistic way than it tends to think of itself. The next step is to present the country to the outside world. To say that launching a national brand or redeveloping a national brand is impossible is just nonsense because it has been done again and again and again. Napoleon rebranded France for instance.

Q What was the most successful recent rebranding of a nation?

A Spain, undoubtedly. In 1975 Spain was still regarded as a poverty-stricken, autarchic, remote pariah. People went there on holiday but wouldn't want to live there. After the death of Franco and the accession to the EU Spain has changed hugely - in reality as well as in people's perception. There are now very respected and respectable Spanish filmmakers like Almodovar, Spanish engineers and architects like Calatrava, Spanish multinational companies like Repsol and Telefonica. Changes in reality and perception have happened partly through government initiative, partly because of the various regions which launched powerful initiatives. And because there was a great deal of informal consultation between opinion-makers in business, the arts and government.

Q Can branding be done on a budget? Is branding expensive?

A Branding has nothing to do with budget. Nations present themselves literally in millions of ways every moment, 24 hours a day. Whether you're getting your passport looked at at an airport, or whether you are dealing with an organization, a company, a business school, an arts centre or a football club you are dealing with aspects of a nation, minute by minute, second by second. Branding in this context means looking at the way in which the totality of the organization in reality is compared to the way in which it is perceived and trying to relate the one more closely to the other.

Q What is the relationship between branding and ethics?

A This is a very important issue and fundamentally very simple. Most competing products are not very different from each other. So you can chose between buying petrol from BP that says it is an ethical company or you can buy petrol from a competitor with a more John-Wayne-like attitude. All you have to do is to drive a 100 yards more down the road.

I'm all in favour of Seattle and Kyoto; the more big companies are reminded that they do not have power and that the power lies with the customer the better. But I do not take the view that big companies are in fact anything like as successful at being manipulative as Klein suggested in *No Logo*. Sure they'd like to be. They're there to make the most money they can and it is only the constraints that society imposes upon them that makes them behave well. So it's up to us, their customers, to make clear to them what we want.

If people can be persuaded that the company which behaves better is the one worth buying from, then all companies will develop ethical attitudes out of self interest.

But no marketing programme can force people to buy things they don't want from people they don't like, or whose behaviour they disapprove of. We the customers are ultimately in charge.