

Wally Olins

Viewpoints

The image of Spain

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Countries around the world are building and rebuilding their national brands as they compete for power, influence and prestige. But there is also a new marketing battle for tourism, inward investment and exports which is becoming increasingly intense. For the most part perceptions of most countries are partial, distorted and caricatured. The United States, certainly the world's best known country has recently found, to its surprise and chagrin, that it is not the most loved. Images of democracy, freedom and opportunity conflict with images of cheap, vulgar, meretricious but compulsively attractive junk; like McDonald's and Coke. These jostle in turn with images around the idea of scientific and technological achievement: Microsoft, Intel and Boeing. No wonder America's image is confused.

Image counts. It's particularly important to see that the national image is aligned with the reality. When the reality changes the image has to change with it. Take Poland for example, a country with a population around the same size as Spain but with far less influence and prestige and an image directly derived from its period as a Soviet satellite state. The image:- grey, dreary and probably corrupt. The reality has changed, the image hasn't - yet.

Yet only a generation ago Spain was in a similar situation to Poland today. For the first half of the 20th century (and for a century before that) Spain did not count in Europe; it was isolated, backward, poor and undemocratic. Today it has transformed itself into a well-off, respected European democracy. The reality has changed and so has the image. Spain has successfully orchestrated and promoted its re-entry into the European family.

The Joan Miro sun symbol was an identifier for a massive promotional programme closely linked to national change and modernisation. Institutional and tourist advertising on a national and regional level, the creation of successful international business schools, the growth, privatisation and globalisation of Spanish multinationals like Repsol, Telefonica and Union Fenosa, the rebuilding and beautifying of major cities like Valencia, Barcelona and Bilbao, the self-mocking, sexually explicit tragicomic films of Almodovar and his contemporaries, political devolution, the Barcelona Olympics and the Seville International Exhibition of 1992,

the prestige and influence of European statesmen like Javier Solana, all underline and exemplify the change.

A programme of activities, a proportion of it carefully planned and co-ordinated, but much based around individual and corporate initiative, has rehabilitated and revitalised Spain, both in its own eyes and in the eyes of Europe. In Europe the image has changed with the reality.

Outside Europe the situation remains less clear. In the United States especially the image of Spain is confused with that of Latin American countries. While the situation in the Americas is special because of Spain's influence in Central and South America and the ignorance and confusion in the United States, in Asia, Africa and the rest of the world outside Europe, Spain is still pretty much unknown. Ask an Australian or a Japanese about the image of Spain and the chances are you'll get a very strange answer – often a mixture of Flamenco and Franco.

Nevertheless Spain is among the best examples of modern, successful national branding because it keeps on building on what truly exists; it incorporates, absorbs, and embraces a wide variety of activities to form and project a loose and multifaceted yet coherent, interlocking, mutually supportive whole. But even for Spain there's a lot of work still to do.

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