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Building the EU's Identity: A Brand Management Approach

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Abstract

One of the most crucial topics among the promoters of EU integration at present is that of the definition of the EU's identity. Communicators from EU institutions are striving to reach out to EU citizens and to gain their support. Politicians have also realized that promoting Europe both internally among its citizens and outside its boundaries is a critical issue that needs special management. Communication which does not appropriately reach its target audience causes severe problems in the projection of communication messages and results in an incoherent EU image. The Lisbon Treaty has further strengthened the EU as a unique internal and external entity and provides a basis for a solid definition of its identity. This paper deals with the issue of identity in a special and as yet barely explored way, i.e. the building of identity through the use of a brand management approach. It presents theoretical research into existing branding techniques and models for building identity and provides an integrative analysis resulting in the author's proposal that there is an urgent need to employ such techniques in building the EU identity. The success of destination branding has provided reliable evidence that such an approach can lead to a successful branding of the EU, starting with identity building. By building an identity for the EU and treating the EU as a unique brand entity, valuable ground will be established for the preparation of targeted, successful and widely accepted communication strategies for EU institutions. These in turn will help in the creation of a desirable image for the EU, one reflecting its rich and unique identity.

Keywords: Europe, identity, branding models, branding management, branding techniques.

For more than three decades, supporters of EU integration have seen the promotion of a European consciousness among its citizens and the creation of a European identity as a crucial policy goal. A growing number of analysts argue that the ultimate success of the dynamic process of European integration will depend on the development or existence of a European common identity (Sedermeier, 2005). Policy-makers have so far not succeeded in building up and developing such an identity, while facing national populations who appear to feel much less of a sense of community than many had expected.

The necessity of breathing a soul into an economic and political entity which connects more than 500 million citizens from 27 member states has been recognized as very important for its future success (Conference: Giving Europe a Soul, 2006). Research and debates about identity have developed in many directions: political, cultural, social identity, EU identity versus national identity, identity through the concept of citizenship and so on. But no matter which direction is observed, the main aim of identity is that of the unification of its citizens and the creation of a sense of belonging and identification with the EU.

This paper tackles the issue of building EU identity in a specific way, i.e. using the brand management approach. Adaptations of branding models for the purposes of destination branding and the successful implementation of branding concepts in building destination identities have provided a basis on which to seek an approach that might be useful for building the EU's identity. This paper investigates existing models for building brand identity and seeks to offer an alternative view on the process of building EU identity.

The Complex Question of European Identity

Although "United in Diversity"—the motto of the dead project for a Constitution (Article I-8), abandoned in the Lisbon Treaty like other constitutional aspects—is generally seen as best describing the aims of the EU, opinions differ widely as to how this should be understood. The point of departure for most discussions on European identity is the idea that a political community needs a common set of values and references to ensure its coherence, to guide its actions and to endow these with legitimacy and meaning (EurActiv, 2006). However, there is still no clear idea of what should be understood by European identity and what this identity should comprise.

The first official citation of European identity may be found in a document from the early 1970s, the so-called Copenhagen declaration on European identity (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973). The nine member states at that time needed such a declaration in order to enable them to achieve a better definition of their relations with other countries and of their responsibilities and the place which they occupy in world affairs. They presumed that defining European identity involved:

- reviewing the common heritage, interests and special obligations of the Nine, as well as the degree of unity so far achieved within the community,
- assessing the extent to which the Nine are already acting together in relation to the rest of the world and the responsibilities which result from this,
- taking into consideration the dynamic nature of European unification.

So far, the identity of the European Union has predominantly been defined politically. According to the Treaty on European Union, "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail" (Article 2 TEU). In accordance with the motto United in Diversity, "The Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore" (Article 167 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU). The Berlin Declaration, made in 2007 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the signature of the Treaties of Rome, emphasizes the main values of the EU in relation to the issue of identity. It underlines values of individual human dignity and the equality of men and women. Other values stressed by the declaration are peace and freedom, democracy and the rule of law, as well as tolerance and solidarity. But it also refers to the coherence of the EU as a political entity, to common efforts on global warming, poverty reduction, and energy security. The Lisbon Treaty speaks about values too: values of solidarity inside and outside the EU; values of human rights; of a particular type of social model; and the values of free trade, though also of aid to the less developed countries in the world. But it also refers to the coherence of the political entity, to the need for a single voice in speaking to the outside

world and to common work on global warming, poverty reduction, energy security, and international finance.

The issue of European identity is seen by some authors as one of EU identity versus national identity. Some nations are more liberal, others more conservative. Some easily integrate and assume European values; others still have a strong feeling of "us" as a nation versus "them" as European. A new European identity is emerging that encompasses national sub-identities and at the same time allows for cultural and ethnic differences embedded in a broader societal context. Forming a new identity is not an easy process, as national identity comes before everything else. The formation of a new identity requires a re-categorization of EU citizens' cognitive and motivational processes and the creation of shared beliefs and common identity (Orakzai, 2006). The creation of European identity needs to be moved beyond economic ties and must be bonded between European people. The identity of Europeans, which may be regarded here as a cultural-political European collective identity, is obviously a very complex and abstract phenomenon. So far, EU citizens have shown they posses a capacity to tolerate intra-European cultural diversity but still want to maintain their own national cultures, which is consistent with the socio-psychological group-identity model (Thiel, 2005).

The new Commission's approach to the issue of identity is through the concept of citizenship. It places the task of building a citizens' Europe on the main list of priority issues for the next four years. Communicating Europe in a transparent and accessible manner is a prerequisite for citizens' participation in the democratic life of the Union and for Europeans to be fully aware of the opportunities provided by EU policies (Commission Work Programme 2010). It also involves other elements of identity, including the coherence of the internal and external entity of the EU. The European Union is to be perceived as a global player with a strong and coherent external representation that matches its economic weight.

Brand Identity and Models for Building It

The concept of brand identity was first introduced in Europe (Kapferer, 1986) but very soon gained worldwide recognition (Ind 1997; de Chernatony 1999; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Kapferer (1998, 71) provides a very clear explanation of the role of brand identity: "before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are." Identity precedes image. Before

projecting an image to the public, we must know exactly what we want to project. That is why we have to know perfectly our identity in order to communicate it clearly, so it can project a desirable image, one that reflects the inner identity. Identity clearly specifies what the brand aspires to stand for. It represents a vision of how a particular brand should be perceived by its target audience (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

In destination branding there are certain specificities in applying the concept of brand identity. First of all, a country brand combines information at all levels from political to social to cultural to economic to touristic, from the past to the present, real and imaginary, all in complete syncretism (Kapferer, 2008). Second, countries are associated with history, imaginary elements, the personality traits of their inhabitants, key competences and accomplishments. And third, the country brand must have an international dispersal in order to influence the entire world. This dispersal is carried by ambassadors, export products, acknowledged achievements from research and development, past and present political figures, cultural identity, geographic, political and touristic identities (Kapferer, 2008).

Considering models of building brand identity, one must conclude that no universal model exists that can be applied to all types of brands. Kapferer has provided (1998) a hexagonal model called a brand identity prism, which is based on six central components: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection or image, and self-image. This model can be applied to product and service brands, but with minor adaptation it might also be used for other types of brands. De Chernatony (1999) adapted Kapferer's brand identity prism and created a model which conceptualizes brand identity in terms of its vision and culture. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) introduced a brand leadership model that is very comprehensive and focuses on the issue of strategic brand control, i.e. determining what a brand should stand for from the perspective of relevant stakeholders. This model recognizes that decision-makers should be involved in both formulating and implementing business strategy, which in practical terms implies that a brand's identity should not promise what it cannot deliver. Cai (2002) proposes a conceptual model of destination branding that focuses on building a destination identity through spreading activation, the latter resulting from dynamic linkages between the brand element mix, image-building, brand associations and marketing activities. But this model does not explain how to build and develop a brand identity for a specific destination. Konecnik and Go (2008) propose a tourism destination

brand identity framework that later resulted in an applied model for building destination brand identity in the case of Slovenia. It comprises the following: mission, vision, values, personality, differential advantages and benefits of the destination.

A more general model of place brand, called a relational network brand, has been developed by Hankinson (2004). This model comprises: the personality, positioning and reality of the core destination brand; the consumer relationship; the primary service relationships; the media relationships; and the brand infrastructure relationship. It extends the concept of a place brand beyond the narrow focus of a perceptual entity or image and includes behavioral and economic dimensions. Beyond other elements, it emphasizes the need for a strong network of stakeholder relationships which all share a common vision of the core brand.

No universal model is applicable to all types of brands. Some models are designed and applicable to more commercial types of brands, such as products or services, while others provide more freedom to express the versatility of more heterogeneous type of brands such as destinations. Kapferer's prism includes six dimensions, while Aaker and Joachimsthaler suggest twelve dimensions in order to adequately describe the aspirations of a particular brand. In choosing the best model for a certain type of brand, one must start from a strategic analysis of the type of the brand, its nature, character, aim, and the role it has to play. The final implementation step is to track the brand-building programme, which is connected with the first process of strategic brand analysis, in particular the measuring of brand equity (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000).

Building the EU's Identity Using a Brand Management Approach
The EU as a Brand

Despite the huge progress made in destination branding over recent years—including many success stories of branded countries, cities and places—the European Union still lacks branding. The reason for this can be found among the EU promoters who perceive branding as commercial and fancy and thus not suitable for such a project as serious as the EU. Branding professionals know that this is not true; for branding is not just PR and advertising but a very serious strategic business concept of managing companies, destinations, services, products, and people. Such an excuse can

no longer be accepted, as the EU has become a global player in very important areas of trade, climate protection, international finance, agriculture, humanitarian aid, human rights protection, and research and development. And yet its image does not correspond with its identity. What the EU does is not perceived as such by its citizens and by the outside world. In branding, excellent performance is followed by respect, which is not the case with the activities of EU institutions. "For Europe, the biggest threat is its own lack of confidence, which is reflected in its modest international prestige. It is therefore time to refresh Europe's image, to restyle its PR and to start a serious effort to brand the EU as an effective force for good in the world" (Van Ham, 2005).

The process of branding should be managed by the relevant EU institutions. Unlike corporate and network brands, which are privately owned and can be managed by private players, geographical brands are "public assets" and so must be managed by the relevant institutions in the area of reference. The process of branding the EU should start with building its identity. Van Ham (2008, 137) sees the whole project of branding the EU as a major identity-shaping project. EU institutions should also brand themselves in line with the overall branding EU strategy. Thereafter, appropriate management and marketing programs should be created and implemented in line with the branding identity and strategy. The expected branding results should be: a clear picture of what the EU is and how it contributes to the interests of its citizens and to global interests, to its citizens' satisfaction and trust; thus increasing the esteemed international image and reputation of EU institutions and its official representatives. Branding is thus not only about "selling" products, services, and ideas and gaining market share and attention; it is also about managing identity, loyalty, and reputation (van Ham, 2008).

Elements of EU Brand Identity

Returning to the issue of identity, this paper's integrated analysis of existing models for building such identity finds no single clear model directly applicable for the purposes of branding the EU. What emerges from this analysis as useful are the main common elements present in the majority of branding models: the definition of the inner core values of a brand, the vision of the brand, its mission, values, personality, differentiating advantages,

benefits, and relevant stakeholders. Following these as a methodology guideline, we proceed with further considerations of possible elements of EU brand identity.

With regard to the question of Europe's vision, it seems there is no clear view of the direction in which it is heading. In branding terms this is a weak point, as without a clear vision a brand cannot be made strong. According to a recent survey conducted by several researchers from the Utrecht University (Jacobs and Mayer, 2006), there are three conflicting projects for a future Europe within the institutional framework of the EU. The first wants Europe to be an important power factor in the world. The second, partly opposed to the first, conceives of a social Europe based on human rights and democracy. The third, in opposition to both former projects, attempts to defend the existing nation states and would even prefer to strengthen them. The ongoing construction of the EU, through the Treaty of Rome and the Treaty of Maastricht and Amsterdam, has already realized a number of features which seem to implement elements of the first project without, however, having completely excluded the second. This construction is opposed by groups upholding the third project, at the same time paradoxically influencing the development of European identity. The Treaty of Lisbon clearly underlines several issues in favor of all three directions, once again proving that the EU project is an ongoing process that adjusts its formation while serving its members' needs and interests.

Article 3.4. of the Constitution summarizes the EU's global mission as a fighter for and contributor to "peace, security, the sustainable development of the earth, eradication of poverty and protection of human rights and in particular children's rights, as well as the strict observance and development of international law, including respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter". In branding terms, such a mission is highly demanding: for once this mission is declared, the brand must deliver. The quality of its delivery creates the perceived value of the brand itself. Failing to deliver what it has promised decreases the brand's value and reputation.

The main values of the Community—defined as peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law, tolerance and solidarity, the equality of men and women, the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms—further increase the demanding nature of the EU as a brand. Declaring such values is not enough: they must be constantly delivered upon, as this is a pre-

condition for gaining loyalty both from inside the brand territory and respect from outside.

Turning to the issue of personality, we touch a sensitive part of the EU project. From one aspect, the EU can be observed from its institutional nature and is thus perceived as bureaucratic and superficial. From another perspective, it can be observed from its diversified nature as a multicultural unity—as the cradle of ancient Greeks and Romans, Vikings, great Kings and knights, a mix of Christianity and of many ethnic minority groups, their vivid history and great achievements. Branding again has numerous issues to consider in defining this element inside the rich EU identity, as this is the most emotional part with the strength to attract and to bind the hearts of its citizens and to create a charisma that will attract the outside world.

Some of the key differential advantages of the brand in the global arena might include: the fight against poverty; dedication to ecology and the need to protect the climate of the planet; the binding protection rights of all its citizens, including minorities; social nature based on the principle of solidarity; applying democracy and the rule of law in all its activities.

With regard to benefits as an important element of the EU's brand identity, we can observe the following benefits from the point of view of the member states within the common single market: a unique monetary policy and single currency; solidarity in helping each other's sustainable development; and mutual protection from external risks. We can also observe from the point of view of the EU's citizens and their benefits that it is part of the most peaceful, prosperous, innovative and democratic part of the world. This is another rich element of identity that the branding strategist should observe carefully when defining it as a part of the EU brand identity.

The process of identity-building should also consider the following important elements: the EU flag with its distinctive blue color and twelve yellow stars; the anthem; the EURO; EU passports; the Erasmus student exchange program; the Schengen Agreement and the free movement of citizens; labor mobility; European studies and European Universities; European movies; and many other important EU projects and achievements.

Conclusions

The importance of the brand identity concept is commonly accepted in the branding literature and has been successfully applied in many areas; it has been deliberately neglected, however, in activities for the creation of an EU identity. Therefore, the presented paper underpins the need for the creation of an EU identity employing the brand management approach and thereby strongly contributes to several previous studies dealing with investigations into a possible branding approach to this issue. Combining the previous findings of the marketing and branding literature, we have introduced a theoretical framework for the adoption of a possible branding approach in the process of building the EU's identity.

Although the European Commission has undertaken many valuable actions in recent years aimed at EU identity-building, a clearly specified identity for the EU has not been proposed. Therefore, we regard our suggestion for employing a brand management approach in building the EU's identity as an important step in the EU branding process. The EU's identity should be self-explanatory and must suit its complex nature. It should be clearly communicated and must reach its audience. The citizens should feel it, understand it, trust it, respect it and love it. The second most important finding in terms of the process of building an identity for the EU from a management perspective can be seen in the findings of the integrated analysis of existing models for building brand identity. Here we opened some important areas for possible further investigations into the EU's brand. The final discussion, concerning a possible approach towards defining the key elements of the EU's identity, was oriented towards reducing the complexity of the issue and providing possible directions for further activities in this area.

The study results are subject to several limitations and qualifications. Further improvements are needed both on the theoretical and especially the practical level. The complex nature of the EU itself makes the process of defining its identity even more complicated, as putting into a defined framework something so intangible, alive and full of contradictory perceptions on the part of its stakeholders is highly challenging. Due to lack of information about certain aspects of the investigated topic, the study has its own limitations which should be overcome through direct access to information by the relevant authorities involved in this issue. For the purposes of our research we used already existing models for building brand identity,

especially ones for destination brands. The lack of models for institutional branding in the branding literature was also a limitation on the work of this study.

Further research should be undertaken into a number of areas: into destination and institution branding; into creating models for identity-building that would be suitable for the EU as a brand and for EU institutions; and into applying the brand strategy concept to improve the communication strategies of EU institutions. The process of branding is lengthy and demanding. It is usually the work of a team of experts which involves all the relevant stakeholders. In this case, these should be the founding members of the EU, EU Institutions, key EU authorities, respected leaders, opinion makers, distinguished experts on cultural, arts, sports and science issues, and the citizens of the EU. Branding incorporates research, strategy building, designing identity, creating touch points, managing assets. Its final results should be a clear image of the EU that reflects its rich identity and strength and excellent communication activities which reach their target audience and generate loyalty amongst the EU's citizens, increasing their active involvement and sense of belonging, and which create greater respect for the EU and enhance its reputation throughout the world.

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