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Rebranding Israel: History out, creativity and innovation in

Israel is best-known for heritage and men with guns. Now comes a project to change world perceptions, through make-it-yourself logos.

By Nati Tucker 08:28 06.01.13 ■ 5

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Israel the Holy Land is quite the tourism magnet. It is the birthplace of three major world religions and studded throughout with sites of religious and archaeological fascination, and has always been marketed as such. Yet the powers that be in Jerusalem reached the conclusion that what's needed is a profound rebranding, and following a 18-month planning project, last Thursday the Foreign Ministry presented Israel's new branding language at its annual ambassadors' conference in Jerusalem.

Its central concept is "creative energy." The new branding language emphasizes three main narratives: That Israel is an energetic, colorful nation full of variety; that it possesses a wealth of entrepreneurship and creativity; and that it is forward thinking – all depicted in a new, vibrant graphic language.

Actually the Foreign Ministry began its effort in 2006, when it attempted for the first time to improve the country's image around the world using professional tools borrowed from branding and advertising. But then the project encountered failures, obstacles and delays. The State Comptroller's 2011 report criticized the ministry's management of the project and charged that it didn't get much done within four years – despite, according to the comptroller, spending NIS 9 million on it in that time.

Come the British public-relations consultancy Acanchi, which in 2009 came up suggested a new branding strategy focusing on Israel's "creative energy." Over the last year Israeli branding agencies competed in a Foreign Ministry tender to translate this creative energy strategy into a new branding language. It was won by the agency Open, which received a NIS 100,000 contract.

Branding Israel is especially tricky. The international media usually mentions the country in the context of war, missiles and terrorism. Israel ranked 27th in the Country Brand Index in 2012, a slight improvement from 28th place in 2011 and 30th in 2010.

According to the CBI, Israel's strong points are mainly in heritage and culture, where it is ranks 8th and 9th respectively. It also scores well on history – taking a respectable third place on the list.

But the CBI also mentions other benefits Israel has: according to the index it reached 13th place in the "technologically advanced," section, and was ranked 18th in "good for business."

Unifying force in Israel: "Creative spirit"

The new branding aims to strengthen Israel's values of entrepreneurship and creativity, and to downplay those of history and heritage.

"What unifies Israel is the creative spirit here," claims Ran Natanzon, a former strategist and ad man who's heading the rebranding drive at the Foreign Ministry's media and PR department. Natanzon is leading the process together with Danny Zonshine, the director of public relations and branding. "There is entrepreneurship, intellectual and cultural variety in Israel, and there is also the issue of the vision and realization of the state. The language we have created is a platform that we want to be used as widely as possible," he says.

The man who took on the project to design Israel's new branding language was Saar Friedman, owner and creative director of the Open branding agency.

"The brief had a very heavy burden, which at first didn't allow you to think creatively," he says. "In parallel, we were also branding start-up companies, and this suddenly became connected to Israel's branding."

Studies about Israel revealed people didn't identify the country with colors or with women, Friedman says: "The media always shows men with guns." The decision was made to focus on values that an international audience wasn't being exposed to, with an emphasis on creative thinking combined with the image of Israel being a lively, dynamic place.

DIY logo

The graphic language created by Open is based on these values. "We essentially developed the first technology in the world where everyone can choose for himself what Israel's logo will be," says Friedman. What the company did was create an application for computers, smartphones and tablets that allows users to design the word "Israel" in a variety of fonts and colors, so that endless combinations of logos for the country can be created in a unified design language.

"We understood that it wasn't enough to say we have creative energy – we actually had to be that way," says Friedman. "This is the essence of Israelihood – everyone does what they want to do. It's not refined, but dynamic and varied."

Natanzon says that the Foreign Ministry considered adopting the values from the "Start-Up Nation" book, by Dan Senor and Saul Singer, when branding Israel.

"But we didn't want to do that," he says. "It would only reference one sector of the population, and exclude the others. We wanted to take it to the next level, to showcase the variety and creativity there is throughout the whole country."

Out: Jewish heritage

It's impossible not to notice that the new branding excludes central characteristics associated with Israel, such as Jewish culture and heritage and the country's holy sites – all of which appear in countless official adverts.

"The branding looks at something broader," Natanzon explains. "The aim was to create a new range of conversations for the country's brand. The historical components are already part and parcel of its image."

The new design language has already received management approval at the Foreign Ministry, Natanzon says, and will be gradually implemented in its activities. It will be seen in the Foreign Ministry website, its Facebook page and that of its representatives overseas, in international exhibitions and even official business cards.

"Over the coming year we will translate the design language into real-life activities. The advantage in the flexibility of this language is that it enables you to be formal as well as informal, whether using Facebook or an iPhone, or on business cards," says Natanzon.

The Israeli PR effort has endured harsh criticism for the lack of coordination between various governmental bodies. The Tourism Ministry advertises Israel around the world to attract tourists; the Industry, Trade and Labor Ministry promotes commercial cooperation; the Foreign Ministry promotes the PR effort; and the IDF is also active in military PR. Over recent years, the Prime Minister's Office established a PR office with the aim of coordinating all the PR bodies and unifying their message.

At this stage, the branding project is led by the Foreign Ministry, where they hope that all government ministries will adopt the new branding language. If they don't, complications could arise if advertisements from official governmental bodies use different branding languages.

During this sort of branding process, success is heavily dependent on implementation, Freidman emphasizes. "It is a matter of commitment. In my experience with commercial companies, the branding process doesn't always work," he says. "Some of the best projects I've done weren't carried through." He hopes that ultimately the new language will create a new discourse over Israel. "We are faced with so many problems," he says. "But this creative is managing not to fall into the traps. It shows how many beautiful things Israel has to offer."

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