**SPRING 2006 WINNER**

*Leslie Georgatos*

**Instructor’s Foreword**

While it is a remarkable coincidence that Leslie, who covered the Boothe Prize ceremony last spring for the *Stanford Daily*, is now on the receiving end of the Boothe Prize essay, it is not remarkable that she would receive it—the Boothe Prize essay couldn’t be awarded to a more well-deserved writer. When Leslie took my course called “Rhetorics of Advertising” last Spring 2006, she was seriously interested in both the field of advertising and international relations. For her research paper, she hoped to find a means of connecting these two areas and initially researched how international companies catered to or distanced themselves from the brand images cultivated in their home nation. During this process, however, she encountered articles on the emergent field of nation branding and then focused on exploring and assessing the United States’s own branding strategies abroad after 9–11. In particular, she focused on the U.S.’s unpopular image in the Muslim world and wondered about the U.S.’s efforts to project a better national image, the grounds of its current image failure, and a possible solution. Leslie’s paper argues that the U.S.’s failed public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East would benefit significantly from branding strategies and theories used by marketers to target audiences. Although marketing strategies are often seen as applicable only to the business world, Leslie asserts that the rhetorical strategies and successful communication principles applied in corporate branding can lead to more focused and persuasive “international image making” and nation branding of the United States. No less remarkable is how she gathers so many secondary sources (ranging from Congressional reports, books, and journal articles) that effectively support her original argument without overwhelming her paper. In sum, Leslie’s paper is characterized by sophisticated arguments, an extensive range of sources, and fluid writing, which are the hallmarks of excellence in research–based writing in PWR. By persuasively navigating the reader through the complex web of nation branding, Leslie has demonstrated her own art in persuasive writing.

*Sohui Lee*
“Brand America”

We’re selling a product, and the product we’re selling is democracy.

– Former Secretary of State Colin Powell

America has been called one of the world’s most elegant brands facing the most complicated positioning problem of all time (MacKinnon 1). But its branding ineptitude has earned it recognition as the ultimate big business—the world’s last remaining superpower—that foolishly neglected its PR department (Trout 1). Because America’s image affects the success of its international diplomacy, federal resources have been directed toward shaping foreign public opinion of the U.S. since World War I (Nye 1). But for the first time in American history, advertising professionals have contributed extensively to ongoing discussions of the appropriate methods of disseminating information about U.S. culture and policies to foreign citizens, as well as about the appropriate actors to create and deliver such messages. When post–September 11th opinion polls showed rising world disapproval of America, the United States government turned to advertising executives in the private sector for advice on selling “Brand America” to foreign audiences. The U.S. is not alone in exploring the use of private sector tactics to change its international image; the EU, Spain, England, France, Germany, South Korea, Australia, China, and many others have taken steps toward using branding techniques to promote their images abroad. Globally, the idea of managing “nation brands” is on the rise with The New York
Times listing “nation branding”—creating a concept for a nation and selling it to the world to improve its image—as one of its top hot concepts for 2005 (Potter 1).

Yet on the grounds that branding is too shallow, too simplistic, too one sided, and too unbelievable to change foreign public opinion, many skeptical U.S. officials and domestic media commentators have rejected the new approach to national images. For the present, traditional government wariness about using marketing terms in foreign policy and public perception of the shallowness of commercial branding have crippled efforts to incorporate these techniques into the management of the U.S.’s image. But while there are limitations on the wisdom of applying private sector concepts to the U.S.’s nation brand, several key principles underlying corporate branding strategies could direct U.S. public diplomacy in more productive directions. Standard corporate brand management is altogether more systematic, more research oriented, more responsive, and more controlled than that of the U.S.’s current national brand. And private strategies that emphasize thorough understanding of the tools of communication, the targeted audiences, and the intended message could lead the U.S. into a more interactive, dialogue–based approach to making and perpetuating a positive, democratic image that complements and reinforces its overarching policy objectives.

“Public Diplomacy” vs. “Nation Branding”

A variety of names have been used to characterize the shaping of national images abroad, including “strategic diplomacy,” “public diplomacy,” “strategic communications,” “propaganda,” “public affairs,” and “international public relations.” Currently, the dominant name for the concept is “public diplomacy,” popularly defined by Hans Tuch in Communicating with the World as: “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies” (5). In public diplomacy, one nation’s government is attempting to affect the people of another nation or other nations (Manheim 4). And unlike propaganda, public diplomacy is supposed to denote explanation of policies and ideas instead of advocacy of “superior” American ideals (Risen 1).

Although the term “public diplomacy” is relatively new, the current public diplomacy “toolbox” of methods has been developing for decades. Non–technological tools include cultural exchanges, the creation of national libraries abroad, student exchanges, direct contact through foreign affairs officers, and official publications. Yet the information revolution appears to have led to the development of public diplomacy as an integral part of a country’s foreign relations because it enabled widespread public access to many forms of media. Current initiatives have gone beyond traditional radio programs and incorporated television commercials, TV news stations, and ads in the form of flyers and brochures. Online virtual spaces are also being considered as new means to project an American image abroad, enabling widespread access to U.S. information in a way that is secure against physical attack in violently anti–American countries.

Yet the global shift toward “nation branding” represents more than a move to harness technological progress to mold national images. The new nation branding is distinguished from “public diplomacy” in its appropriation of private sector techniques like formulating a message, setting up measures for describing success, conducting opinion research, and actually creating ad campaigns and logos; its open use of marketing terms and expressions to refer to national images; and its categorization of public diplomacy problems as issues
of image rather than policy. Nation branding’s goals may also differ from those of public diplomacy. While public diplomacy seeks to inform foreign publics about a nation’s goals or ideals largely in order to gain support for its foreign policy or to direct other nations’ foreign policy, nation branding can also be applied in the context of economic competition for homegrown brand recognition, international tourism, and foreign direct investment (Olins 178). But as in public diplomacy, nation branding efforts sometimes move beyond superficial ads to incorporate policy changes. Spain, often cited as a successful nation brand, accompanied its new sun logo with institutional and tourist advertising, creation of successful international business schools, growth of Spanish companies, reconstruction of major cities, filming of critically acclaimed movies, and the hosting of the Olympics to improve its international image after Franco (Olins 176).

**The Controversy**

Although it has just begun, the debate over the applicability of marketing concepts, strategies, and techniques to the building of national images has raged fiercely in the United States in recent years. Nation branding is increasingly justified in terms of necessity. Proponents claim that in an international atmosphere charged with emerging national brands, a country that does not deliberately seek to control its image abroad faces obscurity, distrust, or misunderstanding (van Ham 1). Nation branding is also touted as necessary because it establishes a basis for goodwill that lasts through divergences on policy decisions (Wang 19). Thus a country that establishes a respectable international image in the long term may get the benefit of the doubt on questionable policies. Finally, proponents of nation branding claim it is little more than a new term for a framework that has existed throughout history. According to this concept of ancient nation branding, the new expansion of the concept merely constitutes greater acknowledgement of the existence and effects of national images, and in some cases, greater commitment to engaging with foreign opinions (Council on Foreign Relations 2).

Criticism of nation branding has focused its ridicule on the shallowness of conceptualizing countries as brands—condemning the practice as falsely equating “Uncle Sam” with “Uncle Ben’s Rice” (“From Uncle Ben’s to Uncle Sam” 1). Some journalists take a darker tone, attacking the marketing of national images as “sheer propaganda… anathema to the free and civil society central to our ‘brand promise’” (Grimm 1). On a still more serious level, the greatest criticism of public diplomacy based on nation branding is its emphasis on image, not policy, as the source of problems and the focal point for constructing solutions. Its apparent preoccupation with labels and perceptions instead of with realities has some commentators concerned that nation branding reveals a cavalier attitude toward the concrete effects of a nation’s foreign policies. Some purists continue to insist that only policy changes affect the way a nation is perceived abroad; others merely assert that a campaign to change a nation’s image will only work if accompanied by corresponding policy changes, however meager.

Much of the debate on both sides, however, has focused unproductively on the idea of applying branding terminology to public diplomacy instead of on the merits of using marketing strategies and principles in changing nations’ images. Careful study of basic marketing principles suggests that if they were applied to U.S. efforts at image building in the Muslim world, they might improve the campaigns’ effectiveness by making them more responsive to local concerns.
Current U.S. Problems, Tools, and Objectives

After the September 11th attacks, the U.S. government and public became aware of a burgeoning global image problem that worsened during the Iraq War. The Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project found that disapproval for the U.S. had increased between 2000 and 2002 in 19 of 27 surveyed countries, and explained that the current U.S. image problem is deeper and broader across nations and across issues than any previous slump (“Trends 2005” 109). Even popular American brands have become less popular abroad because of the stigma of association (Kitchen 202). Beyond simply regarding U.S. motives in Iraq with suspicion, foreign publics perceived the U.S. as “too quick to act unilaterally,” finding that such action “doesn’t do a good job of addressing the world’s problems and widens the global gulf between rich and poor” (“Trends 2005” 106). In branding terms, the United States had an “image problem” not exclusively tied to its current president or policies (“Trends 2005” 109).

In response to this alarming information about foreign perceptions of the U.S., the federal government directed resources toward improving the U.S.’s image in the Arab Muslim world (GAO 2). Led by Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers, formerly a successful advertising executive, the State Department’s Bureaus of Educational and Cultural Affairs and of Public Affairs worked with the Office of International Information Programs to launch “Shared Values,” a program focusing on similarities between Arab and American societies (GAO 2).

The initiatives developed under Beers included the following:

1) “Muslim Life in America,” a brochure campaign and website showing Muslim individuals and families enjoying their lives in the United States. The site and brochures include photo galleries depicting the mosques, schools, and everyday lives of Muslims in the U.S (Cincotta 152). The sites promote awareness of acceptance of Muslims in the U.S., and of shared values of family and faith (Kendrick 5).

2) A “Shared Values” TV commercial series of five “short-form minidocumentaries” showing a Muslim public school teacher, a baker, a journalism student, a paramedic, and a health professional reporting that the “United States is an open society, and that Americans and Muslims share certain values and beliefs” (GAO). These commercials reached approximately 288 million people in Indonesia, Pakistan, Kuwait, and Malaysia; Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon refused to air them on the grounds that they were U.S. government propaganda (GAO 12, Cincotta 152).

3) Radio Sawa, a radio station playing a combination of popular Western and Arabic music with brief news bytes in between. Intended to showcase American “cultural diversity,” the station has absorbed the funding that previously supported the now-defunct Arabic Voice of America news station (Cincotta 152).

4) TV al-Hurrah, a TV station that features programs on news, health, technology, and entertainment and is intended to project a “message of personal empowerment” (Pattiz 79).

A Place for Branding in Public Diplomacy?

Hostile reactions from Arab governments, foreign and domestic media, and traditionalists in the State Department to the Beers campaigns have discredited branding as an approach to international public relations in America (Fulton 24). But as used by those who discount marketing techniques as an approach to public diplomacy, the word
“branding” is often superficially identified with conventional advertising approaches to selling a national image abroad. These include the flyers, pamphlets, and TV commercials connected with recent efforts at improving Muslim perceptions of the U.S. The broader, more fundamental principles of branding have not been adequately judged for their applicability to public diplomacy.

In examining recent public diplomacy initiatives produced under former Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers—“Shared Values,” “Muslim Life in America,” Radio Sawa, and TV al–Hurrah—I investigated whether or not these campaigns conformed to simple branding principles drawn from the papers of marketers and proponents of nation branding. When I discovered that these recent programs deviated in some respects from basic marketing principles, I studied whether or not better application of these principles might have made these programs more effective. In completing my research, I found that four elements of a marketing–based approach might help the U.S. move from one–sided, message–based campaigns to more productive, interactive exchanges of ideas. While I focused on recent campaigns, these principles can be applied productively to U.S. public diplomacy efforts as a whole.

The basic marketing principles I relied on were:
1) Define and coordinate a single message;
2) Identify and understand target audiences;
3) Fit the message to the product;
4) Measure success and reevaluate approaches based on results.

What follows is a summary of my findings.

Branding America in the Muslim World

1) Define and Coordinate a Single Message

You only have a certain number of chances to register in people’s minds, and unless each time you register, it appears to be making the same point, you don’t have much of a chance.

– Simon Anholt (Risen 1)

While private sector branding emphasizes coordinating a single message in order to more firmly impress that message into public memory, U.S. public diplomacy could benefit from formulating a single message because of the internal, organizational advantages derived from clear goals. With the exception of Radio Sawa and TV al–Hurrah, which were focused on establishing a U.S. media presence in targeted nations, each of Beers’ individual campaigns in the Muslim world had a clearly articulated message both at its inception and—according to available research—during its reception. “Muslim Life in America” was conceived to convey the religious freedom of Muslims in America, as well as to reassure audiences that U.S. military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan were not a result of U.S. anti–Islam prejudice. “Shared Values” attempted to show that American and Muslim societies shared values of family and faith. A Southern Methodist University study of responses among international students at Regents College in London even showed that the program successfully achieved high recall of its other principal message—Muslims are treated well in America (Kendrick 14).

Yet crafting the specific purposes of individual campaigns is not sufficient to make U.S. intentions, ideals, and institutions understood. Current U.S. nation–branding efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere are weakened by a lack of institutional coordination into
one overarching U.S. message or target image. A Government Accounting Office (GAO) review of State Department public diplomacy conducted in 2003 found that greater collaboration on articulating a single U.S. message would help agencies achieve “mutually reinforcing benefits”—amplification of the persuasive power of their messages through repetition (13). Chinese propaganda offices have coordinated their efforts behind the concept of “China’s Peaceful Rise,” and some scholars conclude that they have successfully sold the image of China as a peaceful, developing, anti–hegemonic power to other Asian countries through organized cultural initiatives (D’Hooge 90, Wang 48). A coordinated single message also frees public diplomacy practitioners familiar with their assigned territories to innovate within established parameters. The U.S. State Department has been reticent in communicating its public diplomacy goals to practitioners of U.S. public diplomacy around the world, and the limited communication has resulted in bureaucratic confusion. As recently as 2004, the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reported that without a core message to refer to, U.S. ambassadors were forced to be cautious in their public statements to avoid clashing with State Department policy (Advisory Commission 8). In one outrageous case, a former public affairs officer in Morocco was forced to use newspaper articles to guess at U.S. public diplomacy plans and formulate his own (GAO 14). Government reviews have found that the U.S.’s uncoordinated strategy for public diplomacy risks resulting in “conflicting messages” that compromise the U.S. credibility absolutely critical to successful public diplomacy (Advisory Commission 16). Finally, a unified and coordinated message would facilitate the measurement of the success of public diplomacy initiatives. Without selected goals or target images for the U.S., public diplomacy officials have a difficult time assessing the success of their programs, and as a result, may waste resources on ineffective enterprises (GAO 13). Yet a well–defined message, clearly understood both internally and externally, will not resonate effectively unless it appeals to target audiences on their terms.

2) Identify and Understand Target Audiences

It’s not what you say, but what they hear that’s important.
– Charlotte Beers (Cincotta 154)

Current U.S. public diplomacy in the Muslim world suffers from an inadequate understanding of its target audiences. Although the listed Beers–run campaigns identified key target audiences—Radio Sawa targeted the 15–30 age bracket, al–Hurrah was directed toward news watchers of all ages, and “Muslim Life in America” and “Shared Values” were supposed to reach broad Arab publics with specific appeal to women and mothers—they failed to resonate with those audiences because of misconceptions about how the ads and their messages would be understood (Pattiz , Kendrick 10). Attempts to determine the causes of the campaigns’ failure—or indeed, to describe their purported failure—are severely handicapped by the dearth of hard information about Arab responses, but some anecdotal evidence has helped in judging how these ads were received.

That the Beers campaigns did not adequately respond to target audiences is evident in two ways: the campaigns both addressed subjects their audiences found irrelevant and employed methods and messengers their audiences did not find credible. Newly published survey data from several sources shows that Muslim audiences’ most deeply felt concerns about the U.S. in recent years surround its foreign policy, and demonstrates that the same people who despise the U.S. for its wars admire some of the values it espouses. Pew Research Center data from 2003 shows that chief Muslim concerns about America then
were worry about becoming military targets, belief that the U.S. seeks to control Middle Eastern oil and dominate the world, and antagonism toward the U.S. stance on Israel and its invasion of Iraq (“Trends 2005” 109, 110). Yet according to Zogby International, Muslim audiences who disapproved of U.S. policy approved of its culture, technology, and education (GAO 8). The Pew Global Attitudes Survey also emphasized that even as faith in American intentions, government, and respectability were falling, people in Muslim countries continued to place a high value on democracy (“Trends 2005” 109). Given the serious alarm with which Arab audiences then confronted U.S. foreign policy, Beers’ ad campaigns, which focused on abstract values, were seen by influential Arabs as glossing too lightly over substantive controversial issues. Responses to specific programs have not been adequately measured, but anecdotal evidence shows that some programs were out of touch with Arab realities. For instance, many of TV al–Hurrah’s programs are called “uninteresting” or “bizarrely out of tune with Arab concerns and interests” (Lynch 102). These and other responses like them in the Arab media demonstrate that the Beers campaigns failed to address key Muslim concerns, and came off as insensitive or arrogant in the process—an unintended message that resulted from ignorance of crucial audience views.

The Beers campaigns’ failure to incorporate credible messengers was also symptomatic of a weak understanding of and response to their target audiences. Aside from the skepticism that unavoidably greeted ads produced by the U.S. government, certain aspects of the ways the programs were designed damaged their credibility in Arab countries. The TV station al–Hurrah, run by the U.S. government, was viewed as highly biased because of the resemblance of its over–friendly coverage of America to the self–praising coverage put out by distrusted local government–run stations (Lynch 105). Its credibility was also undermined by the fact that its intended audiences tend to find face–to–face dialogue a more appropriate means to communicate on serious issues (Johnson 1). Successful public diplomacy campaigns must pay careful attention to their target nations’ ideas of credible messengers. When Australia tried to market itself as a destination for business travel in China, it employed “leading Asian business personalities” to speak in its commercials (Business Asia 1). In the current situation, in which the consensus among public diplomacy experts is that the U.S. government is not a “credible messenger” to Muslim audiences, non–governmental agents may be employed to carry the U.S. message (Allison 1). Loosely coordinated NGOs, businesses, charities, cultural icons, and universities can serve as more believable envoys of U.S. public diplomacy and, depending on their help, would demonstrate closer adherence to branding principles as well as greater interest in participating in dialogue with target audiences.

Considering Beers’ continual emphasis on communicating effectively with target audiences in her speeches, it may seem confusing that the campaigns she designed seem unresponsive to Muslim audiences’ concerns. Yet she and her team frequently complained that they were not getting access to needed information about foreign public opinion (Tiedeman 51). Indeed, the failure of the Beers campaigns to understand their target audiences is symptomatic of how U.S. public diplomacy is hurt by its lack of emphasis on audience research. In 2003, the Department of State’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research spent about $3.5 million on overseas opinion research, an amount that finances about two surveys per country per year (GAO 22). By contrast, private companies within the United States spend approximately $6 billion on marketing research each year to understand the target audiences for their own branding messages (Peterson 1). In addition
to underfunding research on foreign public opinion, the State Department often fails to ensure that the data that is calculated is received by the foreign affairs officers who need it (GAO 23). Drastically increased funding for research on foreign public opinion is necessary if the U.S. is to mount successful public diplomacy because the government must understand how messages will be understood in the cultural contexts of audiences. Yet messages must also align with the product they intend to sell—with the image the United States wishes to project.

3) Fit the Message to the Product

> Of course, even the best advertising cannot sell an unpopular product; a communications strategy will not work if it cuts against the grain of policy.

– Joseph Nye (1)

Given widespread assumptions about the supposed move from policy to image inherent in nation branding, it is ironic that nation–branding proponents are among those most vocally supportive of aligning messages with policies (Risen 1). Nation–branding experts stress that any new campaign must “respond to stereotypes already in circulation” (Risen 1). Then, once a new image has begun to be created, “Madison Avenue advises delivering ‘this message consistently in word and deed’” (MacKinnon 1). This concept of fitting the message to the product has two principal applications to U.S. public diplomacy: first, the U.S. Middle Eastern nation–branding efforts would benefit from matching public diplomacy techniques to their intended messages; and second, well–publicized policy changes should sometimes accompany U.S. image–changing efforts.

Marrying method to message, a favorite axiom of marketers, can be productively applied to the creation of a new U.S. image in the Muslim world by employing programs that demonstrate, rather than merely articulate, U.S. commitment to democracy and engagement. America has a historical example in the early Arabic Voice of America radio station. In aiming to be “a balanced and comprehensive projection of American thought and institutions,” the program invited speakers with some well–known anti–U.S. leanings to debate ideas and included question–and–answer sessions about the United States in its regular programming (Heil 52). These decisions embodied U.S. values of democracy and engagement, respectively, in contrast to current programming that shuns engagement in favor of broadcasting U.S. viewpoints. In the case of the Beers–initiated TV al–Hurrah, Marc Lynch of the non–government Public Diplomacy Council argues that to demonstrate democracy and engagement, the station should “broadcast hard–hitting programming about the missing Iraqi WMDs, about Bush’s domestic political problems, and about American foreign policy” (108). Such a shift would resonate with audiences who find the current programming imitates “the official media of a totalitarian state” (Lynch 106). But the union of message and product goes beyond making messengers embody the target image, and demands real coincidence between U.S. messages and U.S. policies. “Shared Values” campaigns showing Muslims enjoying their lives in America clashed with media reports of anti–Muslim violence following September 11th. In other words, “talking about freedom and democracy won’t get us very far if those efforts are competing with Abu Ghraib and the Patriot Act” (Risen 1).

In a broader sense, however, like the other marketing principles discussed, fitting the message to the product could be applied to U.S. public diplomacy outside of the Beers initiatives in order to make U.S. nation branding more credible. If the U.S. wishes
to communicate that it is interested in cultural dialogue, it could improve its numbers of foreign language speakers in government. At present, 21 percent of the officers posted overseas in positions that require language ability have not attained the needed proficiency (GAO 9). Such statistics communicate the U.S.’s level of interest in other cultures, suggesting arrogant assurance that interlocutors will speak English or unwillingness to learn local languages. If the U.S. wishes to promote itself as “a nation of personal freedom, risk-taking, and cultural tolerance,” it could market that brand image by “expanding market-friendly foreign aid programs” (Risen 1). Chinese public diplomacy met with success in Asia partly through its successful marriage of message and policy, at times supporting radical regimes with no other motive than to make its communications more credible (Wang 28). If the U.S. is to meet with similar approval in Muslim nations and worldwide, its policies must mirror its intended image.

4) Measure Success and Reevaluate Approaches Based on Results

Like branded products, branded states depend on trust and customer satisfaction.

– Peter van Ham ("War, Lies" 1)

Precious little research actually documented the effects of the Beers initiatives on their target audiences. Although Beers compiled a short summary of media responses to “Shared Values,” most of the audience research that was conducted was undertaken by private entities outside immediate government control. Keith Reinhard, an advertising executive and head of Business for Diplomatic Action, a group that prepares U.S. businessmen to behave properly abroad, surveyed people on the streets of Egypt and Jordan regarding the State Department’s Arabic Hi magazine (Reinhard 10). The interviews gave him quotations as evidence that the magazine was resented as propaganda (Reinhard 10). But the surveys gave no idea of numbers, or of the responses of different age and gender demographic groups. Two SMU professors systematically studied the effects of the “Shared Values” spots on Regents College international students, but only six of those studied students were among the targeted Muslim audience (Kendrick 10). The only widely publicized and organized studies of the results of a Beers initiative were conducted by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which receives government funding, but, tellingly, not government direction. BBG surveys estimated the size of the audiences of ongoing programs Radio Sawa and TV al–Hurrah. Yet while these studies demonstrate that the radio and TV stations are successfully achieving a share of the market for their target audiences, the surveys have not moved beyond questions about the “reliability” of the stations’ news to those of, for instance, how targeted audiences interpret the programs (Pattiz 87, 88). Some Arabic sources have reported that listeners tune in to Radio Sawa’s music, but tune out the station’s news, a serious blow to a program that claims to attract youth to American news through pop music (Riordan 84). Yet more troubling than the superficiality of “consumer attitudes” toward ongoing programs is the mere fact that only ongoing programs have been studied. Unsuccessful or terminated public diplomacy efforts may afford key insights into how U.S. public diplomacy must be conducted in the future, and in–depth assessments of audience responses to “Shared Values” and “Muslim Life in America” must be conducted in order to aid in formulating new approaches.

Recent initiatives have not been uniquely underanalyzed, but rather are emblematic of a government structure that de–emphasizes assessment of success. Current State Department measures for the overall effectiveness of its public diplomacy are limited to counting hits on its local and national web sites, counting the number of times the
U.S. is mentioned in countries’ media, and surveying participants in foreign exchange programs about their experiences (GAO 3). As the GAO review found, these measures are fundamentally flawed because they provide little quantifiable information about the character of target audiences’ responses to U.S. public diplomacy. Counting website hits does not even involve using cookies to measure the demographics of the site’s users, as some advocate (Riordan 183). Tracking mentions of the U.S. in foreign media is not an adequate measure for the success of U.S. public diplomacy, as it leaves aside assessing the tone of the article and the way the publication is viewed in its home country. Similarly, as the GAO has acknowledged, information about how exchange students viewed their experiences “does not demonstrate progress toward the more fundamental objective of achieving changes in understanding and attitudes about the United States” (GAO 4). This audience is not only highly selective, but also is not the target of public diplomacy efforts, which are directed at entire foreign publics in their home nations. If real understanding of the results of U.S. public diplomacy is to be achieved, more comprehensive measures of success must be introduced in the State Department.

The Need for Uncle Sam in Nation Branding

Some scholars and media critics cite recent U.S. and British failures in the realm of public diplomacy as emblems of the impossibility of conducting effective branding at the national level, arguing that large, influential countries are incapable of presenting the kind of single coherent message required for successful public diplomacy (Risen 1). It is true that some relatively smaller nations like the Maldives, Kuwait, and Singapore can more easily and precisely articulate their images because of the sheer paucity of available information on their characters. And even countries in the middle tier of economic and military power, like Norway and Canada, have an advantage over countries of greater size and prominence in that they can focus their resources on promoting one or two key appealing areas of their policy or culture to the world—conducting what is known as “niche” diplomacy (Henrikson 67). But successful efforts by China and Australia at altering international perceptions of their “nation brands” contradict the assumption that size precludes effectiveness (Business Asia 1).

Other scholars have disputed the U.S. government’s ability to articulate a national image on the grounds that its structure impedes its success. Arguing that bureaucracy can stifle innovation and impede rapid progress, while a prominent government role in information programs invites foreign skepticism, they find that private organizations ought to take the lead in nation branding (GAO 26). But research has shown that some corporations have achieved greater market shares by distancing themselves from an unfavorably viewed home nation (Kitchen 202). Some turn to localization as a means to appeal to targeted groups abroad. An article in the influential marketing publication Brandweek urged businesses to adopt the example of CNN, which has deliberately dissociated its local branches from America through native-language programming and associations (Colberg 22). Others may even play to unfavorable foreign perceptions of their home audiences. Budweiser has met with great success in England with ads depicting American men as “crass and stupid” (Selling the Flag 1). Still other associations of private companies do not have sufficient funding for wide-ranging image-changing activity (Luley 8). While collaboration with NGOs is an inevitable and indispensable part of nation branding, the federal government is one of few agents that possess both the means and the motive to construct U.S. messages and direct their propagation.
While acknowledging the necessity of government’s role in public diplomacy, still other scholars question the effectiveness of nation branding. Without policy changes, they argue, public diplomacy efforts will make no significant difference in how America is perceived abroad. It is true that an entirely aggressive policy may never be justified in foreign eyes through public diplomacy. But it is also true that, in this specific instance, United States policy has not been uniformly anti–Muslim, as is popularly believed in the Arab world. Public diplomacy works to amplify awareness of those policies that do favor targeted populations in ways that policy alone might never accomplish. Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. assistance in the world, but in 2003, U.S. embassy officers in Egypt and Morocco found that only a small percentage of the native populations were aware of extensive U.S. aid to their countries (GAO 26). The case of Egypt reveals that without coordinated publicity, aid–related U.S. policies, like other policies favorable to nations targeted by American public diplomacy, may not receive foreign attention. Relying purely on policy to communicate U.S. goals would thus mean neglecting to ensure audience awareness of favorable policies as well as audience understanding of the goals of unfavorable ones.

Dialogue, Nation Branding, and the New Public Diplomacy

Though their relation to national marketing is new, these four ideal principles of international image making (creating a single message, understanding target audiences, fitting the message to the product, and measuring success) reflect attitudes that have been growing with the development of U.S. public diplomacy. The trend from the birth of U.S. public diplomacy in the First World War to its peak toward the end of the Cold War has been increased dependence on two–way channels of communication, moving away from the dissemination of wartime propaganda to focus on cultural exchanges and interactive communications (Critchlow 83). Nearly every modern–day commentator, no matter what his or her position on the Beers campaigns in the Muslim world, has emphasized the urgent need for a public diplomacy based on dialogue. To foreign public relations professionals, including the newly non–government–affiliated Charlotte Beers, this means reactivating the old libraries, information centers, and English–learning opportunities that were hallmarks of U.S. public diplomacy in the past (O’Regan 1). To others, this means increased collaboration with local foreign media and NGOs to build working relationships that allow the U.S. to reach foreign audiences through trusted channels. In one such promising initiative, the State Department joined with Egyptian TV and government to air stories about local USAID projects in 2003 (GAO 12). To advertising exec Keith Reinhard, a focus on increased engagement means that nation branding must position the U.S. in investment “as the facilitator, not the patron”; in charity, “as the partner and not the philanthropist”; and in business, “as the courier of progress, not the preacher of Westernization” (Reinhard 1). While further study will need to determine the efficacy of public diplomacy through statistical analysis of audience responses, it remains clear that if public diplomacy is a national priority, depth and breadth of message must be achieved through many kinds of collaboration in many areas of the world. And a collaborative, democratic image can be enhanced by appropriate application of the principles, rather than the language, of nation branding, which encourage understanding of foreign audiences and effective, truly persuasive communicative interaction with them.
Works Cited


