

MARKETING BRITAIN

To be or not to be



At BMP DDB, **Chris Powell** chairs one of the UK's largest and most respected advertising agencies. He has long been associated with efforts to put Marketing Britain on the agenda for government and private enterprise alike. Here he discusses what this should and should not mean with Locum non-executive Director **Tony Hodges**.

Chris Powell is one of those rare individuals in advertising who risks giving his industry a good name. He is courteous, unassuming and intelligent. He has spent over 30 years with one agency, helping guide BMP to its worldwide reputation. Even more unlikely, he seems to have a quiet passion for public service running through his veins. This has been manifest in his work as key advertising advisor to the Labour party through four elections. In his chairmanship of the Institute of Public Policy Research. And in his constant support for the idea of Marketing Britain, for which he has worked to no apparent commercial advantage 'and so far without any significant success, to be honest'. On Marketing Britain there is at last a faint glimmer on the horizon to encourage Powell: the establishment of the Britain Abroad Task Force, under the auspices of the Foreign Office and the chairmanship of designer-entrepreneur John Sorrell, which is drafting its first report as we speak. (See Jonathan Griffin's contributions elsewhere in this issue and more analysis of the Task Force recommendations in a future *Locum Destination Review*.)

It seems likely that Powell's missionary work in the corridors of power may have helped shine some light where once there was dark. He certainly knows his way around. Quite apart from his own past efforts for Labour, his eldest brother was private secretary to Thatcher and another is chief of staff for Blair. (A fourth brother runs Invensys in the US, which probably qualifies as public service too.) His experience and contacts do not seem to have calmed his sense of frustration, however, with the traditional response to Marketing Britain initiatives he has promoted. His equanimity cracks visibly as he describes prevailing attitudes.

Frustration was what brought him into the fray in the first place. A young BMP planner, Anneke Elwes, had put together a seminal international research study called *Nations for Sale*, back in 1994. This compared international attitudes to America, Britain and Japan, treating each as a brand and demonstrating how far the world's perceptions of

Britain were lagging behind. Chris Powell only got involved 'when nothing happened as a result, which made me rather cross ... no-one was picking it up and running with it ... you know, that English thing – "frightfully interesting" and everyone goes to sleep.' So he picked up the cause, 'to try to stir the pot and get some action by business and government ... action needed to be taken in the national interest'.

First, the issues had to be clarified – and there was much clarifying to be done. Many immediately assumed that Marketing Britain or Branding Britain was harking back to the Buy British campaign of Harold Wilson's government. This was, in fact, aimed at UK consumers and eventually slunk away into its natural habitat, the last refuge of the scoundrel. Later the initiative was obscured by all the hoopla surrounding 'Cool Britannia! Whilst describing this pithily as 'nonsense', Powell patiently explains how it was pure 'journalist frenzy', with the British press picking up on a major splash by *Time* magazine. A coincidental report from the influential think tank, Demos, extended the coverage, and the press assumed Cool Britannia and Branding Britain were the same thing. Who ever said that missionary work was easy?

Powell is on the record with his definition of what Marketing Britain is not and what it should be. 'Marketing Britain is not a piece of British jingoism. It isn't a "buy British" campaign. It is simply a plea for marketing people to take the lead in managing country perceptions Perceptions of country play a role in how people see brands and companies, and this has a commercial consequence in doing business, in the success of brands and inward investment. If Britain is not to be left behind, we need to take the necessary steps to create helpful impressions overseas of British commerce National provenance powerfully shapes expectations and those expectations infect people's view of a brand and company. There is work to be done to manage and improve the way Britain is perceived overseas; but this is not just a factor for marketing goods and services – the economic consequences of an unmanaged reputation go far beyond that.'

POTENCY OF COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

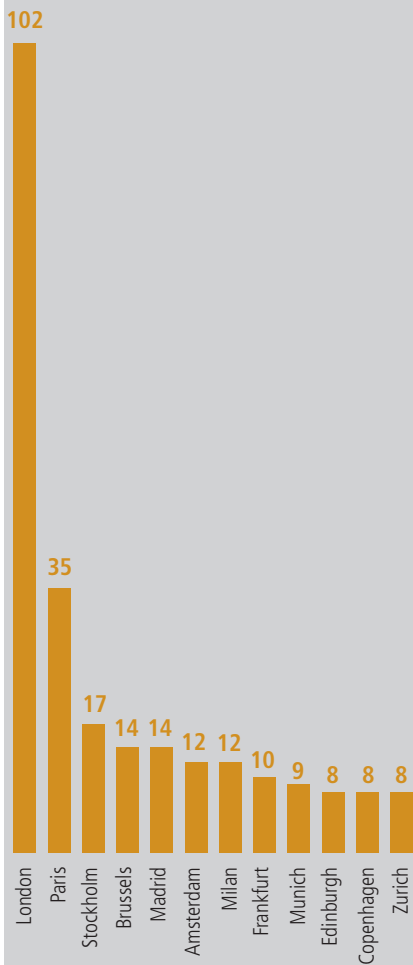
'72% of the world's leading companies cited nations' image as important when they make a purchasing decision.'

Source: Wolff Olins, *Made in Britain*



While Britain's reputation for excellence at culture and the creative industries is welcome, greater efforts should be made to promote its achievements in sectors such as telephony and software

Table 1: Headquarter clusters in Europe



Source: McKinsey1998

With commercial sense and national interest in perfect harmony, Powell sounds like the idealised New Labour businessman. The difference is that with Powell it is not mere spin. Nor is there any cult of personality to get in the way. He is quick to credit other missionaries, citing designer Wally Olins as the pioneer spirit in this field. (It was Wolff Olins' original study, *Made in Britain*, which found that '72% of the world's leading companies cited nations' image as important when they make a purchasing decision'.) He points to the work by new product research guru Creenagh Lodge on brands from Ontario to Scotland. He underlines the case made by Ian Davis of McKinsey for the battle of countries and their images to attract business talent, highlighting London's head start in attracting international companies' headquarters (see Table 1).

The conceptual challenge facing Powell and his ilk is one of subtlety. It is a seductively simple step from 'managing country perceptions' to 'Branding Britain' campaigns. Yet Powell is characteristically modest about the ability of traditional promotional methods to 'brand' a country. 'You can nudge it but you can't create it [a nation's brand identity] or control it'. He notes the Foreign Office exercise when every US press cutting over a two-week period which referred to Britain was collected for analysis. The

task was aborted, not feasible. When he says 'nudge', Powell appears to favour focused, specific activities that might be described as micromarketing were the issue not so macro.

He has promoted the idea of a joint marketing initiative between the government and leading players in British industry, a modest £2 million campaign targeting CEOs, politicians and journalists and timed to coincide with trade show activity in each country. The strategy behind such a campaign emerges clearly from Powell's brand training. Whilst he is cautious about promoting the importance of Britain's creative industries, wary of confining British creative flair into a cultural-economic ghetto, he does see an opportunity: 'If we could pick up on this reputation for creativity in the arts and get people to see we can be creative in business, then we could find a niche that is credible and powerful'. As evidence of the truth behind this brand story, he cites the fact, known by few but quoted by Japan's government, that 70% of all significant inventions and a fifth of all post-war inventions were made in Britain.

There is little doubt that Britain's reputation abroad is nowhere in major product categories, as *Time* magazine's Country Images Study demonstrated (see Table 2).

Table 2: Who makes the best...?

Product Category	Country of Origin	%	Brand	%
Sports Shoes	US	53	Nike	49
Cameras	Japan	81	Canon	27
Consumer Electronics	Japan	68	Sony	51
Luxury Cars	Germany	49	Mercedes Benz	33
Computers	US	80	IBM	51
Quality Watches	Switzerland	84	Rolex	36
Fashion	France	48	Christian Dior	16

Source: *Time* magazine, Country Images Study 1997

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BMP's own World Study of the same year showed that the highest ranked product category for British goods was telecommunications, and only 42% of respondents could agree that Britain was very good in this field. Britain's real strengths – in the world's eyes – are not industrial products but services and cultural phenomena: advertising, music, theatre, clubbing (see Table 3). All very sexy, all very Cool Britannia, but far from its core achievements in telephony, pharmaceuticals, computer software. The contrast between perception and reality is stark. It conjures up the image of a brilliant inventor dressed up as a fashion designer.

As a result, Chris Powell is wary of using tourism promotion for Destination UK to leverage wider economic benefits. The UK has a major reputation and income stream as a tourism destination and cultural centre, but it is not exploiting its assets well enough as a destination for talent, trade and inward investment. Powell sees that London's civilised attractions mesh seductively with its financial reputation to attract high-flying talent to the Square Mile: 'The RSC plus the City is a very attractive combination!' But he would like to see this link between creativity in the arts and creativity in business recognised more widely and travel beyond London.

'National provenance powerfully shapes expectations and those expectations infect people's view of a brand and company'

Table 3: Comparing nations' strengths

Categories where each nation achieved highest score for 'amongst the best in the world' or 'are very good at'

Japan	Germany	US	UK
Consumer Electronics	Cars	Specialist Retail	Advertising
Domestic Appliances	Beer	Computer Hardware	Nightclubs
	Engineering and Construction	Supermarkets	Contemporary Music
	Grocery Foods	Films	Theatre, Drama and Literature
		Streetwear	Air Travel
		Financial Services	
		Footwear	
		Telecommunications	
		Insurance	
		TV Programmes	
		Newspapers	
		Pharmaceuticals	
		Retail Banking	

Source: BMP World Study Nov.1997



St John's College, Cambridge and Cambridge Business Park: 'Cambridge has heritage but it turns it to good business advantage'
 Photographs courtesy of St John's College, Cambridge and Drivers Jonas

Not that this is a man who believes in breast-beating. He particularly likes the ideas on 'Exemplary Marketing' expressed by Jeremy Bullmore (WPP non-executive Director and another advertisement for British advertising); Bullmore is equally wary of countries 'going around boasting' and is all for 'setting things up' – such as a Finishing School for Young Entrepreneurs (post-university, post-business school), reflecting Britain's innovative achievements and attracting young talent from elsewhere. What seems at first to be a notion in a minor key is actually mainstream sense. After all, America's space programme was born of German scientists and its high-tech reputation is based on a narrow strip called Silicon Valley, where, Ian Davis noted, 15% of successful entrepreneurs are Indians (first generation immigrants, not Native Americans).

The prime example of Marketing Britain Abroad that Powell applauds is the British Council brand initiative for UK Education. 'Spot on', affirms Powell. 'There is very good evidence that people educated here have a much better relationship with Britain than those who haven't been, and this should be an integral part of any strategy aimed at marketing Britain abroad.' The example of Clinton crops up, but this only serves to remind Powell of the distance yet to travel. Despite Britain's advantages of

language and educational heritage, it appears 'they can't fill Fulbright places for Business & Economics ... Britain is just not acknowledged as a place that's any good at business.' Still, there is no doubt that the £5 million voted to brand UK education is a good start. As Helena Kennedy QC, Chair of the British Council, put it: 'The promotion of British education overseas is vital not only because of the trade it generates, but also because of the relationships it creates for Britain with the new generations abroad.' Quite.

The other example of effective nation marketing that Powell applauds is Irish. 'The Young Country' brand platform was rooted in the simple fact that Ireland had a higher percentage of graduates in their twenties than other European countries. Like attracting like, this offered Ireland a competitive weapon in the battle to attract bright young minds. And for a country whose inward investment successes had been based on low-cost and tax advantage, here was a route to higher margin acquisition.

Ask him for an icon of international appeal with which to exemplify Britain's twenty-first century strengths and Powell responds in a flash: 'Cambridge Business Park. It's the way the world is going, with businesses clustering around universities. It has the tradition of a great old university there plus

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leading-edge businesses. It has heritage but turns it to good business advantage. It takes a traditional tourism icon like Anne Hathaway's Cottage and turns it on its head!

So is he optimistic about the prospects for Marketing Britain? 'It will happen as a result of competitive pressure anyway. In 10 or 20 years the whole world will be doing it. It just needs some leadership, political and business leadership, to kick-start it. It amazes me that the obvious is not being done.'

And with the Britain Abroad Task Force about to report, has central government got the message?

'Ish,' he ventured.