

Recasting the UK

Museum or moving image?



In the Spring 2001 issue of *Locum Destination Review*, Jonathan Griffin offered an analysis of the UK's image to visitors and investors in overseas markets, and reported on the work of the Britain Abroad Task Force, which he continues to lead. Here, he looks back at the developments since then that have impacted positively on perceptions of the UK brand, and introduces the latest strategic moves to build on these and move forward.

Last time I contributed to *Locum Destination Review*, I looked at the UK brand under the heading 'Things can only get better'. It was Spring 2001. I highlighted the work that had been done on the country's identity: how we Brits were still seen around the world as stuffy and old-fashioned and how perceptions of us had been further damaged or reinforced by a string of what the charitable might call bad luck but the critical might call a symptom of British short-termism and incompetence: BSE, Foot and Mouth, floods, railways crumbling, a petrol strike and, of course, the after-effects of football hooliganism. Set against the power of the US brand, it seemed unlikely that young people around the world would think better of us for some time.

I went on to outline some of the proposals that Britain Abroad was considering to try to inject a new sense of purpose into the promotion of the nation's image without resorting to the blandness of words like - whisper it quietly - 'Cool Britannia'. The UK, I argued, deserved a clearer and more consistent brand identity in a communicating world. It also needed a better press as new Lottery-funded attractions were making it an ever-more attractive destination.

I was taken to task by the writer of the diary, who accused me of being far too gloomy and negative about the destination brand, arguing that the crises would pass and that all that was needed was leadership. British innovation, championed by Chris Powell of BMP DDB elsewhere in the journal, was the answer.

Have the crises past? What image are we trying to project and, importantly, have we found the necessary leadership?

It has been a roller-coaster year for the UK's identity. I wish I could show this through research surveys but sadly no one has carried out any systematic work on the image of the UK as a whole since the British Council's *Through Other Eyes* of 1999 and 2000;

and that was a lifetime away in view of what has happened since. We must therefore rely on objective analysis.

The summer of 2001 was borrowed time. Short term, tourism was struggling to overcome the immediate effects of Foot and Mouth - the crisis became a disaster. In the political sphere, we were coming to terms with the early days of George W. Bush and his apparently unilateral approach. This offered the UK a real opportunity to carve out a niche for itself as the peace-loving, cooperative English-speaking partner in contrast to the self-centred, unilateralist economic power across the Atlantic. The UK almost began to feel facilitative and European. This opportunity was never grasped, for the General Election concentrated politicians' minds on a short-term popularity contest and after the event we had none of the 'new direction' announcements that had followed the 1997 election. After all, it was the same party even if the faces had changed.

September was, of course, the watershed after which everything suddenly looked different. The immediate reaction to this confirmed what the world already believed: that 'Nanny' still wanted to make the rules and it was going to line up with the US, come what may. It just so happened that the US was not everyone's favourite country.

Judging identity

There seem to be three main indicators of people's views on national identities. They judge a nation's military/political behaviour, its commercial approach, and its culture and lifestyle. They appear to have no problem holding radically polarised views either. Some recent research by the British Council in Islamic countries showed that young people in some Arab countries hate the US for its military/political activities but still hanker after all the values



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portrayed in Hollywood movies: the lifestyle, the freedoms, the can-do land of opportunity.

For most of the time since the end of communism, the military/political identity of the UK was simply not an issue. There was no massive military or political stand-off and the 1990s were therefore a time of increasing importance for the commercial and cultural indicators of identity. In September things changed. And, since your standing on the military/political indicator trumps the other two, the behaviour of the UK has reinforced existing perceptions of the UK as a traditional, military, former world power trying to play big man; US- not Euro-focused. This was reinforced in the commercial arena in January when we were seen to be left behind and obviously not part of Europe, when others adopted the euro. Creative, ambitious innovators? No. Sorry, Chris. Leadership was firmly concentrated in the military/political arena.

The reaction of the British themselves has been equally confusing - consistency was never their strong point. At the beginning of the year the media seemed to agree that the Golden Jubilee was dead in the water and likely to be an embarrassment. Six months later, they all agreed it had been a great success. It took the deaths of first Princess Margaret and then the Queen Mother to unleash a tide of goodwill and support, coupled with some excellent PR on Prince Charles' love life from the palace next door. The result was round the world coverage of what they all know we do best: heritage and pageantry in traditional style. There was little room for creativity and innovation in this event with the Palace on auto-pilot.

What about the populist end of the market? The two Jubilee concerts created a carnival atmosphere and showed us letting our hair down, even if we needed the excuse of a royal event to do so. On a larger scale there was an optimistic fervour in support of the World Cup football teams, and England - I cannot speak for the

other parts of the UK - is still festooned with both Union and St George flags. The Brits really did look as though they had found a new confidence, which expressed itself in exemplary behaviour by the England fans in Japan and Korea, much to the disappointment of journalists around the world eager to see them causing trouble. Can we sustain this good behaviour in competitions closer to home, I wonder?

So will the sum total of the events of the last year have helped to show the world that we Brits are creative, innovative individuals eager to contribute and to be a force for good in the world? Or will they have reinforced their perception of us as stuffed up, heritage-obsessed, traditionalists able to put on a wonderful formal show but still frightened of technology and hankering after past greatness?

Leadership

And what of leadership? Things have been moving in the public sector; slowly perhaps but the pace will quicken. The Foreign Office carried out a major review of public diplomacy in the spring and is now beginning to make changes to the way in which it promotes the UK to the general public around the world. For the first time it is starting to think seriously about the image we want to have as a country and to approach communication using marketing techniques.

The Foreign Policy Centre - a think tank - published its ideas in a booklet entitled *Public Diplomacy*. This called for much more effort to be put into winning hearts and minds amongst the general public, and underlined many of the changes that the Foreign Office was proposing. All this has been helped along by people like Chris Powell and others pushing from the outside. What they all know is



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that more money is needed if we are to change perceptions in the commercial and cultural arenas, but unfortunately there are higher short-term political priorities even if investment in good relations now will pay dividends in years to come.

Leadership from the private sector has been hard to find. There has been a degree of self-interest for investment to take place and self-interest has emphasised the core values: playing to existing strengths and existing perceptions. Tradition was safer than modernity. Visionary leadership is about the long term and when the world is having a fit of the jitters it is hard to invest in the long term. A UK with a successful commercial or lifestyle image is a more attractive investment for business than one with a strong military/political identity.

Public and private sectors are coming together to take a step forward, however. In Shanghai this October, a major exhibition - *Britain at the Leading Edge* - will be a test bed for some new ideas about how to promote the UK's creativity. This will roll out into a series of major events across China next year. Using the theme of *originality*, the events will communicate with some of the most jaundiced critics of the UK: the British Council's *Through Other Eyes* research showed that young people in China were the most critical of the UK out of all 30 countries. If this series of activities is successful, then we can expect to see them replicated in other countries around the world in the future.

Originality is an interesting brand positioning for the UK. It does not attempt to compete with Germany on engineering or

manufacturing, with France on culture or lifestyle, with Japan for electronics or with the US as land of opportunity. Like the Virgin brand, it seeks to take ownership of a cross-cutting idea: that the UK is good at concepts, thoughts, design, invention, creativity and innovation. Just as Chris suggested. We certainly have a good story to tell.

Originality does not need to cut out the heritage, reliability, or traditional aspects of the UK. No one around the world doubts our strengths in those areas. They also remain central to our tourism proposition. But originality does allow us to add in the lively lifestyle aspects so that there is no doubt in visitors' minds that we are a country that is not wallowing in the past but embracing it and positively moving forwards. Wellie-boot throwing and knights in armour playing tennis, if you must.

Are things getting better? A bit. The UK brand has taken several steps backwards since last year but it may just be able to move forward faster as a result. If only we could get the same amount of coverage for the reality of genuine - not spun - modern UK as we did for the royal funeral. Now that would make a difference to people's perceptions.

For more information on the Britain Abroad Task Force visit www.batf.org.uk