
Branding a destination in a political crisis: Re-learning, re-thinking and re-aligning strategies

Joram Ndlovu, Elias Nyakunu, Polytechnic of Namibia; Ernie, T. Heath, University of Pretoria

Abstract

Contested election results or coups de dat have triggered political violence that has swept across a number of African countries, negatively affecting their tourism destinations. Thus, a political crisis can cause a significant disaster since it has the potential of impacting negatively the smooth operations of the tourism industry. This paper discusses the prospects of branding destinations and the opportunities thereof. Destination branding literature reveals that every destination should include crisis management strategies in its tourism planning processes, management activities and destination marketing programmes. The paper concurs that destination branding should be married with crisis management strategies in order to turn a crisis into a profitable opportunity. However, in the prevailing fragile, economic and political conditions the traditional notion of positioning a destination is no longer effective. Destination Marketing Organisations need to position their destinations in such a way that, despite uncertain conditions, they can exploit the scarce windows of opportunities. The paper proposes that in this ever increasing non-linear world, it is only the non-linear strategies that can create new tourism wealth. The paper concludes that though destination branding is an essential tool for positioning a destination, in order to be effective, Destination Marketing Organisations need to re-learn the destination strategy process, re-align their strategies and decisions.

Introduction

A destination brand is used in destination marketing primarily to project a positive image of tourism at a destination. Destination branding plays also a significant role in positioning a destination. This paper defines a destination brand and explores its key features. It discusses the functions of brands, analyses the factors that can affect destination brands and develops a framework that can be used by a destination experiencing a political crisis to market its destination brand. It concludes by developing strategies and recommendations that can be used by a destination going through a political crisis to reposition itself successfully.

Defining qualities of tourism

While a destination can be considered as a single product comprising of every kind of tourism operation in its geographical area. It can also be viewed legitimately as a composite product that comprises a mix of various components (the destination mix) (Morrison & Anderson, 2002:10). According to Heath (2004:40), a "destination represents a mental picture in the minds of current and potential visitors". Perceptions such as cheap versus exclusive or safe versus dangerous often overshadow reality. Thus, the tourism industry operates in a complex and changing environment that is characterized by several challenges (Heath, 2007:263). In most cases, destination marketers have little control over the elements of the destination mix that they are branding.

Contextualising political crisis in tourism

In order for tourism to be successful it requires the services of both the public and the private sectors. In fact, for the industry to operate smoothly it is highly dependent on these sectors. However, each of these sectors has its own varied interests and agendas which are sometimes complimentary and at other times very contradictory to each other. Political actors can (and do) exert undue influence. Consequently, tourism has these defining qualities that set it apart and that make it susceptible to a crisis. A crisis exists when a situation, in a destination, raises prospects of a fundamental change which is usually sudden and unforeseen, that also threatens to disrupt and overturn prevailing practices. The incidences of crisis in tourism have not abated and instead are likely to increase.

A destination can be affected negatively by current events such as political chaos, natural disasters, terrorism and civil unrest that can occur within its boundaries. It can also be impacted harmfully by events that are occurring elsewhere, for example, the world economic crisis (Heath, 2007:66). In addition, a desirable destination can also be influenced by previous events, myths or fictitious events.

Such occurrences interfere with normal tourism business operations. In most cases they tend to damage a destination's image and to compromise perceptions regarding its overall safety and security. In general, they shape the tourists' perceptions of the place in a very negative way. Such negative developments often interrupt tourism industry operations resulting in a down turn spiral in tourist arrivals. The downward spiral, in turn, generates a distressful cumulative effect on the country's economy. Thus, a tourism crisis occurs when circumstances in a destination pose a change which is potentially destructive to the destination and to the tourism industry's viability.

Causes of many tourism crises are traceable to economic downturn and recession, socio-cultural unrest, environmental and natural disasters, technological failures and political events. The domain of political events includes war, coups, deteriorating international relations, imposition of sanctions and terrorism. Crises emanating from a political upheaval tend to differ from those caused by natural causes. They tend to have a more adverse impact on tourists. Experts warn that in terrorism and politically related crises, tourists constitute "soft targets". The recent bombing of hotels in India is a case in point. At times attacks become indiscriminate and institutionalised. Potential visitors to the destination inevitably continue to witness these kinds of crises as a result of improved media coverage of political related events.

Heath (2007:263) discusses some of the common crises and their impacts. He suggests some possible strategies of dealing with these crises, as follows:

Table 1: Key challenges and concerns in international destination marketing

Crisis impact	Possible strategies
Perceived and real safety and security issues	Develop an integrated and coordinated strategy at the national and regional levels and create a realistic balance between reality and perceived safety
Perceived health issues (e.g. malaria, aids, etc)	Develop information and communication strategies to address these fundamental issues on a continuous basis
Disasters and unforeseen incidents	Develop contingency plans and proactive public relations measures for immediate implementation when the unforeseen incidents occur
Lack of investment as a result of political incidents	Address the investment issues and open opportunities. Use this as a competitive advantage.
International competition	Monitor and evaluate key competitor strategies as a key input into strategy formulation
The concept of a global village	Develop tourism marketing strategies by thinking globally, planning regionally and acting locally
Image fragmentation in certain overseas markets	Create strategic participative destination marketing frameworks that can serve as references for all stakeholders

Source: Adapted from Heath, 2007:264-265

Most of the existing literature on tourism crisis has focused largely on terrorism and war without clearly narrowing down to politics as a factor capable of generating a crisis. There is also a plethora of literature focusing on crisis management, but surprisingly there are few sources to turn to regarding politically engineered tourism crisis management. Most tourism crisis strategies that are readily available are found in tourism manuals that address natural disasters.

Tourism and politics share a close but often uneasy relationship. Politics, namely, government actions, ideologies and the unfolding of political events can trigger a range of crises. These events shape tourism flows and the environment in which the industry operates. Similarly, tourism impacts political structures and processes since it is a policy arena that offers opportunities to fully exploit economic opportunities and unlock the potential in a country's cultural and natural resources.

Once a destination experiences a political crisis there is a tendency for a crisis mind-set to set in. Usually adaptive strategies are adopted which do not seek to change anything, but rather focus on the core of the tourism business, chart alternative action while the going is good and deck when the storm hits. In reality, a political crisis can denote two things: danger or an opportunity. It is prudent to adopt the latter approach. This paper adopts the latter approach and recommends the branding or re-branding of the destination.

The destination branding concept

Branding has its roots in economic history. It has evolved as a concept of ownership and identification (Blichfeldt, 2003:8). In its physical form, branding has been, and still is, used on livestock to identify and differentiate the owner's livestock from the livestock of other farmers (Middleton & Clark, 2001:132; Howie, 2003:152). Its use has since evolved to include other uses and meanings, for example the family names of well-known ranchers have become guarantees of the quality of their beef or breeds. During the medieval period, trade marks and signs were used on crafts and other guilds (Keller, 2003:20). As a result of the increased production and distribution channels in the latter half of the 18th century, branding has been used widely as a form of identity.

The latter half of the 19th century saw the introduction of brand management standards (Keller, 2003:20) that related to consumer goods and product brands. In some countries, the sheer power and influence of some global brands has resulted in increased political and environmental backlash against local products. However, in tourism it is fair to say that the use of branding is still in its infancy (Howie, 2003:152). Nevertheless, there is already a plethora of literature that focuses on destination branding as more and more countries have begun to offer holiday destinations to tourists (Gould & Skinner, 2006:1).

Key features of destination branding

Branding has evolved a great deal over the past six decades. It has evolved as a communication strategy together with an awareness of the might of the mass media

(Joachimsthaler & Aaker, 1997:3). Now branding is considered to be a marketing communications effort, which is done through advertising, sales or exhibitions and many organisations continue to place strategic emphasis on branding. Today the strategic importance of branding is also emphasised by most leading academics and consultants (Blichfeldt, 2003:3) as a result of the complexities that prevail in the marketplace. There has, however, been a shift of emphasis from mere branding to brand management, which takes a more strategic stance regarding the brand management scene (Keller, 2003:24).

Tourists have become increasingly price sensitive, shopping for price and quality. Manufacturers are also able to copy or imitate (branded) products and innovations of other manufacturers and thereby easily gain entry into the markets concerned. According to Aaker (2001:321) strong branding remains the only weapon that can be used by companies to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage. Aaker (1997:349) notes also that the most important reason for engaging in strategic branding efforts is to protect the company's profits from erosion. The same can apply for destinations.

Brands are powerful entities, because they blend functional, performance-based values with emotional values (De Chernatony, 2006:5). Several scholars have advocated the use of branding as a management tool. Such branding would comprise everything that a company does and the company should make its marketing-mix decisions with due regard for the brand, while focusing on long-term goals. Heath (2007:176) states that branding should be a top management priority and it should be part and parcel of the company's strategy and mission.

Functions of a destination brand

According to Laws (2002:203), branding is a means of increasing the efficiency of marketing. It is appropriate for destinations that seek to create destination awareness and destination image within the consumer market. Destination branding is not new, but its importance has grown exponentially since tourism became one of the world's largest industries. Revenue in respect of worldwide tourism revenue amounted to US\$ 462 billion in 2001 (WTO, 2005:20).

Fundamentally, destination branding is premised on the conviction that country names amount to brands. Therefore the name of a country conveys certain images, values and cultures and contributes to the evaluation of products and services (Laws, 2002:203). Because brands are a combination of graphics, colour, logos/signs and images, which represent certain qualities within the destination, they contribute towards increasing brand equity (Keller, 2003:25).

Brands are designed in such a way that they project to the prospective customers a particular message about the destination (Heath, 2007:187). They influence, stimulate and motivate the customer to choose the brand in the face of competing brands (Morgan *et al*, 2002:34). The branding of tourism destinations requires honesty, objectivity and, above all, an empathetic understanding of consumers' mind space (Heath, 2004:56). According to Cai (2000:730), "destination branding represents a paradigm shift in marketing and an emotional relationship with the consumer is central to the paradigm shift". He emphasizes that branding is not

merely a rational marketing activity; but also a political act that is based on issues such as local pride and dignity. Morgan *et al.* (2002: 6), echo the same view by saying that "branding should contribute towards drawing a distinct line between the past and the present".

While branding embraces a host of activities, including infrastructural development, product enhancement and protection against environmental degradation, it shapes perceptions of the destination. Therefore destination branding should be used as an image-modification process where consumer's perceptions ultimately facilitate tourists purchasing decision. When a destination has a powerful brand, it translates into a better image of the country. The improved image could in turn lead to increased exports and inward foreign investment (Vicente, 2004b:4). According to Anholt (2005:1), "country brands stand for a number of qualities, including power, wealth and superiority and they could be used as tools for economic development".

Countries have branded themselves with qualities such as music, philosophy, trust, wisdom, beauty and peace. These brands act as a form of identity and differentiation from competitors. The branding of a destination enables the customer to readily identify it and distinguish it from its competitors. A country could be associated with particular benefits or activities that are offered by a destination. These benefits act as a cue for decision-making regarding purchases (Kaplanidou & Vogt, 2003:2). In particular, it indicates to a prospective purchaser what level of quality he could expect. A range of destinations that are marketed under the same category would convey similar expectations of the quality of their products, although the products cannot be seen or sampled in advance.

Factors that can affect a destination brand

In their study of perceived travel risks, Hang *et al.*, (2005:154) concluded that "man-made risks such as robbery, theft, cheating, corruption, and transport-related accidents, whose effects are random and not group specific, tend to be the most innocuous and least negative in terms of their effect on the likelihood of visitors' future visitation". The perception of risks in destinations where terrorism, bombings and kidnappings are aimed to a greater extent at tourists and certain identifiable groups impact in a different way. They tend to result in a reduced likelihood of future visitation of main stream tourists. However, if a tourist has visited a destination before, s/he is likely to have a better and sympathetic view of the situation and the likelihood of future visitation increases, regardless of the type of risk associated with the destination. Tourism destinations should therefore, use prior visits as a point of departure in destination marketing and branding. Destination marketers and decision makers should not therefore underestimate the importance that the general public places on risk identification and risk management.

According to Hang, Nunes & Dioko (2005:150), "the spread of SARS in 2003 had a devastating effect on the tourism industry globally, but particularly in the Asian countries". This incident illustrates that risks do not only have an impact on the environment, but also on politics and economics, at both the local and the international level.

Slovac & Weber (2002:4) have defined risk as “a hazard, a probability, a threat, an uncertainty and a feeling of loss”. Roehl & Fesenmaier in Hang *et al.* (2005:151) identified a common typology of seven risk components that are commonly mentioned in leisure consumer-behaviour literature. The seven risk components are equipment risk (equipment problems or failures), financial risk, physical risk, psychological risk (the possibility that the destination may not reflect one’s self-concept, image or personality), satisfaction risk, social risk and time risk (the possibility that the destination will be a waste of time). These risks can influence a prospective tourist’s choice of travel and behaviour. Hang *et al.* (2005:151), view these risks as “applicable in most circumstances, because individuals place differing measures of importance on each component of each travel risk”. Individuals adapt their behaviour in accordance with their assessment of the risk component, which in turn is influenced by both the extent of risk and the nature of the past travel experiences. These authors even suggest that personal experiences may exert more influence on travel decisions than the information acquired from external sources (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998:115).

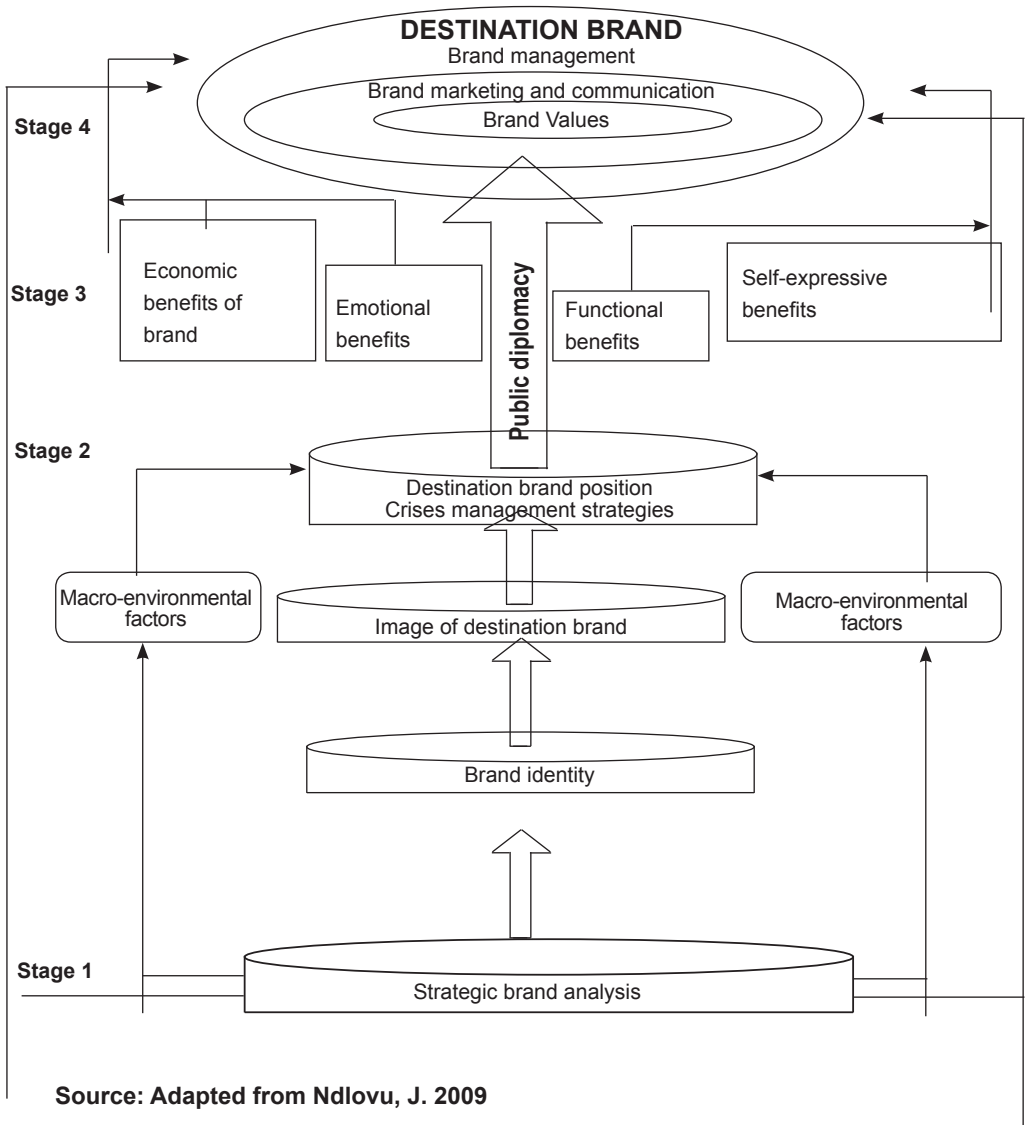
The past experiences, of a destination, that an individual has may ultimately influence his or her general preference for travel to a particular destination by confirming or eliminating the risk factor (Sonmez & Graefe, 1986:117). Travellers are likely to assess each destination on the basis of the risks associated with that particular destination (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998:117). Tarlow & Santana (2002:426) propose that, in evaluating risks, a traveller would consider how great the risk is perceived to be, in terms of control, potential for catastrophe, fatal consequences and inequitable distribution of consequences as well as whether the risk is known, observable, new and delayed in its manifestation of harm”.

Developing a framework for managing a destination in crisis

For the purposes of this paper, an analysis has been undertaken of the public-diplomacy strategies that have been employed by various destinations. A summary of these strategies include branding-campaign strategies and the use of destination-branding and public diplomacy campaign strategies. There are six layers used in the development of a destination-branding and public diplomacy campaign model, namely brand management; brand marketing and communication; brand values; public diplomacy; brand position; brand image; brand identity and brand analysis.

Government representatives of many countries interact with private groups in other countries to gain an understanding of and to influence the public opinion in that country. In order to achieve the broad aims of public diplomacy, communication on current issues should be aligned with traditional diplomacy and with the salient events occurring in one’s own country (Hart, 2008:4). Such diplomatic efforts should be supported by a strategic communication plan that involves the management of all the overall perceptions of a country (Leonard, 2002:3).

Figure 1. Destination-branding and public diplomacy campaign model



The model that appears in figure 1 is a destination-branding and public diplomacy campaign model. This model has been developed from various concepts and the extensive literature reviewed in this paper. The model is a combination of branding, positioning and public diplomacy strategies adopted by variously selected countries such as Israel, Denmark and the Fiji which were faced with an image problem. The foundation for the development of crisis framework is to develop a crisis management task force at national level tasked with the duty of developing a tourism crisis management plan. This task force should include all the stakeholders including the law enforcement organisations.

The bottom layer of the model comprises the elements of strategic brand analysis, brand awareness and brand identity. *Brand awareness and public diplomacy* strategies that are developed for educational campaigns are aimed at using the local inhabitants as ambassadors to create awareness and to change negative perceptions about the destination. It involves emphasizing the brand's economic, emotional, functional and self-expressive benefits. *Brand identity and image* concern the use of symbols, names and strap lines that conjure up images, ideas, beliefs and opinions in the mind of the target audience. The objective of the brand identity can be achieved by rallying behind the brand and projecting the vision of the destination. Where a change in perception is needed that can be achieved by building on expectations, developing slogans/positioning and branding themes that are alluring to the target audience. The implementation of a *strategic brand analysis* is premised on an analysis of the micro and macro environments of a destination. The analysis has an impact on the brand identity, brand image and brand position. It has a bearing also on the development of crisis management strategies.

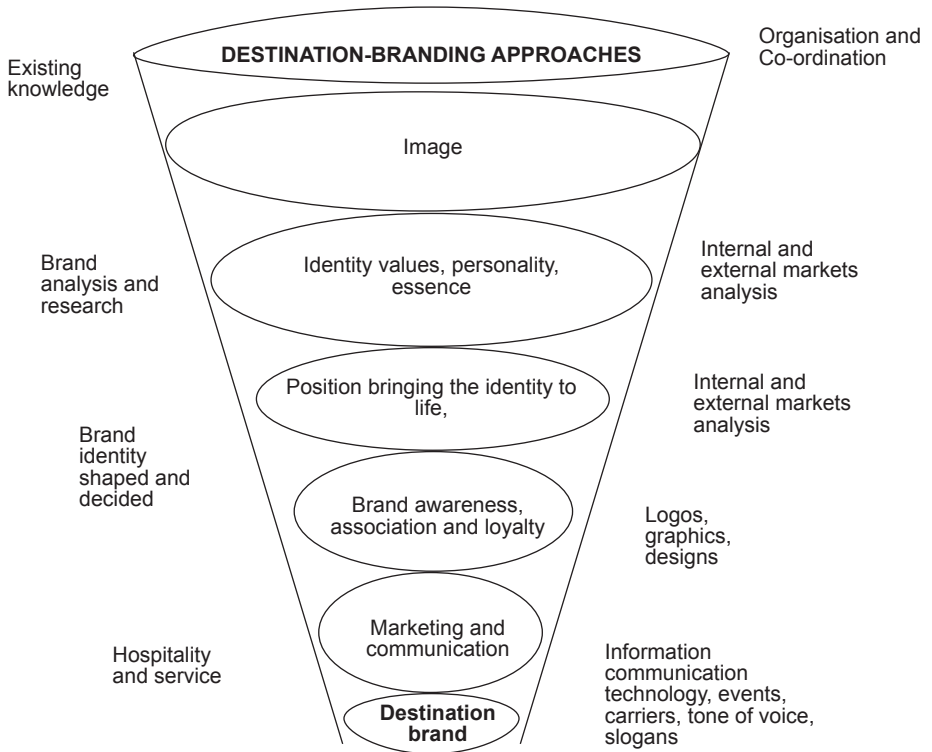
The top layer of the model comprises brand management, marketing and communication and brand values. *Brand management* is concerned with creating an environment that is suitable for the achievement of goals in a strategic manner. It focuses on the interests of the destination, diversity, culture and technology. The aim of brand management is to maintain and increase visitation while *marketing and communication* concerns the use of the printed and electronic media to maintain relationships and convey information to various publics. It could also involve the use of embassies to influence mass audiences in other countries.

The strategy is intended to foster media relations in order to gain positive publicity and control messages about the destination. *Brand value and positioning* is concerned with value creation that is aimed at maintaining relationships with individuals and customers. Its components include a changed tone of voice in public diplomacy and international relations by providing assurance on peace and security and emphasizing tolerance.

Strategies for marketing a destination during a crisis

Based on approaches to branding that were applied in Israel, Denmark and Fiji, a theoretical framework has been developed. It is based on the best practices that have been applied by destination marketers in their attempts to reposition a destination that had experienced a crisis. The underlying assumption is that each destination has already a brand strategy in operation and that the major issue is to build brand equity. The action taken then focuses on four dimensions, namely: image, brand identity, positioning, marketing and communication. These matters are depicted in the destination-branding funnel below.

Figure 2. Destination branding funnel



Source: Adapted from Ndlovu, J. 2009

From the above analysis, it is evident that destination branding and positioning is anchored on the target audience' existing knowledge about the destination, the image of the destination whether it is positive or negative. Successful branding is also dependent on the involvement of all stakeholders in the branding process. Therefore, carrying out an internal and external analysis serves as a basis for identifying the values, personality and essence of the destination.

The establishment of a brand identity tends to shape and direct the brand position. Positioning and identity can be enhanced through the use of logos, graphics and designs meant to reinforce brand awareness, association and loyalty. In addition, marketing and communication can be used to deliver a consistent image and project the destination in a very positive note. The tools that can be used in this communicative process include, ICT, public diplomacy and slogans while service represents the promise and level quality expected. The successful branding of a destination, like Zimbabwe, which experiences a crisis should be anchored on the recognition that the destination branding process has to follow the steps such as those outlined in the destination branding funnel.

Bridging the gap between destination branding political crises

Being prepared for any possibility of tourism crises, putting a crisis management team, development of a crisis management plan should be taken as bare essentials for effective management of a crisis. The following points are a guide on bridging a gap between destination branding and political crisis.

- The restoration and recovery of the image of a destination is largely dependent on the appropriateness of the efforts made by the country concerned to market the destination. The recovery process comprises many elements, such as the repair of infrastructure, erection of buildings and rehabilitation of medical facilities and provision of funds. Successful recovery action demands a truthful assessment of the crisis situation.
- Failure to tell the truth could affect the integrity of the brand. In the long, run the truth will be exposed and lead to the destination being viewed either negatively or positively as a result of the projected image. The lesson learnt about the open and honest management of marketing information is that it can result in short term pay for long term gain.
- A website has become an important tool in the dissemination of information and it should be updated regularly.
- Positioning a destination includes changing the strap line and/or the logo in order to develop new images, associations, awareness and values.
- Destination marketers and national authorities should work in conjunction with the private sector. In some cases, major consulting firms should be hired to provide independent marketing and management advice.
- Crises have been managed with varying degrees of success. Destinations need to be pro-active in developing crisis management strategies in order to counter any negative equity.
- Strategic destination-brand management is an important element in destination branding, because it can be used to create an environment that is suitable to the achievement of goals in a strategic manner.

Conclusion

It is worthy noting that destination branding is a powerful tool for repositioning a destination. However, destination branding can be affected by a number of factors including politics. Politics stretches far beyond the power of branding. It has been demonstrated clearly that in a crisis situation, destinations need to consider other strategies like public diplomacy, crisis management, isolationist strategies and be able to use some of the risk management tools available in order to avert turbulent situation. The aim should be to convert a political risk into an opportunity through the use of opportunity management strategies. This paper recommends that Destination Management Organizations should focus on positive aspects of a crisis by extracting the positive aspects, focusing on the difference the crisis has caused

and any special circumstances. Therefore, re-branding a destination during a crisis will not yield any dividends since destinations can not be re-named like commodities but Destination Marketing Organisations need to re-learn the crisis situation and re-think on how they can use it as an opportunity.

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