



Maximising soft power assets: towards prosperity

Monday 19 – Wednesday 21 May 2014 | WP1289

Held at the Hacienda Cantalagua, Mexico

In association with:





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Key points

- Soft power assets can be used to challenge outdated and negative perceptions about a country.
- Soft power may be soft, but it is still power, requiring financial investment with the objective of exercising influence over others. Hard power involves coercion and military threat while soft power relies on context and behaviour to effect change.
- Soft power is increasingly exercised not by government institutions, but by civil society and individuals. While the state is essential to the concept of soft power, the private sector is increasingly the birthplace of soft power initiatives which governments then take on.
- Meaningful and productive partnerships are key to soft power. The diaspora are a powerful and credible soft power actor and should be regarded as an asset.
- Where negative perceptions about a country are based on real problems, tackling the root cause is as important as creating new narratives to challenge the perceptions. Substantive action is needed, not just a marketing campaign.
- Despite uncertain evidence about effectiveness, countries will continue to invest in promotional activities. But the objectives should transcend tourism and commercial targets and incorporate indicators that states are also principled, ethical and responsible global actors.
- The Year of the UK in Mexico and Mexico in the UK in 2015 is an opportunity to take advantage of all soft power tools including culture, education, science, innovation, trade and investment. The year provides an unprecedented space between the UK and Mexico to promote further dialogue about soft power and cultural diplomacy.

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Where does soft power come from?

1. Soft power is derived from the cultural and liberal values unique to each country. The most important factor which makes people admire some countries more than others is the state’s perceived morality or ‘goodness’. There are comparisons to companies with corporate social responsibility programmes; people trust countries which are doing something positive for the global community. This can have knock on economic benefits: countries with better reputations in global markets are likely to do more trade.
2. Providing a good education to its citizens (and working to improve global educational standards) is one of the most universally appreciated actions a country can take. Domestic policy is important to soft power: the way in which a country treats its own people affects its reputation and is observed by other states as indicative of behaviour on the global stage. Soft power is not only something that countries do outwardly, but is also a way of ‘being’ internally, a new form of political culture that builds links between civil society and a government that wants to empower its citizens (in some cases it may not yet know how to do this). But acting admirably in the domestic context isn’t enough as this often lacks relevance to people in other countries. Countries must also ‘do good’ internationally.

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3. Governments should act on what their citizens ask them to do: a country's name is not the exclusive property or preserve of government. When populations demand that their governments act beyond national interests, the resultant changes could do much to increase the country's potential for the exertion of soft power. Soft power relies on authenticity and trust: what countries actually do, not what they say.
4. Populations empowered to act as ambassadors on behalf of their country become a sincere, democratic and effective manifestation of soft power. Two successful examples are Chile's 'Habla Bien de Chile' campaign and the involvement of well-known Peruvians in the Marca Peru initiative to change perceptions about Peru. In Mexico, more could be done to publicise members of the Mexican diaspora who have been successful in business, science and the arts.
5. Soft power does not necessarily come from expected sources; telenovelas and Mexican music are widely consumed around the world and have created affection towards Mexico in unexpected places.
6. Soft power is not free. To use it successfully, a country has to invest resources. For example, international cooperation and development- although seen as costly- are important soft power assets that create high impact.
7. Soft power does not come from marketing campaigns. There is little evidence to support the assertions of the communication and public relation industries that tackling negative perceptions and improving a country's image can be done solely through marketing. Sectoral promotion to eg. increase tourism or trade differ in that they have concrete and measurable outputs.
8. Negative perceptions can only genuinely be changed by addressing the underlying root causes. As Professor Simon Anholt states, 'in order to be admired, a country needs to be admirable'. The challenge is how to proceed when a country is admirable but still isn't admired. In these circumstances, simply telling the right story will not lead to a new image. Countries need to be creative when answering the question, 'what is this country for?' They also need to accept that simply behaving in a certain way and asserting that they deserve respect will not automatically lead to it. However, countries should not be afraid to challenge stereotypes if they want to change perceptions. The rich cultural heritage of Mexico is one of its major assets and more can be done to maximise the potential for this 'jewel in the crown'.

How do states reframe their story?

9. The difference between reality and perception is a considerable challenge for Mexico. Reframing a country narrative is particularly difficult when a negative international image is absorbed by its citizens. Repeated negative stories in the international and domestic media can have a corrosive affect and may result in citizens losing their ability to realise the positive worth of themselves and their country.
10. People do not process information rationally. There is a tendency to look for the first pattern which fits the information: many of these patterns are subconsciously triggered by past influences or shaped by media stories and the opinions of acquaintances.
11. The media tends to over-simplify narratives and often looks for an angle which already has resonance with the audience. So when countries are seeking to rebuild their own narrative they need to consider what is credible to the audience they want to reach, given opinions already formed. Large scale interventions tend to have little impact; it is more effective to have a number of small stories that resonate on a human level, for example because they include something familiar. Personal interaction has the most impact. For example, perceptions of the British military were radically changed by the positive interaction of personnel greeting people at the London Olympics.
12. Breaking free of negative narratives is particularly difficult where there are real problems. In these cases, states need to address the underlying problem rather than portray the issue as a matter for the media to resolve. In some cases, the use of

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expensive public relations (PR) to create positive stories can back-fire: publics often distrust PR campaigns therefore their use can further negate perceptions. Countries should make authentic efforts to tackle the root causes of problems that lead to negative perceptions rather than attempting to put a gloss on the situation.

13. South Korea is an example of a country that has reinvented itself amongst a new generation of ‘medium powers’, which have found a niche on the international, and particularly multilateral, stage. This has been done through the development of knowledge networks with similar countries, under-pinned by a strategic narrative. As the ability to flex soft power grows the countries are articulating themselves as ‘intellectual powers’, ‘intelligent powers’, or ‘constructive powers’.
14. Stories about a country’s involvement in international development can be powerful in changing perceptions. Mexico might want to consider how it ‘exports’ its successful poverty reduction programme overseas. This conditional cash transfer programme benefits female heads of household if she and her children are having regular medical examinations and vaccinations and if the children are attending school and getting good marks. It has lifted 40 million people out of extreme poverty in Mexico over the last 20 years and, if appropriately adapted for other countries, could be an impactful ‘made in Mexico’ brand of social programme.
15. If states follow this international development approach, they should be careful that their soft power initiatives are not simply an imposition of alien ideas in different environments. The exercise of soft power must be sensitive to the countries where they want to have an impact. Insensitive actions could be perceived as impatient and as interference. This can create resentment and undermine the relationship between states.
16. Mexico could consider supporting positive models of Mexican entrepreneurship in the global market, for example those with educational goals that support an image of engagement and productivity.
17. Politicians may be inclined to respond to challenges in traditional ways. However, soft power initiatives can often have greatest impact when they are innovative and creative.

Getting the message out?

18. It is important to communicate through appropriate channels and the means of messaging are often as important as the message itself. In many cases, the communication is most effective when voiced by those outside government.
19. The internet, and social media in particular, is an important enabler for exercising soft power in a complex, interconnected world. It can be used to connect people, and share information and business opportunities, levelling the playing field for those who are able to engage. However the technology is only a tool and it is the people using the technology who are actually driving change. There is a relationship between the internet and efforts to deepen democracy. Linked to this, soft power can be a tool for empowerment by engaging networked communities, rather than perpetuating the status quo.
20. This presents a challenge for traditional hierarchical structures, such as diplomatic services unused to engaging with diverse networks. However, this engagement provides access to new solutions from civil society and innovators and opens up space for experimentation. Governments need to change the way they perceive networks to shift from a government-centric approach where states drive the agenda to those which exist autonomously and are interconnected in different ways.
21. Social media is a tool to facilitate relationships, not for broadcasting messages. It is used most successfully when there is recognition that users are members with the opportunity to cultivate networks, listen and connect. It is important to invest time in enhancing the network for its own good rather than treating it merely as a vehicle for self-promotional messages. It is incorrect to refer to ‘audiences’: the experience is not

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one of ‘command and control’, rather it is about connecting with stakeholders. Asking the right questions will result in more qualitative responses.

22. The Mexican government has undertaken some innovative work using digital diplomacy to engage stakeholders in open source discussion on policy development. The use of digital is a powerful way to listen to the voices of people that are not generally heard and to connect with formerly unknown networks. As the Mexican example illustrates it also provides an opportunity to decentralise strategic dialogue. However, this should come with a ‘health warning’: unmediated discussion will not necessarily give rise to good policy.
23. There are challenges in operationalising soft power in that the implementation link between communications and resources may break down within government.

Building networks and partnerships

24. Partnership is an important component of soft power. Partners can be highly effective multipliers - particularly important when resources are limited. Many states have a strong track record of convening relationships based on their historical legitimacy and authority. However, it is important to invest time in identifying the right partners and to be aware of potential pitfalls within all parties.
25. Partnerships can be characterised through four models of imperfection:
 - a. The dictator: seeking to control the people they are partnering with and placing themselves as the priority actor;
 - b. The ventriloquist: not looking for a genuine partner but rather a mouthpiece for themselves on a certain issue;
 - c. The heroic narcissist: a James Bond-type figure who believes the narrative is all about them and goes through allies and partners quickly; and
 - d. The bus driver: who tries to bring together partners in good faith, but the partners are not genuinely interested in collaborating.
26. In his book ‘Collaborate or Perish’, former Los Angeles police chief and New York police commissioner Bill Bratton, sets out principles for successful collaboration. These include: a clear vision of what is to be achieved; ensuring that the problem to be addressed is of a manageable size; researching the problem thoroughly; building a structure around which effective collaboration can take place; locating partners; accepting that the partnership will work towards objectives that won’t be identical but that it is more important in the overall scheme of things to achieve a common goal; finding the right frame for the story and remembering the political realities; and accepting the limitations of the partnership.
27. Developed from this, Professor Nick Cull’s nine key steps for partnership are to:
 - a. Agree clear objectives;
 - b. Manage expectations around limited objectives;
 - c. Understand the need to establish and protect trust;
 - d. Accept equality of partners based on membership of the partnership, not on the amount of money contributed;
 - e. Allow people to be specialised;
 - f. Use the partnership to cross boundaries, sectors and generations and appreciate the different skills that the partners bring;
 - g. Celebrate differences, not let them get in the way;
 - h. Share the credit for successes achieved by the partnership;
 - i. Part ways if the partnership gets too old, accepting that it was created for a limited time and objective.

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28. Public diplomacy and the successful exercise of soft power are based on genuine listening. This is important for creating the legitimacy and credibility needed to build trust. Progress in building partnerships can take years of intense networking that should be open and transparent. The process and complexity of developing partnerships should not be underestimated. Governments need to recognise that civil society may find it difficult to understand/accord with the objectives of the state.
29. Partnerships between states and companies are particularly complex as they have different interests and motivations, especially when they are trying to achieve goals on global issues. There needs to be serious consideration of the mutual benefits to be derived from association.
30. Soft power is most effective when based on collaboration that goes beyond national identity. In many cases, it is easier to collaborate when public diplomacy is issue rather than nation driven. Some actors will find it harder to collaborate if they are asked to coalesce around the ‘brand’ of a national flag.

Who are the important soft power actors? Do they need to do things differently?

31. The British Council and BBC World Service are powerful UK soft power actors. Their impact is largely derived from the high quality of their services, their international ‘recognition rate’ and their independence of government. Mexico could benefit from similar institutions focusing on teaching Spanish overseas and broadcasting the reality of life and culture in Mexico.
32. The involvement of indigenous communities and of celebrities in soft power diplomacy can be powerful. They can speak compellingly about culture and social development or increase the attraction and prestige of an issue through their involvement. Diaspora communities also have an important role in promoting the interests of their country and can be powerful ambassadors, a role states could do more to harness and support.
33. In a rapidly changing world where power is more diffused and traditional actors are increasingly responding to shifts in global governance, new non-state actors have emerged to challenge the status quo in the international arena. Diplomacy needs to be done differently, with new diplomats trained to respond to these shifts and become skilled in digital diplomacy. Foreign ministries’ evaluation of risk needs to shift to allow more independence and opportunities for real time interaction on social media.
34. It is difficult for governments to ‘create’ soft power. Some would argue they either have it naturally or they don’t: either way, public/citizen perceptions cannot be changed overnight. States need to recognise that there are some things that they cannot do and acknowledge the difference between statecraft and ‘streetcraft’.
35. The soft power of some individual cities is starting to eclipse the soft power of states, in particular as their reputation as hubs of innovation and entrepreneurship grow.

Agnes Annells

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