

The United Nations In Crisis:

Negative Perceptions Call for Savvy Marketing to Rebuild Its Brand

By Lisa Marchese and Rachel Simmons

The United Nations is in brand crisis. It is no longer perceived as an effective global body whose legitimacy and authority are respected. The damage to its reputation is significant, but if the organization is committed to making some significant changes, it's not too late for it to change course and correct its tainted image.

Like any business whose success relies heavily on constituent perception, the United Nations is facing a significant brand challenge in several key areas, notably brand relevance and consideration. Over the last few decades it has lost one of its most powerful assets: the perception that it is relevant to the challenges confronting the international community. What can the UN do to turn around its troubled and controversial image in an era when public confidence and trust is at an all-time low? It needs to become a savvy marketer and cultivate a brand that is powerful and worthy of international and individual support.

A recent poll conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation found the general perception of the UN is of an organization "incapable of effectively resolving international affairs." One third of respondents believe its influence has declined over the last five years and some think the organization has "outlived its usefulness," saying it doesn't work according to "modern realities."

Current perceptions of the UN seem to stray further away from "doing good" and closer to outdated, bureaucratic, and ineffective. It is ironic that it set out to address exclusion, discrimination, and ignorance and yet these are perceptual qualities that people would attach to the UN today. Like most organizations (both public and private) that face a reputation or brand crisis, the UN has a credibility gap between the responsibilities associated with it by the international community and what the organization does and is actually capable of

doing in practice. One of the challenges it faces in rebuilding its brand is to ensure that gap does not widen.

Negative perceptions are not the only challenges facing the UN. There is also the challenge to remain relevant, or as we would say in marketing, to remain "top of mind." Of the U.S. citizens who really give the organization any considered thought, not many have a sound understanding of what the UN is and what the UN does. In a Public Opinion Strategies poll, voters were overwhelmingly more likely to support the UN's development goals if implemented by the International Red Cross, the World Health Organization (WHO), or UNICEF rather than the UN, which is interesting because UNICEF and the WHO are part of the UN. Such misperception serves to negatively impact the UN's authority and credibility.

Perhaps one way to reach the general public with its key messages is through a savvy marketing campaign designed to educate the public about the UN and its related agencies and inspire people through highlighting the organization's good deeds. It's unlikely, for example, that the general public knows that each year the UN provides approximately one-third of the world's food aid through its World Food Program or that the UN World Bank annually provides \$30 billion in assistance to developing countries. Such important messages are important to restoring the organization's credibility and relevance.

The UN could learn from the way NATO and the European Union (EU) have become relevant brands in managing European security. Both have realized that branding is not merely window dressing, but incorporates the power of image, influence and reputation — essential parts of their strategic equity.

Membership has become a symbol of status and acceptance in the international community.

In central Europe, the NATO logo has become a symbol of respectability and security — the ultimate mark of “Westernness.” Interestingly, NATO has actually managed to build many of its strategic acts into “products” such as the “Partnership for Peace” and the “Membership Action Plan.” The EU has built an entirely different image from NATO that has helped minimize confusion between these two organizations: it is in the midst of building a brand around prosperity and self-confidence. Its distinctive, contemporary logo of a blue flag with a circle of 12 stars embodies sophistication and affluence.

The UN can start rebuilding its brand by developing and focusing on a clear, simple, and distinctive message that connects to the real needs of people today — a key to any successful brand campaign. Too often, organizations with a broad range of capabilities or objectives like the UN tend toward vague, “kitchen-sink” marketing statements that promise everything. The UN should not try to market itself like a Swiss Army Knife, but find a collective emotive focal point that evokes the right public perceptions and behaviors and, most importantly, a message that is relevant today. To find this singular point of clarity, it’s critical that the UN strategically decides all the things that it does not want its brand to stand for:

Along these lines, the UN needs to focus on the big misperceptions that a strong brand can help overcome. For one, the UN is not a world government and was never intended to be. Its brand therefore needs to separate itself from any message that would only serve to perpetuate this image. Another public misconception is that the UN wastes a lot of money and does not squeeze the most out of every dollar. To overcome this, an attribute would need to be built into the brand positioning that would create and connect to the UN perceptions of effectiveness, efficiency, and competence.

Developing a well-positioned brand that contains the right balance between realistic qualities (attributes that

credibly represent the organization today) and aspirational qualities (what it would like the brand to stand for in the future), requires the UN to play to its strength — its record of alleviating suffering throughout the world. This position is attainable as well as trustworthy and believable.

The UN could learn from BP’s recent “Beyond Petroleum” campaign that repositioned the brand around social responsibility and alternative energy — a huge shift for a company renowned for oil production. So how did BP do it? It anchored the campaign around the message ‘It’s a Start’. In doing so, it took a bold and differentiated stance that was credible because it acknowledged the amount of work BP needs to do to really change (and the enormity of the task of improving the environment). The UN is better off taking a similar tack rather than indulging the temptation to create a lofty brand centered on a highly evocative message such as the “humanitarian powerhouse”. Such an approach would likely lack credibility and might, in fact, hurt the organization further. To succeed, the UN needs to position its brand in a way that is both understated and optimistic at the same time.

The UN is at a critical juncture in its bid to regain trust and renew its ability to inspire the international community. A strong brand cannot come close to fixing the practical, financial, and legal problems the UN is facing, but it can inspire the right behaviors that ultimately will bring about more substantive change. It’s a powerful starting place for reducing distrust, demonstrating the effectiveness of collaboration, and building consensus around a positive agenda for the future. There is no reason why an organization with the charter “to be the centre for harmonizing the actions of nations,” should not have greater brand equity. With popular support for the UN at an all-time low, the organization has everything to gain and little to lose in undertaking a rebranding initiative.

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