

If one Googles Sri Lanka...



IN the last week there was a build-up globally to the 21 December Mayan Calendar dilemma.

My boss, who is of French origin, mentioned that a particular village in south of France is believed to be the only village that will not get affected and hence many people have already begun to flock into this tiny geographical area. Some say that the Mayan triangle includes Matale and hence the recent weather-related impact. There are interesting ideologies going around the world.

My View



The Next Big Idea

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Given the above stories doing the rounds, I Googled this subject to get a better view and when I Googled Sri Lanka, the news stories that emerged were not very positive. If I am to give a number, almost 53% of the news items on the time-belt were negative to Sri Lanka and as a marketer, it was very demotivating.

Marketing theory

The great Phillip Kotler says that brands move in a consumer's mind first from the awareness set to becoming a top of the mind brand and, provided that the pricing and availability is right, trial will take place. If consumer satisfaction is right with the product in relation to purchase, loyalty to the brand takes form.

This apparently is the foundation to brand building, which results in sales revenue picking up and subsequent profitability of the brand. If one goes further, if the bottom line is healthy, then share prices will be stronger and thus the value of the company will increase. On the other hand, the expert consultant on building strong nation brands says that the awareness set must be on six pillars - Tourism, Exports, Governance, Investment, Culture and People.

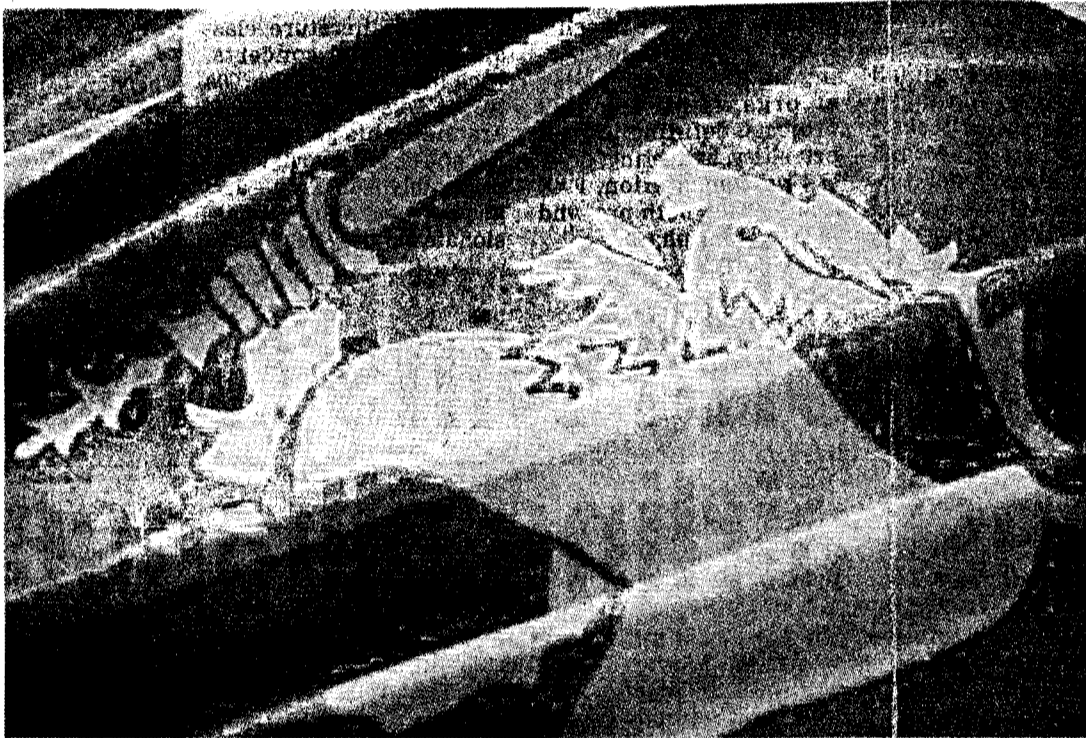
Googling Sri Lanka

On the above theory, if we are to look at the first ladder in brand building of awareness among consumers, the pick-ups that are doing the rounds are as follows:

1. The CJ issue

The fact of the matter is that perceptions drive behaviour rather than reality. Current media on this issue has created a perception which is negative to Sri Lanka and the only way to correct this from a marketing point of view is by addressing the central issue - the governance record.

As Simon Anholt, the expert policy advisor globally for many governments on nation branding says, getting a PR company when a brand is in trouble is like trying to lose weight by apply-



ing creams or vibrating belts to the fat bits. The fat is not on the surface but under the skin and it can be reduced only if it is gradually done by focusing on exercise over a period of time. Then controlling one's weight is a sustainable initiative.

Slogans and logos don't build brands in Simon's view, with which I agree, as brands need to earn the reputation. Hence, Sri Lanka must bite the bullet and understand the perceptions that people have about Sri Lanka on the above issue and address the core issue rather than working on fat, as Simon advocates.

2. Ceylon Tea

One of the groundbreaking private-public initiatives in Sri Lanka was the private sector driven Ceylon Tea campaign that was agreed on and the campaign to be managed by the Sri Lanka Tea Board. As we speak there is almost US\$ 20 million collected, but the campaign has not yet broken out as the decision making is painfully slow.

Tea Board officials and the private sector must be commended on the work done and finalising of the technicalities, but getting the final button pressed has not happened, which has strained the concept of the working model of the private-public sector and the industry is quite dejected on this front.

3. 20-20 Cricket

Whilst Sri Lanka Cricket must be congratulated for staging the above event, the fact of the matter that has been raised by many quadrants was, did Sri Lanka actually benefit? Did Sri Lanka get showcased post the 30-year conflict?

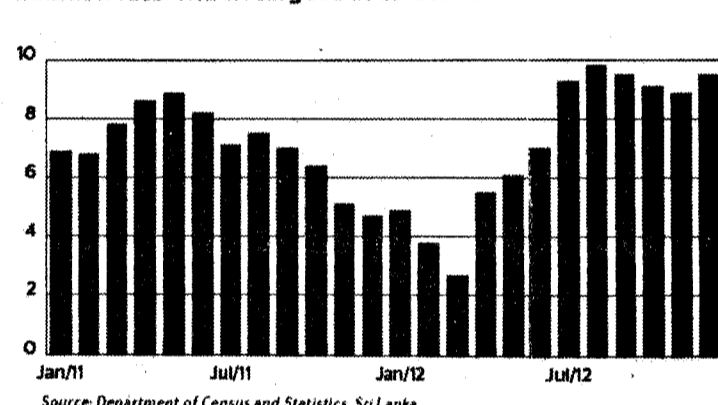
As Simon Anholt says, we need to earn respect with strong word of mouth. The event would have been an ideal opportunity to do this task, but it did not get traction. I guess the time has come for Sri Lanka to be selfish and unless the brand Sri Lanka benefits, we must not allow Sri Lanka to be used as a place for staging such events.

4. Night Races

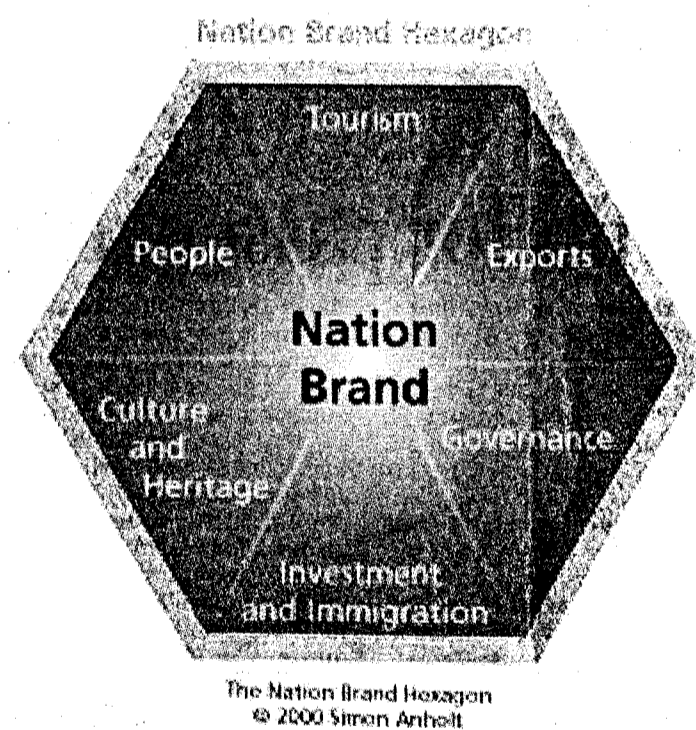
I personally enjoyed the Night Races 2012 edition. But the negative media that has surrounded the event has clouded the staging of the event, which hurt the brand rather than doing it any good.

Some question the economic viability based on the cost whilst others talk of the audience penetration and how logical it was given that Sri Lanka is essentially

Inflation rate: within target but on the rise



Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka



The Nation Brand Hexagon © 2000 Simon Anholt
Sri Lanka must be associated with positive stories if we are to make brand Sri Lanka global

a rural economy. I am personally positive about innovative products that must be launched in Sri Lanka, but we need to manage the perceptions internally and externally if we are to take brand Sri Lanka global.

5. Sri Lanka exports

Whilst we command less than a one per cent share of global exports to the world, we experienced a 6-8% drop in 2012, which is continuously on the decline at a larger trajectory in the recent past. This has to be corrected with a private-public partnership mainly on the innovation and research perspective plus a strong category promotion on a strong proposition.

The ethical sourcing destination is an established value built by the apparel and tea industry that can be now extrapolated to ethical polishing and mining when it comes to gems and Ceylon sapphires in particular and may be the whole area of handloom

based on the work promoted by Sri Lanka Design Festival.

6. Tourism

It's strange but last year almost 37% of the tourists who visited Sri Lanka were above 60 years of age and the rank on most attractive experience was sun and beach, whilst the next ranked was friendly and nice people.

The latter is exactly what Simon Anholt calls 'Culture' in the nation branding hexagon. I strongly feel the time is right for a global tourism drive so that we can change the visitor profile to a younger audience that can bring in a higher value in revenue.

(The author is a multiple award winning marketer and business leader. The thoughts expressed are his personal observations and not the views of any organisation he serves. He is a recipient of the 2012 Global Business Leadership Award by the Association of Businesses and Global Education Congress - Singapore.)