

Country of Origin as a Branding Statement

Imagine that I told you of a product that I knew nearly nothing about. I didn't know what its price was, what any of its unique features were, or even what type of product it was. But I did know the product's country of origin...

Let's say the product is from Switzerland. Now what would your impression of this product be? Even though this is a hypothetical scenario, I bet that you'd be able to tell me something about the mystery product's price, its quality, and the reputation it most likely enjoys. Such assumptions would be inspired by the preconceptions you, as a consumer, hold about the country in question.

Country branding means much more than adding a "Made In" label to a product. A product's country of origin constitutes an important piece of branding that, in many cases, can be so influential it overtakes the brand's other reputation builders. If I were to tell you that the next supercar was to come from Germany, you probably wouldn't be surprised. You would probably be immediately curious about it, expecting the fictional vehicle to be of superb engineering and design quality, expensive, and solid. Now imagine I surprised you by revealing that the forthcoming supercar was actually a product of Greece. Your impression of the car would be totally different,

your assumptions inspired by the apparent personality the country of origin communicates to your perceptions.

Have you ever wondered why some perfume bottles are accompanied by packaging that bears something along the lines of "Paris 7 Milan 7 New York 7 Rome 7 London"? I'm sure you don't really think the perfume is produced in all of those places. Now imagine if instead the packaging read as follows: "Prague - Helsinki - Melbourne - Seattle - Auckland." I guarantee your first impression of the perfume would be affected by the suppositions you made about the national affiliations. This is quite ironic considering none of us believe for a minute that any of the cited locales have anything to do with the product's manufacture. I can't stop thinking about how valuable some countries are for their manufacturers. A high-tech brand coming from Japan seems logical for most of us. I'm convinced that promoting a high-tech brand in, say, the U.S.A., would be substantially easier if the product hailed from Japan than it would be if the product hailed from Iceland. Why? Because the product's country of origin -- in this case, Japan -- has a reputation for producing superior high-tech products. Thus, the country establishes the brand's initial reputation.

Conversely, brands themselves can create countries' reputations. Consider Finland. If I asked you to respond to the notion of Finland 10 years ago, you'd probably have said things like "cold," "midnight sun," and so on. Today, you're likely to think of high-tech mobile-phone technology when you think of Finland. And this huge mind shift is purely thanks to Nokia (which, by the way, was a chainsaw manufacturer just 20 years ago).

So you can claim that brands create countries' reputations and that countries create brands' reputations. This is a very interesting theory to keep in mind the next time you have an opportunity to create a new brand from scratch. The theory should not only make you consider what values your brand should stand for, but also where it should be manufactured and where it should be perceived as being manufactured.

Having the wrong country label on your package won't destroy your brand, but I'm convinced that having the right "Made in" label will save you a substantial amount of marketing money.

Rome wasn't built in a day. I'm sure we'll get



there. The question is how long you can afford to wait? The rewards can be enormous.

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