

Long-term reputation management

By ANITHA SONI

CHAIRMAN, INTERNATIONAL MARKETING COUNCIL, CUSTODIAN OF BRAND SOUTH AFRICA



ANITHA SONI has had wide experience in the Tourism sector after graduating in Hotel Management in 1978. She has served as a Special Advisor to the Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism and also served on a number of Tourism Boards including SA Tourism. She was awarded Business Woman of the Year and founded the ASA Tourism Services Group in 1989.

In the world of country branding, Marshall McLuhan's theory that "the contraction of the world around us is amplified by the speed and availability of information" could not hold more true. Add to this, the increased relevance of promoting a country's competitiveness as the foundation for a long-term reputation and you have a mix which requires a fresh look at how countries promote themselves as both a tourist as well as a trade and investment destination.

As a country, South Africa is in a fortunate position. The advent of the FIFA 2010 World Cup focuses tremendous global attention on the country and provides a platform from which to position long-term trade and investment relationships which benefit all South Africans directly.

That said, developing a sustainable position for a country brand has very little to do with a single event; and a substantial amount more to do with how various strategic opportunities are leveraged as a collective which drives the ongoing effort to gain traction in the conversations being had on and about that country brand. While traditional nation branding initiatives focus on the four traditional pillars of country marketing; geography, history, social issues and the economy; real traction is created when the proof points behind these pillars form the basis of a single-minded positioning, which informs every intervention.

In the case of South Africa, this could not be more real. As the world's attention focuses on the country as a result of the FIFA 2010 World Cup, it is natural to assume a fallback position which places the football tournament at the centre of South Africa's country branding/marketing initiatives. The reality is that the 2010 FIFA World Cup is but one of a string of strategic positioning opportunities for South Africa this year. Granted it is a significant opportunity, and one which should be leveraged to the fullest extent possible.

The recent World Economic Forum provided an excellent example of a strategic platform to promote South Africa as an emerging market which matters. This remains a critically important catalyst in positioning our country, an effort undertaken with a clear understanding of how each strategic engagement or opportunity relates to the other and how opportunities are being collectively leveraged.

The World Economic Forum was a major (and very successful) milestone in managing the South African

country brand. The alignment of messaging and tactical interventions by both government and business formed a significant foundation from which to build on the three established platforms. These platforms included:

- South Africa as a regionally relevant country and connector to the rest of Africa (often seen as the world's last unexplored economic frontier with approximately 1-billion largely untapped workers and consumers). This position makes sense. South Africa is a strong, stable and growing economy with massive domestic resources and the ability to exploit them. In the longer term, we and our neighbours in the Southern African region and the continent as a whole have a common destiny. We play a key role in the fast changing global governance landscape, often providing a link between Africa and developing countries and global structures. We are committed to regional market integration that is developmental. Huge investments in infrastructure, not only for the FIFA World Cup, are an integral part of the springboard for economic growth for both South Africa and for the whole Southern African region.

- South Africa as a globally relevant country and critically as an emerging market which matters. Indeed, at Copenhagen 2009 (the recent UN Global Climate Conference), South Africa's key role as a bridge between China and the United States provided the catalyst for a compromise on climate change by a new G5 group of nations (known as BASIC) which represents both the industrialised world via the US and the leading developing markets - China, India, Brazil and South Africa. The emergence of the BASIC group - or G5 - puts South Africa at the cutting-edge of a new global paradigm which could help reach consensus on key issues such as trade, poverty reduction, the global financial system and the growing tensions around limited resources in a finite world and ease in fundamental changes in the global order with the minimum of disruption.

- South Africa as a truly competitive nation. In driving our competitiveness we are aware that efforts to improve the understanding of our competitiveness are important.

The World Economic Forum was without a doubt successful. Research indicates that South Africa appeared dominantly amongst the top ten countries at the WEF for the first time in seven years. This is a significant achievement and one which will be leveraged again as we continuing these conversations during the 2010 State Visit to the United Kingdom. **F**