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# NATION BRANDING- A CASE STUDY OF THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

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## **Abstract:**

Increasingly, countries with emerging economies are focusing on building their national identities. In an increasingly interconnected globe, many countries—including several in the Middle East—are looking for ways to strengthen and diversify their economies. The article defines the concepts of national branding, place marketing, and destination marketing, and specifies the aspects of national branding while highlighting Oman's efforts to develop brand Oman. The Middle Eastern country of Oman, which is home to vast oil reserves, has launched a massive tourist promotion campaign. The Ministry of Tourism has planned a number of domestic and international initiatives to combat the country's regional rivals. Even though there is a lot of land to cover, the results have not yet been documented but the view for the future is optimistic.

**Key words:** Initiatives, Branding, and Tourism in Oman

## **Introduction**

Several countries throughout the world are engaging in what is called "Place marketing," in which they compete with one another as if they were selling a product. Due to its enormous tourism potential, Oman has launched a bold marketing initiative to distinguish itself in the current marketplace. Due to definitional issues, the terms "place marketing," "destination marketing," and "country branding" are all up for controversy. In this work, the words are used interchangeably, with some definitions provided in the introduction. Since the early 1990s, place marketing has skyrocketed in popularity across nations and throughout the globe (Codato and Franco 2006). The marketing mix method, in particular, provides the theoretical underpinnings upon which the practice of location marketing is built (Olsson and Bergland, 2006). Place marketing, also known as place promotion or city management, has been around since colonial times when governments tried to entice people to relocate to newly conquered territories (Gold, 1994). However, the term did not gain widespread traction in European urban literature until the 1980s, and only slightly earlier in the United States (Paddison, 1993). Various definitions of place marketing exist. According to Gold and Ward (1994), it is "the deliberate use of publicity and marketing to convey to a target audience certain pictures of particular geographical locales or regions" (p.2). Specifically, the term highlights the use of the target audience's agency in deciding whether or not to embrace the marketing strategy, including considerations of consumer choice and desirability. "Short et al" (2000) To improve their ability to compete for scarce resources, communities may engage in "place promotion," which entails "revaluing and representing place" to establish and sell a new image for places (p.318).

This definition explains how promoting a fresh representation of a location may help maintain and tap into existing strengths.

A similar focus on resources is seen in the work of Ashworth and Voogd (1990), who propose that "place marketing" is the process by which urban activities are adapted to the requirements of a certain demographic in order to improve the area's social and economic well-being. Researchers in Europe (Van den Berg et al., as cited in Paddison, 1993) define urban harmony as "the promotion of various aspects of comfort and economic development in the marketed areas that satisfy the requirements of residents, investors, and visitors." They also stress the need of sprucing up the location's aesthetics as the cornerstone of a successful advertising drive. Place marketing, in any case, may be understood as either a reinvigoration of urban or national identity or the development of new identities (Dunn et al, 1995) Nielsen (2000) discusses the challenge of place marketing in times of image crisis and other trying circumstances. The process of advertising a place is challenging under the best of conditions, and it becomes exponentially more so in the face of obstacles to tourism, such as unfavorable publicity or infrastructure damage caused by natural or man-made catastrophes (pp207-208)

"Place branding" refers to the coordinated management of a location's economic, commercial, social, cultural, and government aspects in order to cultivate a positive public perception, as defined by Simon Anholt (interview, January 2007). "Competitive Identity" (or "CI") is "the word [Anholt] adopted to define the synthesis of brand management with public diplomacy and with commerce, investment, tourism, and export promotion." (Anholt, 2007) Similarly, national branding is described as (1) creating a favorable image of a country based on its national values and perceptions, and (2) emphasizing this image while marketing exports, tourism, and inward investment (Source: International Trade Centre).

The people, the government (and its institutions), and the commercial sector of a nation are all components of the product in the context of country branding. If you want to successfully brand a country, you need to include and coordinate the activities of these three key groups so that your country is positioned and differentiated in the way you want it to be. Now comes the difficult part. Due to the high importance placed on both tourism marketing and cultural and historical preservation, this article focuses only on these two topics.

Constituents of National Identity Experts in the field of country branding identify tourism, cultural and heritage exports, exports of goods and services, governance, investment, and immigration as factors that may strengthen a nation's reputation. Visitors' impressions of a place may have a significant influence on the economy, politics, and culture of that country. Images from tourism, for instance, may influence the decision of potential foreign investors. Tourism should be seen as more than just a revenue stream for a country as it is essentially the country's intellectual property.

The intellectual capital of a country's past, history, culture, and geography is widely recognized, but it is not always properly converted into "added value" for tradable products. Cities that focus only on economic development risk being known exclusively to potential investors, tax evaders, and currency traders; they will lose any other potential visitors who may be interested in the city. Culture, history, and sports provide depth, making a city more appealing to tourists and increasing its reputation at home and abroad. Many nations have launched public relations operations, first geared toward boosting tourism but now shifting their attention to boosting exports and luring investors. Unfortunately, most of these initiatives have fallen short of their goals. This is because, although relying heavily on media and branding, most campaigns have done little to create a bottom-up, long-term, comprehensive plan that has won the support of all relevant actors in the nation. Promoting a country as a tranquil getaway for tourists may not be in the best interest of those working to attract foreign investment to the country's emerging sectors of industry, information technology, or the energy sector. Even if a nation is trying to attract tourists by highlighting its beautiful beaches and resorts, its culture and morality may not mesh well with the ideals advertised. Wally Olins, one of the most well-known authorities on branding, claims that although some countries build a national brand in a planned, formalized fashion, for others, the process is more organic.

The way India is portrayed, for instance, cannot be manipulated. Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic shift in how people see India. Ten or fifteen years ago, people looked at it differently than they do now. Once seen of as a land full of snakes, slums, and abject poverty, modern perceptions of the country praise its human intellectual capital and abundance of highly skilled software developers. Indian textiles and fabrics have become very trendy in a number of international markets. Nothing is under control. All of it just happens on the spot.

However, India has just released a dramatic and compelling tourism campaign that captures the essence, energy, and beauty of Incredible India in a single, unforgettable package. As an additional example, the national marketing effort of Spain, easily recognizable by its eye-catching emblem (based on Joan Miro's "Sun"), is commendable. case study illustrates how a strategic branding initiative may radically alter a country's status in a short amount of time

#### The Oman Brand

The first inquiry into Oman should be whether or not Oman is a recognizable brand. Do you think branding is important in Oman? I'm curious as to how the name "Oman" is now being received. The answer, however convoluted, is both yes and no.

Most people think of Oman as just another oil-rich country; frankincense is mentioned sometimes, but that's about it. Many international visitors to Salalah may not know that the city offers scuba diving, wadis, a rich cultural history, or even a Kharif season. The Oman brand is unobtrusive. When compared to Dubai and Qatar, who have put more money into their brand development effort, Oman has a tough time competing in terms of promoting tourism and recruiting international investment.

Oman needs to "beep on the map" of prospective investors and visitors, but there is plenty to do before that happens. While the Sultanate has made some positive strides in this direction in recent years, the first essential component of a strong brand—a unified message or visually cohesive aesthetic—has not yet taken shape.

The 2020 Vision for Oman Establishing Oman as a regional travel and tourism hub is central to the "Vision for Oman's National Economy: Oman 2020," an economic diversification and growth strategy. Other goals of the plan include increasing "Omanisation" (the replacement of expatriate workers in the travel and tourism industry) and increasing the private sector's participation in the development of tourism activities. The government's goal is to make tourism one of the country's primary sources of revenue, therefore the Ministry of Tourism is working to draw 12 million tourists by 2020. By that time, according to Euromonitor International, the tourism sector would have become one of the world's most important economic drivers.

#### Efforts in favor of the tourist industry:

With this goal in mind, various people flying the flag of Oman in different parts of the world are working hard to spread the word about the Sultanate. The Sultanate's overseas embassies, the Ministry of Tourism (whose job it is to promote Oman tourism worldwide), and Oman Air (which has marketed Oman more than any other institution, with an emphasis on luxury, prestige, and modernity combined with tradition) have all done an excellent job of promoting Oman.

The Sultanate takes the lead in the area when it comes to fostering the growth of the tourist industry. Private and international firms are being encouraged by the government to join the market, and the government itself is a co-financier of a wide variety of tourist endeavors. According to Sambidge, Andy (2011), a new committee has been established by the Ministry of Tourist in Oman to create a strategy for expanding the tourism sector in the nation. To promote tourism in the sultanate, the Ministry will cooperate with the panel, which comprises members from airlines, hotels, tour operators, and tourist investment businesses. According to Salem Al Mamari (2010), Oman's tourism industry may benefit by catering to certain types of visitors by catering to cultural events, short-breaks, meetings, family and friends, independent travelers, independent travelers interested in heritage, nature, adventure, cruises,

and tours. The markets of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the United Kingdom (UK), Germany (Germany), France (France), the Netherlands (Netherlands), Belgium (Belgium), Russia (Russia), India (India), China (China), Japan (With its global growth, Oman Air is targeting a broader market. Combining established brands with fresh, specialized lodging establishments is another option.

Timeline of initiatives

Year	Brand	Awareness	Trade & Media	Tactical
2000	Logo adopted	Print and Media	Trade & VIPs Trade Shows	Gulf air packages
2004	Ministry established		MBRs - UK, GMB, FRA, NET, UAE & AUS	Oman Air GCC
2008	Oman brand mark	Oman Sail Geneva Festival	Geneva Festival	Oman Air International
2009				Holiday in Oman  Hello sunshine
2010	New website + social networks Creative agency	Shanghai world expo, photo contest	MBRs – IND, RUS	Now is the time KLM coop
2011		BBC global		

Oman's aims for responsible tourism include encouraging visitors to: Climb the ranks of successful referrals, Engage with locals, educate businesses, and then act as our champions back at base. Industry resources, "Front-line" initiatives for police, customs, and taxis, and a comprehensive school curriculum (ibid)

Telling the story of Oman means showcasing the country's history, traditions, and people; demonstrating respect and self-assurance; being open-minded and forward-thinking; and putting an emphasis on travel and international exchange.

"Beauty has an address," the message implores readers to do something. Better distribution and consumer marketing in current and new markets, as well as synergies with more specialized resort brands, are all areas in which Oman sees potential.

The Sultanate has begun an intensive advertising and marketing campaign, with the appointment of destination marketing agents in strategic markets (the United Kingdom, Germany, and France). As for increased air travel between the United Arab Emirates and Oman, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the two nations in 2006. According to Euromonitor International's study "Travel and Tourism in Oman," the number of flights between Sharjah and Muscat will grow to eleven per week, and the number of flights between Sharjah and Salalah would increase to four per week, as a result of the MoU.

Officials in Oman are making more of an effort to promote the country to its neighbors because the tourism administration sees regional tourists as a promising new market. For instance, the 2005 launch of the Shangri-Barr La's Al Jissah Resort and Spa is projected to draw a large number of well-to-do Gulf residents and visitors. More than 22% more tourists will visit Oman between 2006 and 2010, predicts research firm Euromonitor International, with the largest increases coming from neighboring countries Bahrain and Egypt, both of which will see increases of more than 30%. The travel industry as a whole, including tour operators, hotels, and transportation services, stands to benefit from this uptick.

#### Hotels and other mega-projects:

Oman is experiencing a period of rapid growth and development. The Sultanate has launched many mega projects, including the multi-billion Blue City residential project, the Wave (a giant mixed-use development), and the Muriya tourist project (a joint-venture between the government and Egypt's Orascom). These events, spurred on by the bigger projects, are anticipated to increase the number of business visitors to the nation, while the addition of hotels and resorts is anticipated to draw more leisure visitors, particularly from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain.

#### Improvements to the system

According to Trade Arabia Business News and Information (2011), Oman is eager to increase its tourism industry by introducing an unprecedented number of vacation resorts and other leisure and travel offerings. The Oman National Ferry Company now offers longer service between Muscat and Khasab, and there are new hotels with more than 1,400 rooms. To reach its goal of attracting 12 million tourists per year by 2020, Oman's Ministry of Tourism has already authorized investing over \$8 billion on tourism-related property projects around the nation.

Demand during high seasons is expected to increase with the opening of new resorts and hotels. We also need to increase the number of hotels in the mid- to low-price range since this market is becoming more popular.

customers," said Salem Al Mamari, the Ministry of Tourism's Director General of Promotions.

With their luxurious 5-star offerings, the Sahab Hotel in Jabal Akhdar and the Sifawy Boutique Hotel in Jebel Sifah (both of which debuted in June 2011) are hard to beat. Our goal for making tourism beneficial across Oman centers on the Millennium Hotel in Mussanah and other regional initiatives. Muriya's Jebel Sifah resort is located 45 minutes east of Muscat, and the first of five hotels is the Sifawy Hotel. Ocean Blue International's 75-foot catamaran Azzura provides a water connection to the hotel's doorstep. Location: in the Hajar Mountains, approximately two hours' drive from Muscat, where you'll find both the Sahab Hotel and The View. They are rising in prominence as both weekend getaways from Muscat and top tourist spots in their own right.

In recent years, Muscat has seen more hotel construction than anywhere else in Oman. The City Seasons Hotel Muscat (268 four-star rooms, three restaurants, and three event halls) and the 153-room Golden Tulip Inn in Al Khuwair, close to various Ministry buildings, both opened in the first few months of 2011. In late 2011, a number of hotels in Muscat's cultural and sports sector, including the Swiss- Belhotel, will open to the public at prices between those of luxury resorts and those of hostels.

In addition, Oman's Royal Opera House, a gorgeous marble complex that Al Mamari claims "will become an iconic building for Oman and a world-class center for performing arts," is scheduled for completion by the end of 2011. Eventually, the Royal Opera House will announce the schedule of performances that will occur before the grand inauguration.

In addition, the Sultan Qaboos Causeway between Muscat and Khasab was opened by Oman's National Ferry Company in April 2011. The ferries utilized have a maximum speed of around 80 km/h and are the fastest diesel-powered vessels in the world. More than 200 people and 56 vehicles are served daily by

the new route. As of the end of May, the firm also began transporting passengers between Shinas and Khasab.

Omran is on schedule to oversee the completion of Oman's \$2.6 billion convention and exhibition center by the end of 2013. The complex has a plenary hall that seats 3,000 people, an exhibition hall that spans 25,000 square meters, and four hotels with a total of 1,000 guestrooms. It is hoped that the center would make Oman a magnet for business travelers from all around the Middle East and beyond, both during and after events hosted there. This project exemplifies a well-planned approach to building essential infrastructure in order to maximize the benefits of Oman Air's expanding nonstop service network to the western and eastern hemispheres. The facility would make Oman a prominent destination for big corporate events in the region, he added, as it will become the largest meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) site in Oman.

As part of our efforts to showcase Oman as a comprehensive business, leisure, and lifestyle destination, we have begun construction on a new convention center in Muscat. We expand as a company by expanding our MICE services.

Salem Al Mamari, Oman's Minister of Tourist, has indicated that the country is getting closer to the tourism goals set forth in Oman's economic strategy for 2020.

Modernized emblem for the nation's branding

Following a series of workshops organized by the government-run Oman Brand Management Unit to investigate the Sultanate of Oman's brand, the Sultanate of Oman unveiled a new branding mark for the country in January 2009. (OBMU).

The Oman Business Marketing Unit (OBMU) recognizes that, as a result of globalization and the growth of the "Attraction Economy," it is more vital than ever that Oman improve its worldwide reputation. If we want people to pay attention to us, we have to compete with every nation in the world. Clear and consistent messaging about what consumers value, such as good government, welcoming locals, and sound financial practices, are more likely to attract customers. OBMU CEO Sayyid Faisal Al Said said that the organization would collaborate with a wide range of governmental and commercial sector partners to offer consistent and uniform messaging in these areas.

The Oman Business Marketing Unit (OBMU) has also come to terms with the notion that "Brand efforts must infiltrate every level of Oman and be present at every stage in a customer's journey." The introduction of the new logo is the first step. Prospective buyers' opinions, actions, and purchases are all influenced by their impressions of the nation the product was made in. According to OBMU's Azzan Al Busaidi: "Like any country, Oman's brand is experienced through various encounters, these range from the level of customer service tourists receive in hotels, to how visitors are welcomed at passport control, through to the quality of products bearing the Origin Oman label."

The OBMU's goal is to articulate Oman's underlying shared purpose and share that story inside the country and beyond. The introduction of the brand name is intended to speed up the process already under way.

According to Sayyid Faisal Al Said, "it is not destination branding or marketing activities; it is not an image makeover, nor an advertising campaign, nor a marketing plan; and it is most surely not simply a logo." Instead, these elements make up a significant but not constitutive whole that is the nation's brand. Sayyid Faisal made the point that the nation's brand may be strengthened and brought into the spotlight with the help of the country's new brand mark and a number of interesting projects, but that they won't be successful means of communication until the people themselves get behind them. Fundamentally, "country branding" is a coordinated and all-encompassing campaign by national people of all social strata to adopt and consistently convey this new national identity.

The chief executive officer of OBMU posits that individuals, not organizations, are primarily responsible for the development of Oman's brand. Following the successful advertising launch of "brand Oman," brand ambassadors will be sent both inside Oman and to other countries to spread positive word of mouth about the Sultanate.

#### Boost tourism inside your area

As reported by Trade Arabia Business News and Information (2011), Oman's primary goal during the May 2011 Arabian Travel Market (ATM) in Dubai was to seek short-term leisure and MICE business from the GCC and India.

Against the background of regional events that have sparked demand for travel to the Gulf, Oman's Ministry of Tourism launched work on a worldwide awareness campaign that would begin in late 2011. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is now in talks to facilitate smoother intra-regional travel, with a focus on capitalizing on the huge transit markets that pass via the region's aviation mega hubs. Already, in collaboration with the online travel agency LastMinute.com, it has launched a massive direct-to-consumer marketing in the United Kingdom. Indigo Airlines' intention to begin operating daily flights between Mumbai and Muscat beginning in August 2018 is anticipated to increase demand for vacations to Oman.

The Sultanate of Oman's national airline, Oman Air, has been instrumental in broadening the country's profile and influence. As a result of increased demand for flights between Oman and key cities in Asia and Europe, the airline has expanded its fleet to accommodate both short- and long-haul routes. Oman Air finished its rebranding effort, launched additional routes, and expanded its fleet in 2009.

There has been a rise in the number of visitors to Oman who are only there for a short time. The United Arab Emirates, for example, saw a doubling of its tourist traffic as a result of the increase in short-haul visitors. Low-cost airline tickets have helped encourage shorter vacations. Chalets, guesthouses, private lodging, and self-catering flats all saw double-digit increase in 2009, contributing to Oman's noticeable fall as a luxury destination.

According to a survey by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) cited by Financial Express(2011), Oman's tourism industry is forecast to contribute \$1.93 billion (Dh7.10 billion) or roughly 3% of the country's national GDP in 2011. The World Travel and Tourism Council predicts that by 2020, tourism in Oman would account for 9.2 percent of the country's GDP, up from 7.6 percent in 2010.

Over 50,000 employment will be directly supported by the travel and tourism industry in Oman by 2021, according to the research, and the sector will account for 6% of the country's overall investment.

To sum up:

Branding initiatives at the national level might be designed to advance a broad variety of policy goals, although they often work to boost the economy. When it comes to the positive or negative connotations associated with a country's name, it's rare that the stereotypes held about them are really representative.

proportional to the state of affairs in the nation. The most typical explanation for this phenomenon is the passage of time, especially in the case of developing nations, when the country itself may undergo rapid transformations but the perception of it persists in a stasis that spans decades or even centuries.

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