

# Slovakia has no image



**Peter Littmann**

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#### EDUCATION

- Studied philosophy and business, obtained PhD in business from the University of Cologne in Germany in 1976

#### WORKING EXPERIENCE

- Managing Director of the international consultancy BRANDINSIDER GmbH
- Chief Executive Officer of Hugo Boss AG 1992-1997
- Worked in various positions at Girmes-Werke AG, Rosenthal AG and Vorwerk & Co

#### **From your personal and professional experience, how is Slovakia currently perceived abroad?**

The current position of Slovakia can be perceived as an advantage and as a disadvantage at the same time. As far as its image in the West is concerned, the advantage is that Slovakia doesn't have a bad image. There are countries, which I'm not going to name, which have to overcome not just prejudice but the simple fact that their image is bad. Slovakia is not in that

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situation and that is the good news. The bad news is that very little is known about Slovakia, and to put it simply, Slovakia has no image.

#### **What should change and why?**

My area of expertise is marketing and communication and I know how hard it is to change a negative image. First you need to get to the neutral level and only then can you start building a positive image. Slovakia doesn't face this challenge which is a big advantage. Currently, we are more or less at zero level and we need to build the right positive image.

The right image doesn't mean inventing something which is not true and promoting it. Promoting something which is made up and has no connection to reality creates the opposite effect. Creating a positive image is a long-term task which requires lots of time and effort. We need to promote and communicate something true, that people who live here are able to identify with, and those visiting Slovakia see confirmed in reality. These things are extremely important and one needs to take into consideration that successfully creating a brand takes years but it definitely pays off. Today, every country, just as

every city or company, operates in a competitive environment. Slovakia is competing with other countries and it needs a positive image abroad.

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#### **How does the current development of brand Slovakia rank in comparison with other European countries?**

Slovakia is still perceived as a part of the former Soviet bloc, which lacked freedom. The fact that Slovakia has made a big leap over the past 20 years and no longer carries this burden from the past is, in my opinion, largely overlooked abroad. It is very important that this is noticed and seen. And I'm not talking about experts who follow politics and international affairs. I'm talking about the general public, about the media who rarely mention Slovakia. Slovakia is overlooked. People don't know about Slovakia.

I'm involved in creating brand Slovakia and I am also the honorary consul of Slovakia for northern Germany. One of my duties is to raise awareness about Slovakia and I know that although Germans are generally interested in politics, they know very little. I don't want to mention the cliché that people confuse Slovakia and Slovenia, that's not so important. It is not enough for people to know that Slovakia exists – they need to know what is going on here, that Slovakia is an interesting and diverse country with a huge potential and lots of skilled and ambitious people. Many positive changes took place over the past few years. Although people who live here don't realize it that much and might still feel unhappy, objectively the country has changed for the better. People in Western Europe are not aware of this.

#### **What, in your opinion, should be the key elements of brand Slovakia?**

I am convinced that the branding of a country cannot be created from an office of some agency. It's not something abstract that can be artificially prepared. Branding is closely connected to the identity of the country and with how the people who live there perceive the country and its values, what they find important and what not. Branding of products often involves making things up in order to promote them. The branding of a country cannot be made up just like that because if it doesn't correspond to the identity of the country and is artificial, nobody would believe it and it wouldn't work in the long run.

When we talk about branding, we're talking about what IS – what is the identity of Slovakia?

That's one question. The next one is about Slovakia's future development, its potential – where do Slovaks want to see their country in 5, 10, 50 years? And the third important thing is the fact that the general public needs to be involved in the creation of the brand. It needs to be discussed with the public, with everyone who is interested in participating in this discussion, and we must listen carefully to what people have to say.

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Slovaks are often critical towards their country but even this is a part of our identity and it needs to be taken in to consideration and it has to be a part of the message that will be communicated within the country and abroad. The communication abroad cannot be based on something that doesn't work in the country, that the people don't identify with.

**Can you describe a successful implementation of a branding strategy in some other European country which could serve as an inspiration for Slovakia?**

I would like to mention two European examples. One of them is Austria and the other one Finland.

Not so long ago, perhaps 20 years, Finland was in a rather deep crisis. They didn't know how to get out of it. But they managed to pull out of it by themselves. They thought about their identity, they changed several things and they came up with a new branding strategy. And when you look at how the country has evolved, and how it is perceived around Europe these days, it's something completely different and very positive.

Austria managed to achieve something similar. I remember that some 30 years ago Austria was in a completely different situation. It was one of the European countries that almost everyone overlooked. The situation today is completely different. This is true about Austria's capital Vienna, which has developed very well and is full of tourists. The Austrian tourism industry could serve as a great example for Slovakia, which still has a huge untapped potential. I am convinced that the potential is there. In Austria, they consciously changed things; they changed their image. As a part of its branding, Austria doesn't communicate its past as much as the present and the fact that it is a modern, young, and ambitious country, and that is what people in Europe care about.

**Are there any potential risks associated with branding campaigns of this scope?**

When I'm quiet, when I'm hiding, my only risk is that I won't get noticed. If I start working on branding, start to actively communicate, I have a good chance for my message to get through the way I want and to improve my image. That's a huge opportunity. There's a risk that I am not trustworthy, that I am communicating something the

people won't believe in, and that I will be caught in the act. People are not naïve.

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**Can the branding of a country also be strengthened through its specific cities? How do you evaluate the recent experience with Košice as the European Capital of Culture?**

I have already mentioned Vienna as an example of how branding can create a positive and attractive image of a city.

Košice, on the other hand, serves rather as a negative example. The city of Košice had a huge opportunity. Not many cities manage to obtain the ECC title. Košice managed to do so and I dare say that nobody knows about it. It may be known to

people in Košice or Slovakia in general, but nobody knows about it for example in Germany, France, or Italy. Košice wasted this huge opportunity to show off the city.

Another Austrian city, Graz, was selected as the ECC some years ago (2003) and they've managed to completely change the image of a city which was also almost unknown until then. Today, it is a known city associated with culture and it's a popular tourist destination. Košice didn't manage to achieve the same and it is not likely to get a similar chance anytime soon.

I think this should be a lesson for Slovakia as well because it's a real shame to waste such an opportunity. I'm stressing this because Slovakia has a similar opportunity waiting ahead in the form of the EU Presidency in 2016. For six months plus the period immediately before and after all eyes in Europe will be focused on Slovakia. It is an incredible opportunity and a big risk at the same time and it would be great for Slovakia to take full advantage of it.

