



## An interview with Stanley Moss

from So-Obshenie (The Message), a Russian business magazine  
August 2006

**Nowdays the creative class is deep in a discussion of nations' and countries' branding. Do you believe that such brands – countrys' brands - really exist?**

I do believe that nation brands exist, but not in all cases. Some nations are too new, poor, small or unfocused to have effective brands of their own. Others have such powerful legacies that their brands are built on a bundle of common, pre-existing understandings, depending on the constituency addressed. And there are the issues of stereotyping, which can negatively skew a brand- South Africa or North Korea are good examples. France's "brand" does not rest solely on tourism, food, art, fashion or intellectual tradition; it is a little bit of each. Location brands for nations are -as a rule- the most difficult to build for this very reason. What is the brand understanding of Togo? Is Switzerland about money, chocolate or watches? Specialists in place branding are discovering that it is easier to brand regions or cities than whole nations, since the local level can be defined with more specificity.

**What role does the development of a country's brand play in the promotion of national and transnational corporate brands?**

History has a lot to do with this. If a country's brand is built on historical or stereotypical understandings, then companies and organizations which relate are the greatest or most immediate beneficiaries. A common understanding of a nation's talent, heritage or legacy can bear directly on the more immediate promotion of transnational corporate brands. This also cuts the other direction: a good corporate brand can feed a nation's identity- for example, Infosys has been a tremendous vehicle for adding value to India's brand as a technological leader in the future.

**By what means are the nations'/ countries' brands created?**

According to my colleague at The Medinge Group, Malcolm Allan, who is an authority on place branding, a nation brand can 1) enhance or damage a place reputation and identity; 2) characterize how places operate; 3) attract or repel talent, inward investment and tourism; or 4) promote places in their markets. These seem to be the prime drivers (both negative and positive) in place brand creation.

### How is the brand of United States promoted?

I am not sure the USA brand promotion is at all a homogenous enterprise. There are official representations which emanate from the government through agencies like the Chamber of Commerce and the US Tourist office, but one does not get the sense that these are at all coordinated- tourism doesn't really track with business, education doesn't align with these or government. And larger political signals, such as USA as an island/example of "democracy" are not concepts clearly articulated or understood either inside or outside our borders, since they are so abstract. The biggest drivers, to my opinion, of brand USA are the products and services, which have the highest profile of recognition in the rest of the world. In recent history, perhaps the greatest signals have come from American entertainment, and that has both offered the world higher consumer aspirations while at the same highlighting the superficiality and spiritual bankruptcy of mindless consumption.

### What ideas are being broadcast by USA to the world today?

The list of ideas is so vast and mixed that there is no main idea being sold. That is part of the problem. Is USA about freedom, democracy, convenience, technological innovation, rap music, or the cult of celebrity? Your question is so broad that it would be an entire interview in itself. This begs the question, should USA –or any nation- be about one single idea only? I think when such a narrow matrix is imposed, no answer will ever be sufficient. Your questions direct the answer into the realm of black-and-white conclusions. My opinion is that we live in a gray universe, with many shades of gray. But that is another, deeper philosophical conversation.

### What ideas does USA sell to the world?

Largely the ideas sold can be mapped from the products and services which distinguish USA as a thought leader and which travel outside our borders: innovative media, advanced product delivery and supply chain solutions, commitment to research especially in educational institutions, openness to new and different ideas, the willingness to fail in order to eventually succeed, and a "can-do" attitude. We are at heart an open, confident people, willing to engage the frontier. Cultures that value humility and subjugation of the self have a harder time understanding the unique American mindset. But I also think we are somewhat conflicted about reconciling economic mobility. We were founded on the idea of upward mobility as the right of every citizen, while at the same time stating that all people are created equal.

### Does contemporary art have the resources to aid the creation and promotion of the brands? In what ways?

This is an interesting question, and I think that as the commercial environment seeks more authentic communications there will be a diminution of traditional advertising techniques, the hard sell, the blatant science of promotion, the loudest message being regarded as the best. Instead, companies are now leaning on artists as advocates of their brand values, since art is often a reflection of deeper humanistic issues than simply trying to represent cold and impersonal products. We know now that product does not equal brand, just the contrary. A brand is not an oven or a copy machine, or a candy bar. A brand is a promise of value.

### Can you give an example? An automobile brand for instance? Or some other brands, perhaps?

I can cite a number of brands who now use art to define their humanistic values. Perhaps the most sustaining is Beck's Beer, which has for years conducted a successful art sponsorship program which brings new art to the forefront- and doesn't use images of happy customers drinking. Another company is Philip Morris, which has distanced itself from tobacco, and instead shows its art collection and sponsorships in its print advertising. In the apparel category, Globe Shoes doesn't really sell trainers as much as it sells outsider art. In the same category, Converse mounts 1-minute home-made films on its web site, contributed by its customer advocates. So, consumer brands are finding ways to let the artists define deeper values without

such crass reference to product, as they make much more direct humanistic connections. Youth brands dominate this trend.

**In your opinion: in a case of a high purchasing capacity and a wide selection of products available, what influences the consumer more: the prestige of the trade mark, or something else, like in a case of autos: their efficiency, low fuel consumption, design, pricing?**

We buy different products for different reasons. You can't, in this sense, equate automobiles with orange juice. One has a long-term need to be met, another a short-term, instant gratification need to be met. So criteria differs from product-to-product. You need to define your market and strategy parameters and that will often direct you to the brand solution. I don't buy a disposable monthly comic book for the same reason as I buy a DVD player I may keep for 5 years. Having said that, traditional metrics need to be reconsidered: market surveys, focus groups, telephone surveys are merely vehicles for manipulating statistics to support or prove a point often already decided. So that to ask "what influences a decision more" is a loaded question. There's only one medium, the internet, which can be quantified with automated tools, and even now we are learning to lie with those.

**There is an opinion, that brands are in fact instruments of propagation of ideas, that "brands are a media for ideas". Do you agree with this formula?**

Absolutely. If a brand doesn't communicate an idea, then what is its function? But let's not call it a formula. It is simply a postulate.

**In your opinion, does the successful expansion of an idea aid the sales of affiliated products?**

I am not sure what you are asking here. You may be addressing the idea of brand architecture, yes? If you are talking about brand extensions, meaning products created under the same name as core offerings, as long as the affiliated product delivers some category-specific merits then chances are better it will sell. Brands are now expanding their categories in amazing and innovative ways. My favorite example of the moment is Bulgari, the Italian jewelry house. They added branded fragrance to their product line, then lent their brand name to a luxury hotel, and even commissioned a novel to be written with a string of their pearls a main character. Their bottom line has, at least in the short term, grown. But let's see how they do after five years.

**It seems that in a current world manufacturers and salesmen can't do without the help of the creative class. However in case of emerging markets and developing economies (in Russia for instance) employers still avoid using the help of the creative class, trying to solve the tasks of planning, projecting and promotion of their new products and services on their own. In this respect Russian business is falling behind the world's lead. In your opinion, what can Russian creative class undertake to raise the demand for its services?**

I am not sure Russian business is falling behind. What is your criteria? How do you prove this statement? If I proceed from the assumption you are correct (and I do not agree), the best thing the creative class can do is look across borders and promote the thinking it believes that non-Russians are deploying to maintain their advantage. Innovation is the only real tool you have to build successful brands, in that sense. Without innovation, brands stagnate. So perhaps that is the best concept the Russian creative class needs to understand and articulate to its clients: innovate or die.

Stanley Moss is CEO of The Medinge Group, a Stockholm-based international think tank on branding. He is also founder of Diganzi [www.diganzi.com](http://www.diganzi.com)