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WHY GUATEMALA'S NEW TOURISM SLOGAN DOESN'T WORK

And Why the Country Should Think Bigger and Change Its Name

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Recently, the country of Guatemala hired a global branding consultancy to develop a new tourist strategy.



Photo: AP

Guatemala, which was once a capital of Mayan civilization, is littered with ruins such as this pyramid at Tikal.

Focus groups

According to the consultants, "Extensive focus groups were carried out to understand the perspective of a broad range of Guatemalans, including the business, artistic, literary, hospitality and indigenous communities."

"Working from the values of Mysticism, Intimacy, Diversity, Evolution, and Authenticity," states the consultancy, "we defined a distinctive and credible brand essence."

Guatemala's new brand essence: "Soul of the Earth."

Is Soul of the Earth a good idea? Are there any objective criteria to determine if a new position is going to be effective?

If you're sitting in a boardroom listening to an agency present the concept for your new advertising campaign, how do you respond? Do you go with your gut? Or do you have another way to figure out whether the proposed idea is going to work?

Reverse strategy test

One test we use all the time is this one: just reverse the strategy and ask if the reversed strategy applies to the competition.

Take "Think small," the Volkswagen program selected by *Advertising Age* as the best advertising campaign of the 20th century.

Reverse the strategy and you have "Think big." Did other automotive brands think big? They sure did. Not only that, their advertisements at the time boasted about how big and long and low their automobiles were.

Prospects don't think in a vacuum. They accept or reject a new idea not just on its merits, but also on whether the new idea fits in the mind with all the other ideas they have accumulated over the years about the category.

A new cola brand, for example, has to fit in with everything the cola drinker thinks about Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and the other brands in the category. If there's no match, there's no acceptance of the new idea.

Avis example

Take the Avis program, selected by *Advertising Age* as the 10th best advertising campaign of the 20th century. "Avis is No. 2 in rent-a-cars, so why go with us? We try harder."

Reverse the strategy and you have "Hertz is No. 1 in rent-a-cars, so they don't have to try as hard." Sounds reasonable to car-rental prospects, so they buy into the Avis position.



Photo: AP

A hieroglyphic expert and archeology student Ana Torres clean a newly excavated altar stone from a Guatemalan Mayan site. The country continues to discover new ruins that



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Most advertising strategies fail miserably on the reversal test and the reason is clear. They sell the category rather than the brand. Take American Airlines, "We know why you fly," and reverse it. Other airlines don't know why you fly?

shed further light on Mayan culture, which was North America's most advanced prior to the arrival of Europeans.

Come on, American. Every airline knows why you fly, but what they need to figure out is why you should fly American. Or Delta. Or United.

Very few advertising strategies pass the reversal test and I think I know why. Having participated in many agency brainstorming sessions, I find that most creative people zero in on the essence of the category rather than the essence of the brand. The strategy then becomes "pre-empt the category with advertising messages that capture consumers' minds through their sheer creativity."

The Nike exception

Sometimes this strategy will work, especially if the competition is weak and the client has enough money to spend. Nike's "Just do it" is a good example. Through brilliant advertising and massive amounts of money, the idea has become associated with the Nike brand.

Most clients don't have the money or the patience to make a category campaign successful. Having visited Guatemala, one of the poorest countries in Central America, many times, I can assure you that the country doesn't have the resources to take a category idea and make it successful.

Soul of the Earth? Reverse the idea and what do you get? Soul of the Sky? Most reversals of category ideas don't make any sense and it's certainly so for Guatemala's new brand essence.

What should Guatemala's new strategy be? Actually, Guatemala is a country rich in heritage. It was the cultural center of the Mayas, the most advanced civilization in all of North and South America before the arrival of the Spanish. Even today, 43 percent of Guatemala's population of 14 million people are of Maya descent. Many still speak dialects of the Maya language.

Spectacular ruins

With mountain ranges as high as 10,000 feet and a culture seemingly unchanged for 500 years, Guatemala is a tourist paradise. Scattered throughout Guatemala are hundreds of spectacular Maya ruins. Cities, temples, houses, playing fields. The relics of a glorious past. More spectacular than the Pyramids of Egypt or the Taj Mahal of India, and built for the living rather than the dead.

Guatemala: "Center of Maya civilization."

Reverse the strategy and what do you have? "Other countries might have some Maya ruins, but they weren't the center of Maya civilization." The reversal sounds reasonable.

There's one problem, however. Even though Guatemala was the center of Maya civilization, there are Maya ruins scattered over Belize, El Salvador, western Honduras and southern Mexico. (Even worse, in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula a marketing group has formed to promote the "Riviera Maya.")

Besides the Maya confusion, there's also the country confusion. In addition to Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador and Honduras, there are three other countries in Central America: Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama. It's going to be hard for the average consumer to associate "Maya" with just one of these seven countries.

Change the country's name

How do you solve the country confusion problem? You change the name of the country from Guatemala to Guatemaya.

Guatemaya would solve both problems. Guatemaya pre-empts the Maya position and it serves as a memory device to link the Mayas to the county which contains the most spectacular Maya artifacts. (It also solves a third problem. "Mala" is Spanish slang for "bad woman.")

Soul of the Earth or Center of Maya Civilization? The two approaches to developing an advertising strategy.

You pays your money and you takes your choice.

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