

Rebuilding Trust, Mending the Rift

“While the U.S. business sector is highly vulnerable to the effects of anti-Americanism, it has the resources to reenergize U.S. public diplomacy.”

THREE YEARS INTO THE post-September 11, 2001 world, it is strikingly clear that the reputation of the United States has suffered greatly across the globe. Moreover, anti-American sentiment is at an alarming high, especially in the Islamic world. The root causes of the rising anti-Americanism, which are obvious to many, include U.S. foreign policy, the effects of globalization, the pervasiveness of U.S. popular culture, and the collective personality of U.S. citizens. The effects, though, are not as widely noted or acknowledged within U.S. borders, which is disheartening since neither isolationism nor passivity is practical or prudent in the current climate. The United States has an immeasurable amount at stake—the economy, security, education—in what is, after all, a global war of ideas.

The 9/11 Commission aptly noted in fall 2004 the need for action, recommending in its report that “the U.S. government must define what the message is and what it stands for,” on the basis that “[i]f the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us.” And while efforts—including people-to-people exchanges and educational programs—are underway to help repair the situation, it’s an unfair match since such measures can only address some of the causes of anti-American sentiment. A holistic solution, it appears, is beyond the ability of the U.S. government or educational institutions alone, as the crisis of rising anti-American sentiment affects more than just government and education—it’s affecting anything under the U.S. or “American” brand, which, from the economic standpoint, puts U.S. businesses at significant risk. It is for this reason that U.S. businesses must also become active in repairing the reputation of the United States.

Attitude Precedes Behavior

The U.S. business sector is highly vulnerable to the effects of rising anti-Americanism. Research confirms the global erosion of trust and preference for a wide range of U.S. brands. One in four consumers in the Asia-Pacific region says they avoid using U.S. brands.



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“Power Brand” scores for most U.S. brands, measured by market research firm Roper, were down in 2003 for the first time. The latest research from U.S.-European research entity NOP World shows significant drops in “trust” and “honesty” for four leading U.S. brands during the past year. A number of restaurants in Germany will no longer serve Coca-Cola or sell Marlboros or accept American Express credit cards. Thirty-six thousand people responded to a “Boycott Brand America” Web site in Vancouver, British Columbia. While many U.S. businesses have not yet experienced a direct hit on their bottom lines, attitude always precedes behavior, which means a negative impact is only a matter of time. In addition, as the *Financial Times* reported in an October 25, 2004 article, the effects are already showing up in sales loss for some of the most iconic U.S. brands: “Many of the best-known U.S. brands are suffering a sales slump in ‘old Europe,’ raising questions about whether anti-Americanism is adding to local difficulties caused by slow economic growth. Coca-Cola, McDonald’s, Marlboro, and General Motors have revealed problems in Germany or France that echo those already faced by Disney, Wal-Mart, and Gap.”

Can U.S. education be far behind? Certain U.S. policies, such as a restrictive and cumbersome visa policy, have already negatively affected the appeal of a U.S. education, as has been noted by NAFSA and other international education proponents. Additionally, it has been widely reported that American studies programs abroad are losing the cache and appeal they once held as many students are choosing not to select American studies programs, a trend that has forced several foreign universities to close their American studies programs indefinitely.

The Business of Public Diplomacy

Recognizing the crisis at hand, numerous U.S. businesses have come together under the banner of a task force known as Business for Diplomatic Action (BDA), led by BDA President

Keith Reinhard, chairman of the marketing services firm DDB Worldwide. In testifying before the House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations in August 2004, Reinhard defined BDA as a “nonpartisan, not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to mobilize and harness the private sector in a separate but parallel effort to...the government, to reverse the alarming decline in America’s reputation.” BDA, which includes professionals from the fields of global communications, marketing, research, and media, asserts that there are numerous reasons business can augment the work of the government and in some cases speak more credibly and effectively.

Specifically, business can be more credible and effective in the following ways. First, U.S. companies, their representatives, and their brands directly touch the lives of more people than government representatives ever could. A part of that is the attention given to public diplomacy funding and human resources: consider the fact that both Coca-Cola and McDonald’s spend more money—to the tune of \$1.2 billion each—to make friends around the world than does the U.S. government. Second, foreign representatives of U.S. companies abroad are more likely to be representative of local views and perceptions than are Americans working in embassies. Third, once corporations decide to act, for the most part, they can move forward without bureaucratic entanglement, and fourth, in a corporation, policy is not automatically up for grabs every four years. This means, if a program gets up

and running, and there is senior corporate leadership behind it, there is a good chance it will be sustained in the long run.

Agents of Change

U.S. citizens, students in particular, can also help address the problem of the “collective personality of U.S. citizens.” Perceived by many people around the world as broadly arrogant, insensitive, ignorant, and loud, Americans still have been historically admired for their openness, creativity, and can-do approach. U.S. students, both those who study abroad and those who interact with international students at home, can do their part by becoming better citizens of the world, in a sense, becoming ambassadors in backpacks. U.S. students who travel abroad will number more than 160,000 this year and they are inheriting the growing resentment and hostility towards Americans. To that end, BDA has published the *World Citizens Guide*, which is being distributed to an estimated 200,000 potential U.S. study abroad students in fall 2004 and spring 2005. The *Guide*, authored by students and faculty of Temerin Advertising Institute of Southern Methodist University, is based on insights from foreign nationals working in more than 130 DDB offices worldwide, who were asked, “If you could advise Americans on what they could do to be better global citizens and to reduce resentment towards them, what would you say?” It is not a travel guide for young Americans; rather a compendium of insights that arouse their interest in the world and move them further toward a global mindset. This sensitization is key to U.S. students becoming better world citizens and better cultural ambassadors.

U.S. citizens, in general, will be targeted by BDA’s forthcoming abridged version of the *Guide*, which will be intended for the 55 million U.S. citizens who travel abroad each year. Based on the experience gained from the feedback from users of these guides and from working with experts on the subject, BDA also plans to develop a world citizens curriculum for colleges and secondary schools as well as a high-level briefing for

senior business executives. Such a briefing program could also be of value to new ambassadors as well as foreign and civil service officers before they leave for service in U.S. embassies abroad.

The Role of Businesses

Like students, U.S. companies must be sensitized to the rise of anti-Americanism in the world and be enlisted in specific actions aimed at addressing the issue and reducing the problem. Certainly, no government agency restructuring will ever sufficiently safeguard the United States unless business leaders and their companies become agents of change. They must join the effort and adopt aggressive public diplomacy strategies that challenge the steady diet of paranoia, bitterness, and hatred being fed young people throughout the Islamic world, and they must effectively convey the benefits of freedom and open society. (This is a role that, arguably, should not be assumed by U.S. students, who would be exposing themselves to too much risk. Students, rather, can do their part by becoming better global citizens and cultural ambassadors.) To facilitate the role and effectiveness of businesses in remedying the problem, BDA has outlined several action programs based on best practices for companies to engage in immediately and in the long term.

Additionally, and in the spirit of the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange's leadership, BDA plans to encourage a number of U.S. corporations to sponsor massive intern exchange programs. Letting bright foreign and U.S. young people experience a business exchange on a grand level could go far toward changing attitudes and perceptions. Such a program would be especially important in light of the current visa environment in which many of the best and brightest minds from abroad are choosing not to study in the United States or are having great difficulty obtaining visas to come to the United States. As many others have observed, loss of such talent to other nations will eventually erode the nation's competitive edge.



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A Credible Messenger

When it's all said and done, the single-most significant obstacle in repairing U.S. relations abroad is the lack of credibility when it comes to the U.S. government as a primary messenger to the world. While the U.S. government has the ability to construct and augment foreign policy and explain U.S. policy via various public affairs apparatus, it does not have the tools, expertise, or institutional flexibility to be effective in the realm of public diplomacy.

Professor Fawaz Gerges, the Christian A. Johnson chair in international affairs and Middle Eastern studies at Sarah Lawrence College and a frequent guest on ABC "World News Tonight" and CNN, confirms what others have said, that rising anti-American sentiment notwithstanding, Arabs and Muslims are deeply attracted to and fascinated with the American idea. Gerges, a Muslim, a historian, and an adviser to BDA, offers the following perspective: "In the last few years, so much focus has been on foreign relations and on the opposing relations between the United States and the Arab world, that the basic challenge today is how to shift the debate from foreign policy to civil society on the American idea. I believe that regardless of what the American government does, its ability to positively influence public opinion is very limited." He added, "American civil society means universities, opinion makers, the media, and business—they have a vital role in rebuilding what I call bridges of trust—the broken bridges of trust between the United States and the Arab and Muslim world."

Additionally, as Ambassador Kenton Keith, chairman of the Alliance for Inter-

national Educational and Cultural Exchange and a former U.S. representative to Qatar and Pakistan, noted at a BDA meeting in fall 2004, "Business [engaged in public diplomacy efforts] is the only way to affect change. Business is the only one that can make a difference."

Joseph Nye, former dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, author of *Soft Power* and adviser to BDA, further referenced a leaked spring 2004 memo from Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, which noted that "the number of terrorists that we're killing doesn't begin to match up to the numbers of young people that the madrassas are producing." He further emphasized, "American companies, their representatives, and their brands directly touch the lives of far more people than government representatives do...business must engage."

When it comes to the "war on terror," BDA's Reinhard noted last fall that, "The private sector has a vested stake in working to reduce the numbers of recruits bin Laden and al Qaeda are able to enlist. It is a matter of not only the war for talent, but for our collective national security. We must engage now and invest in long-term, private sector-led, public diplomacy activities. These efforts are too important to leave to government agencies that lack the urgency, impetus, credibility, and resources to engage effectively."

As policymakers aim to retool and reenergize U.S. public diplomacy, stakeholders must be reminded of the critical roles they are called to play. Ultimately, of course, no weapon could be more powerful in the war of ideas than the tangible ability to touch lives in the form of economic opportunity, education, and other high-value products. And the implication for legislators is to guide the U.S. government to give real support and incentives to empower and activate credible messengers who can begin the process of bridge building. **IE**

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