



In the mind of the average European the Latin American country of Ecuador takes up precious little space. And what space it does occupy is ringing with bad vibes about drugs, corruption and political instability. Laments Mentor Villagomez, Ecuador's ambassador to the European Union, "Our country's bad image affects my work all the time. Ecuador is not taken seriously." Luckily for Villagomez, all that may be about to change. If CORPEI/CBI's ambitious new seminar on country branding catches on, Ecuador will soon be no less than 'the centre of the world' – or at least a little closer to it.

"Every country in the world has to compete for a limited amount of mindspace among consumers, tourists, investors and whoever else they wish to attract. Most people in Europe never think about Ecuador and if they do, their thoughts are likely to be negative and incorrect. So the country of Ecuador, if it wants to draw the attention of these people, has to get stories into their heads. Positive stories. True stories. Stories that don't conflict with each other and that are bound together by a clear and exciting vision of the kind of country Ecuador is becoming."

Brand new Ecuador

By Stephen D. Teeuwen

Malcolm Allan is one of the directors of Placebrands Ltd., a United Kingdom-based consultancy specialized in using brand strategy to add economic, social and cultural value to cities, regions and countries. Allan is convinced that 'placebranding', as he calls it, is a key instrument for developing countries eager to get their slice of the global pie.

To explore that proposition, the CBI and its Ecuadorian counterpart, the Exports and Investment Promotion Corporation of Ecuador (CORPEI), invited Allan and his team to run a three-day seminar in June on 'Developing and Managing a Brand

Branding Ecuador, a theme leading to stimulating exchanges of thoughts (photo De Jong & Van Es).

for Ecuador'. Eighteen high-profile Ecuadorian government and corporate sector representatives attended the seminar in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, including a new CBI target group: the country's ministers of tourism and foreign affairs and a dozen ambassadors to EU countries.

A MAJOR HANDICAP

Juan Salazar Sancisi, Ecuador's ambassador to France, is well aware that his country could use some image building. "Some countries in our region are known for narcotics, guerrillas and worse, but we've discovered that Ecuador is not known at all, at least not in France. The one thing people know about are the beautiful Galapagos Islands – but few know they are part of Ecuador."

Salazar's colleague Mentor Villagomez, who is based in Brussels, Belgium, says his country's negative or obscure image is a major handicap in his work with the EU. "At a recent summit in Mexico for Latin American, Caribbean and European countries we wanted a declaration that free

trade negotiations between the EU and our country will soon be initiated. We fought hard for that declaration for over three years. But in the end, we didn't get it. Why? Because of our bad image. They don't think we're capable of engaging in serious commercial partnerships."

Villagomez has two worries when it comes to his country's image. "The first is that there are a lot of false notions. For instance, we can't get the idea out of the heads of Europeans that Ecuador is riddled with corruption, whereas we've made a lot of progress in that area recently. My second worry is that some of the notions staining our image are in fact true. We do have some problems. And it will take a lot of political will and effort to solve them."

TAKING CONTROL

Nation branding, says Malcolm Allan, is largely about taking control. "Many Europeans don't know what Ecuador stands for, but the Ecuadorians aren't telling us either. They're letting other distributors of information, like CNN, decide what the world hears about Ecuador. Much of that information is random and negative. And on top of that, it tends to be exaggerated in the minds of consumers. Ecuador needs to take control of the information process, to let the world know there are better stories to be told about the country, that there are good things happening there. And it needs to develop a vision of itself and its future, in which those

good stories can be related to each other." During one seminar session, participants were encouraged to list the positive things they wish Europeans knew about Ecuador. The list was impressive. It included obvious attractions such as the Galapagos Islands and the country's general geographical, climatic and biodiversity. But other tasty tidbits emerged as well: the fact that it's seemingly endless border conflict with Peru was actually ended four years ago and the country has enjoyed peace ever since; the administrative excellence of its mayors; its low inflation rate (3.5%); its historic and cultural wealth; and more. Asked for a slogan that might sum up Ecuador's

Closely listening to challenging lectures on country branding. (photo's De Jong & Van Es).

bounties, some of the ambassadors waxed truly lyrical: 'Ecuador, the centre of life!', 'Ecuador, the centre of the world!', 'Ecuador – as though you're in heaven!'

ONLY THE BEGINNING

Back in the real world, meanwhile, Malcolm Allan hastens to emphasize that a three-day seminar in a Rotterdam hotel room is far too short to develop the kind of vision needed to build a nation brand. "Nation branding takes many years. This seminar is no more than a kick-off, a con-



Juan Salazar Sancisi, Ecuador's ambassador to France.



Malcom Allan, director of Placebrands Ltd.



Mentor Villagomez, Ecuador's ambassador to the European Union.



centrated effort to get a group of key people to think about the issue”, he says. Allan and the CBI staff had three basic objectives for the seminar: to give participants an understanding of the process of place branding; to begin to construct a road map towards agreeing on a vision and building a brand for Ecuador; and to get participants to allocate specific responsibilities amongst themselves for the construction of that road map.

Continues Allan, “The real work has yet to start: research, agreeing on and defining The Big Idea, and then developing a plan to communicate that idea to the world through Ecuadorian emigrants, business people, cultural groups travelling abroad, ambassadors and, of course, the country’s own natural environment and civic design. Placebranding is a long-term project.”

SOME DOUBTS

Ambassador Villagomez is well aware of the complexity of the project he and his colleagues are likely to embark on as they return home. “This seminar has given me the conviction that country branding may work for us. I’m less sceptical than I was when I heard about it. But I also have some doubts. Company branding is not difficult, but in a country there are many controversies and conflicting interests that need solving. But I’m prepared to work hard on this. It’s good for the country.”

Ricardo Estrada, executive president of CORPEI, was all enthusiasm towards the end of the seminar. “In the end it all boils down to money. But we believe this is a very necessary move for Ecuador.”

CORPEI is more than eager to assert itself as a leading player in the Brand Ecuador development, it turns out. “As a non-technical, non-political organization, we’re

well-positioned to play a coordinating role.” France-based Juan Salazar believes the role he and his colleagues have as ambassadors is also ideal for contributing to nation branding. “After our conflict with Peru was finally settled four years ago, we began to develop a new view on diplomacy. We’re shifting from classic diplomacy to a more modern, promotion-focussed kind. The idea of nation branding fits into that perfectly.”



Ricardo Estrada, executive president of CORPEI.

TARGETING AMBASSADORS

For the CBI, the seminar catches two birds with one stone. “In addition to the programmes we offer to entrepreneurs, business support organizations and commercial counsellors, we also want to target ambassadors of developing countries”, explains programme manager Titus Swartjes. “The country branding seminar seems to fit that ambition. We’re very eager to see how the Ecuadorians follow through. Their main challenge will be to develop and issue an integrated and consistent message to the world that sticks in the minds of people. It will require close co-operation between public and private sectors and organizations in Ecuador. If this seminar is the beginning of a positive, successful development in Ecuador, we’ll certainly be offering it to other countries as well.”