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# Lessons from the Return of the Ugly American



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## **Donald Trump's erosion of the American brand is a cautionary tale for all leaders.**

It is easy, sometimes almost automatic, to put groups of people into categories. It simplifies our lives and is a relatively quick but reductionist way to understand the behaviour of others. As a cognitive and emotive shortcut, stereotyping reduces the amount of mental processing we have to do by relying on simplistic generalisations. And incomplete as these kinds of categorisations may be, they tend to stick.

In this way, a leader's image can become almost inseparable from the organisation he or she leads. Consumers' perception of companies is often influenced by corporate leaders' actions and what they communicate. Examples may include the innovative appeal of Steve Jobs at Apple or (more negatively) Uber whose reputation has suffered from the recent behaviour of its leader Travis Kalanick.

Similarly, the actions of a country's leaders may be viewed as representative of the character and beliefs of its people and have an impact on how that country is perceived by the rest of the world. The behaviour and actions of former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, for example, very much underscore some negative stereotypical patterns often ascribed to Italians, including being lecherous, over-sexed (nod to the "bunga bunga" parties), endemically corrupt, and not to forget, being in bed with the Mafia. It would be fair to say that 20 years of having Berlusconi at the centre of the political system in Italy has had a very negative impact on the country's "brand image."

### **"America First"**

Although Italy may be an important country on the world stage, it's nothing in comparison to America, the most powerful (economically or militarily) country in the world. In that role, America has always been a very attractive target for stereotyping.

Presently, its incumbent president, Donald Trump, is epitomising the "Ugly American": a stereotype which conjures up Americans abroad who are noisy, thoughtless, uncultured, ignorant, lacking in humility, and self-righteous. They are the ones who speak about other cultures in a condescending manner, appear to be uninformed about the country they are visiting, expect everyone to speak English, and like to brag about "how we do things in America."

Trump's slick media campaign of "Make America Great Again" is reinforcing this image, seriously damaging the reputation of America abroad. In **an alpha-male display** at his presidential inauguration, stating that "from this day forward it is going to be only America first, America first", Trump sent an alienating shot heard around the world. His dark *Weltanschauung*, full of fear, prejudice, and mistrust, is compromising America's ability to set the example on a world stage.

Throughout his campaign, and now in office, Trump seems to be unwilling to recognise that he lives in an interconnected, networked world where international trade spurs economic growth and create bridges across countries and cultures.

He seems to be unable to accept that what makes America truly great – what created a "brand" and stereotype that attracted people from around the

globe and enabled the U.S. to take on a worldwide leadership position - derives from its universal values that uphold other people's rights. Its brand was based on the country's system of justice, educational system, and ability to provide economic opportunities for all; the creative abilities of its immigrant workers; its religious freedom; free press, ability to create upward mobility; highly inventive entrepreneurs; unrivalled talent in innovation; and ability to engage the people of other nations.

### **America's greatness, according to JFK**

Trump's reputation, words and actions (which are eroding this strong brand value) are very different from John F. Kennedy, an exceptional American president who emphasised what made America great in his inaugural address in which he stated, "Let every nation know ...that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." This is the kind of speech that lifts up the spirit, unites and challenges people to dream.

In 1958, when the bestseller *The Ugly American* appeared, Kennedy (who was then a senator) liked it so much that he took out a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times*, identifying it as a compelling critique of "the Americans who go overseas for the various governmental agencies, their activities abroad, and the policies they are entrusted to carry out." Subsequently, he sent a copy of the novel to every member of the Senate, as a cautionary tale against negative stereotypes.

We can always hope that Trump belatedly will realise the importance of how to "brand" America differently, and to recognise - reviewing other experiments of populism - that populist regimes set the stage for economic decline; that his behaviour and actions are not a prescription for greatness; and, most importantly, that his leadership style isn't helping the "brand" that is America. Unfortunately, however, most aspects of his character seem to be set in stone.

### **A disastrous example**

Corporate leaders would do well to learn from the differences between the leadership of Trump and Kennedy and recognise that a leader's reputation, actions and performance are intertwined with that of the organisation which they lead. Traits such as honesty and humility have positive impacts on how an organisation is perceived by business partners, shareholders, prospective

customers and investors, and can ultimately affect the success and influence of the organisation. On the flipside, traits such as Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism, can do enormous damage. Trump's unholy adherence to the kinds of behaviour described in books like *The Ugly American* and George Orwell's *1984* is everything that the U.S. doesn't stand for. These kinds of activities do not make America great. On the contrary, they make dystopian society a reality.

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