

The firefighters: the nexus between personal and national reputation



By [Manusha Pillai](#)

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The deployment of South African firefighters in Canada impacted positively on the country's brand and reputation. Our firefighters, with the expertise to work with the Canadians to fight massive and unrelenting fires, highlighted an area of South African competence, excellence and competitiveness. The team was celebrated and welcomed warmly in Canada by citizens, domestic and international media. Their unceremonious departure from Edmonton equally attracted significant media attention and public comment.

What lessons can we extract from this for the nation brand and national reputation?

One, reputation is fickle and can shift quickly, particularly in an age of technology, social media and the 24 hour news cycle. Reputation is not constrained by national borders. What is feted and celebrated today can be seen very differently tomorrow, enabled by powerful new media channels.

Two, reputation cannot be fixed entirely by public relations, press statements, interviews or even mediation. Reputation is based primarily on action and behaviour and a negative reputation can be resistant to fixing!

Three, personal reputation is no longer just about oneself. Your personal reputation now impacts on your professional, and wider, environment.

Four and perhaps most significant, the behaviour and reputation of an individual has a ripple effect on the reputation and brand of the nation.



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South Africa's reputation and brand is influenced by all citizens and entities within the country, it is a composite of everything within the country. As such, we all have a responsibility, and an opportunity, to behave in a manner that creates positive associations for ourselves and therefore for the country.

Amidst the attacks on foreign nationals last year, one of the most important messages emanating from government, business and civil society was that millions of South Africans should not be tainted by the actions of a few.

We hear a similar message over crime in the country. Many South Africans are honest and law abiding yet the brush of crime is a blemish all citizens must endure through comments like, "South Africa is dangerous" and others. Such perceptions created by the actions of a few, soon becomes a "fact" associated with the country.

Similarly, South Africans who do great things for themselves, equally impact on the country's brand – albeit positively.

Earlier this month, five South Africans under 30 made the Forbes Africa list of 30 under 30 future billionaires! Their strong and positive reputations - based largely on their consistent efforts to build their own brands, brings honour to the nation brand – particularly when they are associated with the country as South African.

Similarly, an article talking about three young designers from Cape Town – the Deep Settle Movement – who are now taking their work to New York, communicates a message of young people with the spirit to export South African talent, innovation and excellence.

Operation Hydrate, where public and corporate South Africa, came together to donate water to drought ravaged communities earlier this year, also contributed positively to the nation brand. This initiative communicated the values of our country – our Ubuntu, non-racialism and non-sexism, in a far stronger manner than any press release.

These examples indicate how individuals can impact on the reputation and brand of an entire nation! They bring to life the theory on reputation management and nation brand building in that actions and behaviour give expression to perceptions, image and one's personal, and therefore the nation's, brand.

Public relations, marketing and communication efforts to position a country positively must rest on the reality of a nation that acts and behaves as it wants to be perceived. We are the brand of South Africa. What is our contribution to our nation brand?

ABOUT MANUSHA PILLAI

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