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Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy



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American Business and Its Role in Public Diplomacy

Keith Reinhard

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Those who think public diplomacy is not the business of business should think again. Even those who believe the only goal of business is to return profit to its shareholders might have to agree that a world in which 18 percent of consumers in G8 countries already say they avoid buying American brands¹ is at least a threat to that primary goal. American business, especially the growing number of American multinationals that derive more than half their revenue from markets outside the U.S., need a world that welcomes American goods and services. That's the first reason U.S. corporations should play a role in public diplomacy. It's in their own self-interest. Whatever U.S. corporations can do to lift America's reputation will eventually lift the prospects for (American) business.

The second reason U.S. corporations should take up the challenge of restoring our country's battered image is that American business leaders are for the most part American citizens. It is therefore their patriotic duty to address their country's urgent need—call it "Business Patriotism," to borrow a phrase from Pete Peterson, Chairman of the Board of Directors, Council on Foreign Relations.² It's also true that in addressing certain public diplomacy challenges business has a great advantage. At least for now, it can be argued that U.S. business is more credible than the U.S. government and more skilled, more efficient, and possessed of more global savvy. When natural disasters strike, American business is often the first to respond with goods, services, and money. The same sense of urgency and commitment should drive a business response now to America's national disaster, our country's plummeting reputation across the globe.

America's Reputation is at an All-time Low

Numerous global public opinion surveys, from the Pew Center, GFK Roper, Zogby, Harris Interactive, and other firms, have documented the worsening of public attitudes toward America over the past decade or so. A global survey commissioned by the BBC World Service and released in early 2007 confirms how grave the situation has now become.³ To quote directly from the BBC article that accompanied the survey results:

The global image of the US has significantly deteriorated over the past 12 months, as the chaos in Iraq has deepened. And in 18 of the countries that were involved in previous polls, the slide in America's standing has steepened . . . This poll underscores conclusions drawn from several other

surveys—that anti-Americanism is on the rise, and the more the US flexes its hard power—the more it deploys troops abroad or talks tough diplomatically—the more it seems to weaken its ability to influence the world.

This, then, raises an obvious question. Is it simply the Bush administration's foreign policy or the whole image of America that is unpopular? Comparable surveys suggest that there is still strong support around the world for the values enshrined in US society. But it looks as though America itself is seen to be living up to those values less and less.

X As a result, America's soft power—its ability to influence people in other countries by the force of example and by the perceived legitimacy of its policies—is weakening.

And in a turbulent, globalizing world, where the US—rightly or wrongly—is associated by many with the disruptive effects of globalization, soft power matters more than ever. It is a resource that once squandered is very difficult to build up again.⁴

A Pew Global Attitudes Survey released in June 2007 confirmed the deterioration of America's favorability ratings across the globe over the past five years—see Table 16.1.⁵

The findings of these surveys and others are irrefutable: America is losing her friends around the world, the country's global reputation is in crisis, and it is not improving. The implications for the future are grave.

The Issue is Complicated. Root Causes are Many

The rise in anti-Americanism is the result of a number of complex factors which have converged in recent years. As a result, there are no “quick fixes” to the problem. Instead, it is a long-term issue that will demand attention and concerted efforts for years to come.

It is true that today the most prominent cause of animus toward our country is widespread disagreement with current U.S. foreign policy and a general dislike of the current U.S. administration. The war in Iraq and numerous policies adopted in the name of the broader war on terror, as the BBC study notes, have sparked sharply negative opinions toward America. The 2007 Pew study shows that majorities in many countries reject the current United States foreign policy and express distaste for American-style democracy. According to the report, respondents not only want the U.S. to pull its troops out of Iraq “as soon as possible” but also seek a rapid end to the American and NATO military intervention in Afghanistan.

Table 16.1. Favorable Views of the U.S. (Selected Countries)

	2002	2007	Change
Canada	72%	55%	-17 points
Argentina	34	16	-18
Brazil	51	44	-7
Britain	75	51	-24
France	62	39	-23
Germany	60	30	-30
Russia	61	41	-20
Turkey	30	9	-21
Indonesia	61	29	-32
Israel	78 (2003)	78	0
China	42 (2005)	34	-8
India	66	59	-7
Japan	72	61	-11

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Indeed, when we commissioned Zogby International to interview more than 200 young Arabs, asking about their career aspirations and life dreams, more than 40 percent said they saw themselves in business. Of those respondents, 40 percent named the U.S. as first choice for learning required business skills. The UK was second with 29 percent, France with 18 percent, and Germany with 7 percent.⁸

So business is admired, more admired than governments. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer presented at Davos in 2006, government is the *least trusted* institution in Brazil, Spain, Germany, and South Korea, and trust in government remains low in the U.S. (38%), UK (33%), France (32%), and Canada (36%).⁹

Not only is business more admired and trusted in many ways it is more relevant than national governments. The vast global reach of multinational companies through their people and their products touches millions of lives throughout the world every day.

Multinational corporations are also more culturally sensitive. For example, six million of the eight million people employed by U.S. companies outside the U.S. are local nationals, and therefore totally sensitive to local cultures and social mores.

Business is more skilled. Multinational companies are expert at building strong brands that generate goodwill, trust, and loyalty—skills that are sadly lacking in many governments today.

By and large, big multinationals are successful. Companies who depend heavily on foreign markets have learned how to get along and work successfully across borders and cultures, and, indeed, could offer many lessons to government. In fact, the *Washington Post* ran an op-ed piece on January 29, 2007, noting that on the same day a BBC poll found that less than a third of people in 25 countries regard the U.S. influence in the world as positive, McDonald's reported its strongest business results in three decades.¹⁰ Brisk sales in supposedly anti-American countries were a large part of the reason. The piece went on to say that "McDonald's changed in ways that reflect the problem-solving grit of American business. It listened to its critics and adapted." The editorial ends by raising the question of whether the American government can mimic the agility of American business.

Business qualifies for a key role in public diplomacy for other important reasons. People who trade with each other tend not to fight with each other. And I hope we can all agree that businesses are at the strategic center of any free society. They provide employment so people can realize their aspirations for themselves and for their families.

In so many ways, business is actually more qualified for public diplomacy than is the government. As Paul Bracken, Professor of Political Science at the Yale School of Management, has said: "Today, the multinational corporation is the most vital institution in economic development, social change, technology, and let's face it, dynamism and new ideas."¹¹

What Business Should Do

First of all, American business should admit that it is American. And be proud of its nationality. Given negative opinions of our country, many American multinationals now claim, "We're not an American company, we're a global company." The goal should be dual citizenship—a company proud to be American and proud of its informed and respectful worldview. An American company that hides its national identity denies itself the opportunity to represent the best of American values to the world.

American companies should practice good world citizenship. Every company should educate its employees on the issue, showing them how America's declining reputation around the world affects a company's long-term prospects, our country's security and economic well-being, and how the issue, if not corrected, will greatly complicate our future dealings with the biggest issues facing us as a nation. Multinationals can build relationships of trust and respect with employees,

customers, and corporation's se

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✓ customers, and communities around the world. As it happens, all of these actions are in a corporation's self-interest.

X By providing cultural sensitivity training and language training, at least for employees who work and travel abroad, companies can begin to disabuse foreign publics of their perceptions that we are arrogant, ignorant, and totally self-absorbed, even while they emphasize and personify those great American qualities that have traditionally been admired—our youthful enthusiasm, our optimism, our sense of humor and our cultural diversity. There are many cultural training tools available. Business for Diplomatic Action provides an excellent one-day immersion. It's called Culture Span, designed for business executives of every level. ↙

At the same time companies are acclimating their American employees to foreign cultures, they can help build better understanding of American culture and values by sponsoring cultural exchanges and English language training, and by giving people in other lands easier access to information about the United States through such efforts as the underwriting of distribution of American periodicals and books in foreign universities.

American companies should continue to set the standard for acts of corporate social responsibility that address human needs and improve the lives of people everywhere. There are many examples of companies changing attitudes toward the U.S. while pursuing their own business goals. And they should not hide those acts of benevolence under a bushel—the world needs to hear the myriad untold stories of U.S. corporations doing good. Dick Martin, in his book *Rebuilding Brand America*, cites two outstanding examples.

Cisco established network-training academies in technical schools, colleges, and community-based organizations across more than 150 countries. To date, the Cisco networking academies have prepared more than 1.5 million students for careers in the information technology industries, including several thousand women in Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹²

Global accounting giant PricewaterhouseCoopers gives high-performing young partners eight-week assignments helping NGOs with their work in developing countries. Their projects have ranged from helping an NGO in Belize develop an eco-tourism plan to helping a United Nations agency in Tajikistan create a model for micro-financed enterprises. The program has not only helped PWC retain talented managers, it has helped them develop as responsible leaders attuned to cultural differences.¹³

340 Business should influence the government, demanding that government fix its visa and entry practices, for example. In a recent survey of international travelers for the Discover America Partnership, America's entry process was rated the world's worst by a factor of two to one over the next worst destination.¹⁴ In another survey conducted by the Santangelo Group, it was estimated that U.S. business interests lost \$40 billion between 2002 and 2004 because of visa delays, primarily in India and China.¹⁵

Companies should work in concert with business associations and groups such as the Business Roundtable to support public diplomacy reforms. There is a broad consensus on what needs to be done, but the administration needs encouragement to take bold steps and help in moving its programs through Congress. Business leaders can provide such encouragement. ↙

X Business should lend expertise to the federal government: Technology to streamline the visa process; media training for foreign service officers; marketing and communications skills for the many voices of government; analytical and organizational skills to facilitate action and accountability. Many of these skills that business depends on and takes for granted are sadly lacking in Washington.

Conclusion

Should business play a role in public diplomacy? If we agree that American business is still the world's best model of free and successful enterprise, if we acknowledge that "the American way of business" is one of the key positives in our national image, if we see that "creativity, innovation, and the 'can do' spirit" are attractive brand values for our nation, and if we measure the vast reach and impact of American brands on the peoples of the world, then it seems obvious that American business, its brands and its people, must be seen as among the most powerful diplomats our country could have. The question is not whether business should engage in public diplomacy, but whether it will, and to what extent. A creative and coordinated response by business to the current crisis of national reputation would lead to a win-win-win situation. Good for business, good for our country, good for the world.

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Notes

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Ethics and Social Issues in Public Diplomacy

Richard Nelson and Foad Izadi

Nations have long reached out to foreign audiences when such efforts advance a particular political or economic goal. Promotion of tourism and business enterprises through international expositions and world fairs are an example. With the rise of mass societies, however, governments also became interested in supplementing their traditional diplomatic efforts with more overt and continuous communications directed at residents in other countries. This outreach became feasible largely because of the growing importance of public opinion on government decision making, and inventive advances beginning with the telegraph in the mid-1800s and continuing through today's modern satellite and internet technologies. This concept and practice is known as 'public diplomacy'—a process which is to promote the national interest and the national security through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.¹

In most cases, public diplomacy has historically been an instrument of foreign policy to meet wartime needs. This has certainly been the case for the United States, which went heavily into the business of shaping foreign as well as domestic opinion in 1917 through the establishment by order of President Woodrow Wilson of the Committee on Public Information (CPI), headed by former newspaperman George Creel. The title of Creel's 1920 book (*How we advertised America; The first telling of the amazing story of the Committee on Public Information that carried the gospel of Americanism to every corner of the globe*)² expresses the philosophy of communication employed by this agency. Or, as one of the CPI's most famous alumni, Edward L. Bernays, admitted in an interview with Bill Moyers, that while during the conflict they practiced propaganda he "hoped it was 'proper-ganda' and not 'improper-ganda.'"³

Bernays, who as the nephew of Freud applied the science of psychology to mass audiences, argued for the central importance of public relations to an effective democracy. To shape a democracy requires an enlightened leadership, he asserted, using communication to effect what he later called 'The engineering of consent.' As a long-lived influential "public relations counsel" and author/editor of other important books including *Crystallizing public opinion* and *Biography of an idea: Memoirs of public relations counsel*,⁵ Bernays also always included a corollary principle: utilizing social science research methods was an essential element in structuring such persuasive campaigns.

One of the clearest expositions of his views occurs in Bernays' *Propaganda* published in 1928.⁶ He opens by making the case that "The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who

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