

The strategy behind the successful Sri Lanka Apparel brand

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As the brand consulting firm which conceptualized the ethical positioning for Sri Lanka Apparel back in 2005, STING Consultants sets out the future for the local apparel industry whilst also looking at where Sri Lanka Tourism went wrong.

Context

Being the single largest industry in the country, Sri Lanka Apparel's ethical brand and its positioning has been increasingly quoted as a success story for the country. So much so, that other industries are now jumping on the ethical branding platform. In the context of the problems that has beset Sri Lanka Tourism branding, the complexities of building a successful brand are worth looking at in greater detail.

The problem with branding is that there are so many misconceptions which are bandied around. Some people believe that all it is, is a word and a logo design. Others think that it is a slogan. Whilst some others think that you have to invest in advertising to build a brand.

A strategic approach

Our involvement with Sri Lanka Apparel (or JAAF) dates back to 2005, where as a small part of an industry wide strategic plan to upgrade itself in the face of the abolition of the quota system, a branding initiative was undertaken.

We set about this task by first carrying out a preliminary industry study which was handled by ourselves and an international market research study amongst customers (Buyers) in the USA which was conducted by a reputed market research agency.

These two studies, combined with our analysis of the international competitive framework, established that in the wake of several sourcing crisis in the past, the US buyers were looking for reliable manufacturers who could deliver their requirements with high manufacturing practices. This was common knowledge in the global apparel manufacturing industry, yet remarkably no country had picked on this as a possible platform to launch an industry wide branding initiative.

Our studies also showed that Sri Lanka's apparel industry was relatively mature (with over 20 years of experience under our belt already) and we were ahead of the curve over most countries in our manufacturing practices. And here lies the core of branding, which is that the brand must be fully integrated into the product or service that is being offered.

An ethical platform based on high manufacturing practices and standards was the opportunity that we identified.



There was some trepidation within the industry. Will it work, is it relevant, will the Unions support it, will our competitors attack us and can we deliver the promise? Eventually, the detailed fact based strategy developed by us was able to sway those few who were skeptical of the approach.

The fact that most people disregard in creating a brand, is the in-depth studies and intellectual rigour that goes into teasing out points of differentiation in order to establish a sustainable long term platform that is completely integrated into the business.

More importantly, all the industry stakeholders need to buy into this and continuously enhance this concept. It is not a mere slogan or a promise with an intention to deliver. It has to be an offering based on a solid bedrock. And finally, all of this has to be executed through a seamless and singular co-ordination of thought in order for a compelling brand to be created.

Where Sri Lanka Tourism went wrong was in all the hard work that was done over the years in building up a well thought out and rationale strategic branding approach with a consensus from the industry was suddenly thrown out of the window at the last crucial phase with different views being entertained thus losing the vital thread or continuity. Further, the creative idea was not adequately tested in the relevant markets, and also amongst a key stakeholder group the Government.



Sri Lanka Apparel as part of country branding

Free of the scourge of war, there is now a lot of talk about “rebranding” the country. Inevitably this leads to the discussion on Sri Lanka Tourism and Sri Lanka Apparel which are the two lead industries which have a branding platform. The reality is that country branding is far more complex than industry branding.

As Simon Anholt, the authority on country branding states “the only sure way places can change their images is by changing the way they behave: they need to focus on the things they make and do, not the things they say”

Branding of a country stems from what constitutes it in a holistic sense. It encompasses an enlightened economic, social and foreign policy; it involves the development of tourism, foreign investments and exports; cohesion and success within sports and cultural events; the elevation of poverty; good governance and transparency; an international quality education system and a host of other factors all bundled into one.

It is in this context that both Sri Lanka Apparel and Sri Lanka Tourism can play a small role within a larger more complex initiative that requires a more in-depth study before it can be conceptualized and then executed under the direct guidance of the highest authorities within the Government. It is not an advertising slogan which what seems to be incessantly discussed in the media these days. Instead, it has to be a planned and structured approach impacting all of the elements that make up the Sri Lankan brand, right down to the behavior and intellectual capacity of our society and the individuals who live within it.

It is in this larger context that Sri Lanka Apparel is doing its part in helping to support the emergence of an eventual brand for the country.

The future of Sri Lanka Apparel

Having set out on this brand journey 4 years ago, the brand has been built with no conventional media advertising, but through web marketing directed at international buyers and through the extensive use of non paid media vehicles all of which are being well co-ordinated by a specialist agency. There is no high profile advertising for Sri Lanka Apparel unlike what is available for Sri Lanka Tourism which goes to show the power of an effective non conventional media approach to building brands.

The future of Sri Lanka Apparel now lies in the industries ability to continue to “live” the brand. This, it is doing by setting new global benchmarks which can be seen through the signature green manufacturing plants that have been set up by MAS, Brandix and Hirdramani. Sophistication of manufacturing processes and establishing more efficient systems of operation is key in order to be a step ahead of the rest of the world.



With greater cohesion within the industry, the greater the power of the brand, which will work towards delivering the brand promise. This is vital for a successful brand.

Based on this ethical manufacturing platform, plans are now underway to continue to move up the value chain in the creation of brands which will have direct access to the end consumer in the USA and Europe.

The approach we intend to take is very similar to the Indian tea plantation companies which went up the value chain from first being a grower, manufacturer and then exporter of commodities and now own significant brands in the UK, such as Typhoo and Tetley Tea.

This is the long term vision for the industry as we compete in an increasingly complex and competitive world.