

2014 Eagle Star Awards Gala

Shai Robkin, President & CEO - Branding Talk

Transcript

So I guess the honeymoon is over! My official start date was August 1, 2013, but I was on the job already in June, spending a good deal of time during a previously scheduled personal trip to Israel in meetings with a number of the individuals and organizations with which Tom had forged relationships over the years.

One of those meetings was with the head of the branding department of Israel's Foreign Ministry. For the very first time in the country's history, a marketing firm had been hired to study Israel as a brand – a brand to be marketed and sold like any consumer product. The central elements of the brand - dynamic, colorful, diverse, innovative, contemporary – are encapsulated in a two word tag line – “Creative Energy.” Think Israel – think creative energy. The Foreign Ministry's decision to invest significant resources into understanding the country of Israel as a brand led me to ask myself about its implications for the Chamber and more specifically, about its implications for the strategic planning process that the organization would be undertaking during my first year on the job.

During my first months on the job, well before our official strategic planning process commenced, I gave priority to reaching out to as many key stakeholders as possible. I wanted to understand not only what the Chamber did well and where it could improve, but also how it is perceived by both insiders and outsiders. These stakeholders included past chairmen, current officers, members of the Executive Board, and partner organizations, both here and in Israel. In addition to Board of Director meetings focused on crafting the questions we would address in our strategic planning process, I also convened a series of small focus groups with members of the Board in an effort to delve into specific issues in greater depth. These meetings, both formal and informal, helped to further identify the most critical areas on which to direct our strategic planning process, during which we reached out again to many of the stakeholders previously mentioned as well as others, including leaders of various Jewish and Israel oriented organizations and members of our Israel Advisory Board.

Now as many of you may recall from last year's Professional Seminar (mark your calendars for August 21st for this year's seminar), and even before many of my personal meetings took place and well before we embarked upon an official strategic planning process, I had already reached one conclusion: something had to be done about our logo! More people identified the flying object on the star as a dove or an airplane or even a dolphin than they did an Eagle. There are, no doubt, some even in this room who are just now figuring out the connection the logo has with the name of the event we are at tonight.

By the time the strategic planning committee had completed the research phase of its work, we felt confident in our findings of how the Chamber is perceived, understood and, sometimes, misunderstood. Among the most important is that the Chamber stands in high regard in the eyes of those who have had the experience of working directly with it. These include companies that have consummated business transactions as a result, in part or in full, of the

Chamber's engagement, economic development partners in the Southeast and in Israel, and other bi-national chambers of commerce, of which there are quite a good many in Atlanta.

However, we also found that the depth of appreciation for the Chamber's achievements is not matched by the overall breadth of awareness and understanding of who we are and what we do. Even within the Jewish community, the AICC is misunderstood and to a great extent, unknown.

Our identity is further misunderstood to the extent that we are grouped together with other organizations with the words "chamber of commerce" in their names. We do not regularly engage in political policy advocacy of the sort that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and some city and county chambers of commerce are engaged in. And our mission is much broader than that of many local chambers of commerce that are singularly focused on recruiting companies to locate operations in their locales. With but few exceptions, the other bi-national chambers of commerce are designed to serve the social networking objectives of their expat members as opposed to furthering serious business relationships between American and foreign companies. We, on the other hand, are recognized by those who know us as an address to turn to when looking to establish the kind of relationships that lead to actual business activity. And, of course, we are the perfect address for those simply looking to combine their interest in Israel with their interests in business and technology.

Use of an acronym can be an effective and convenient means of establishing and reinforcing brand identity. At the same time, acronyms can create confusion and many, both in the US and in Israel, think the "A" in "AICC" stands for Atlanta as opposed to American. On the other hand, those who identify us by our full name, American-Israel Chamber of Commerce Southeast Region, believe that we are a division of a national organization, an organization, in case you didn't know, that does not exist. And if we were simply the Southeast region of a national organization, we would be the address to turn to only when an Israeli business has a specific Southern strategy – a product that is likely to find its primary market in the South or a prospective business partner who is located in our region. I think that most everyone in this room would agree that the Southeast should be perceived as the prospective address from which all of the American market can be reached.

I started my address with mention of my meeting with the head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry branding department. While we may or may not choose to use the term "creative energy" in our own marketing, there is no question that our success is inextricably tied to the image of Israel, particularly the image of Israel as it exists or doesn't exist in the minds of the American business community.

Those who are actively engaged with the Chamber are acutely aware of how Israel's creative energy is leading to cutting edge technologies in so many areas of endeavor. Biomedical, cleantech, social media – you name it, and in all likelihood, an Israeli is at the forefront of innovation. I was surprised to learn over the past year that there are many companies in America – companies of all sizes, including some of the largest, which have little to no awareness that the next industry shaking disruptive technology has a significant probability of coming out Israel. As a result, those companies, even those that are selling their products in

Israel, are not actively engaged in seeking out those Israeli innovators who might hold the key to the future of their industry.

On the other hand, today's image of the Chamber as perceived by Israelis is inextricably linked to the image that Israelis have of the South in general. As I mentioned earlier, while you know and I know that the South can be an effective business gateway to all of America, Israelis, on the whole, identify the South only with Gone With the Wind, the civil rights movement, and Elvis Presley. Rarely, in the minds of Israelis (and I dare say most of the rest of the world, including most of the rest of the US) is the South identified as having a dynamic business and innovation climate.

We are rightfully proud of the transactions the Chamber has helped to facilitate during its 22+ year history. We will continue to initiate and promote those transactions as an important element of our mission. The key question that our strategic planning committee asked itself is "how do we leverage these transactions to create and nurture sustainable relationships that will deliver long term value to our members while, at the same time, creating a business model that will ensure the long term sustainable growth of the organization?"

It is certainly true that quite a good number of our members - individuals, firms and companies - have been and continue to do business with Israel and Israeli companies. But many more of our members, Jews and non-Jews, want nothing more than to connect to Israel and to the incredible innovation, call it creative energy, pouring out of its borders. They want to feel connected to the "Start Up Nation" and they want to connect to the dynamic individuals, both in the Start-Up Nation and those here in the Southeast, who are connecting with it. And no other organization is better positioned than ours to connect Americans and Israelis through the language that all the world understands – business.

So how do we leverage and build upon the successes of the AICC's first 22+ years? I would love to walk all of you through both the key strategies and specific tactics designed around those strategies that were developed by our strategic planning committee and enthusiastically endorsed by our Board. But the hour is late, I've already spoken way too long and tomorrow's gonna be another working day. So....let's just talk a bit more about the branding component of the strategic plan.

As noted earlier, we seek long-term sustainable relationships with our stakeholders. We know from the world of consumer products that only when customers feel that they are connected to a premium brand can the relationship with that brand withstand the inevitable bumps in the road that crop up in any relationship. As noted previously, the good news is that the Chamber is indeed perceived as a premium brand – at least by those who have gotten close enough to know us. But to truly be a premium brand, we must touch a much wider audience, using our unique abilities and positioning to connect Israel with many more Americans – again, Jews and non-Jews - who otherwise would have no connection to it. We need to be viewed as the "go to" address for anyone in the American business community looking to connect with Israel's creative energy. And for those looking for that magical creative energy that will propel their company forward regardless of the source, we need connect them to the one place in the world where they are most likely to find it – Israel.

And on the eastern side of the Mediterranean, we must do a better job of working with the Israeli business community so that they understand that in most cases, regardless of their specific industry, the Southeast can be their most efficient and effective connection to all of America. Indeed, I believe that if positioned and promoted effectively, the many inherent advantages of this part of the country combined with the support from the well-connected membership of the AICC have what it takes to convince the Israeli business community that the Southeast is the first place they should look when seeking a foothold in America.

You may have noticed a few words that have been highlighted over and over again throughout my message to you tonight. I have repeated the words “connect, connections and connecting” throughout this presentation because those are the words that were repeated most often in the many conversations that I referred to earlier. With this observation in conjunction with our newly adopted strategic plan, we requested that our marketing and communications committee take a fresh look at our brand. That committee created a special task force to work with a wonderfully talented marketing partnership team of Dan Malowany and David Burnett from the firm of Vitamin D Creative and Vicki Strull of Vicki Strull Designs. I’m just about to share with you the final result of this long and thoughtful process but before I do, I want to thank Vicki, Dan and David for the many thoughtful, creative, and long pro bono hours that they dedicated to sorting through the many possible directions that we might take to create a public proclamation of identity that would effectively tell our story.

And we have a great story to tell. A great story of the many connections made between Americans and Israelis over the course of the organization’s first two decades. And a great story of how many more connections we can make working together in the future. That story begins right now. I invite you to make your own personal connection with conexx, the America Israel Business Connector.