



Brand Singapore: Defining the nation



Today, Singapore is known for its efficiency and reliability, as evidenced by the smoothly run operations at Changi Airport (top), while its willingness to take risks shines through in its hosting of events such as the F1 race (left). Such strengths have transformed it into one of the world's leading financial hubs (far left). PHOTOS: ALPHONSUS CHERN, CAROLINE CHIA, REUTERS

In 50 years of independent nationhood, Singapore's identity has shifted as it evolved from being a little red dot on the world map into a leading global player – financially, socially and culturally.

After half a century of nation-building, is there such a thing as "Brand Singapore"?

In the practice of marketing, brand identity is about building emotional connections with consumers. As a result, brands are commonly associated with five personality traits: competence, excitement, sincerity, sophistication and ruggedness.

So how does Singapore measure up? Five academics from the National University of Singapore Business School, which also celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, give their perspective on how Singapore's history has shaped our national brand, what Brand Singapore means today and where the nation is headed in the next 50 years.

Thorough Singapore

Jochen Wirtz
Professor of Marketing

I am originally from Germany, which is often associated with efficiency and reliability. Arriving in Singapore almost 23 years ago, I felt instantly comfortable: despite differences in culture, religion and customs, these apparently German characteristics seemed just as at home here. Singaporeans are competent, committed, and they deliver. They are thorough and leave little to chance.

Look no further than the public sector and deep-rooted organisations such as Changi Airport, Singapore Airlines, Singtel and educational institutions here.

Changi Airport meticulously designs and manages all processes that passengers go through from touchdown to departure – it has key performance indicators (KPIs) for each step, including how long it takes for baggage to arrive.

SIA, too, goes to great lengths to test its services before rolling them out – food for on-board menus is tasted in a pressure chamber that simulates cabin conditions, as taste buds work differently in flight.

I joke with fondness that there is only one country in the world that is efficient and innovative enough to try to stop mosquitoes from breeding, or turn almost every drop of rain into potable water.

It also collects heavy taxes on cars to invest in a world-class public transport system, making it one of the few major cities without chronic traffic issues.

I admire the quiet competence and innovative drive that characterise Singapore as a nation – where organisations and individuals recognise problems, and create solutions and, in the process, opportunities for progress.

My wife and I are confident about the future of this competent, reliable and down-to-earth nation. She would say she likes Germany because it is almost as efficient and pleasant as Singapore! But the food and heartfelt friendliness of Singaporeans are what keeps us here.

Seeking out a new sense of excitement

Siok Kuan Tambyah
Senior Lecturer of Marketing

As someone born with the nation, I grew up with a historical narrative of Singapore as a small, resource-poor country struggling for survival.

Against this backdrop, more pragmatic goals prevailed – it was important that Singapore was viewed primarily as an exciting place to invest in; less so as an exciting place to live in.

Nonetheless, I am sure every generation of Singaporeans have had their fair share of excitement and challenges of the era they lived in.

In recent years, unfortunately, Brand Singapore has become somewhat bland. In my research on values, excitement is described as "to experience stimulation and thrills". This value has frequently come up as the lowest-ranked among Singaporeans.

Ironically, however, there is a positive relationship between excitement and life satisfaction for Singaporeans. Perhaps it is time for Singaporeans to take note of this if they want to improve their well-being.

Some might contend that Singaporeans now have a wider range of lifestyle options in terms of dining, entertainment, travel, culture and the arts.

But excitement is much more than a lifestyle centred on material comfort and pleasure. Singapore's efficient and controlled environment might have produced economic prosperity, but it has also stifled creativity, audacity and impulsivity – in short, the ingredients that make up an exciting and vibrant society. Let's make room for diverse ideas and dialogues so that we can discover a new sense of excitement.

Mee siam – reflecting Singapore's progress

Lawrence Loh
Associate Professor of Strategy and Policy

Tiong Bahru was where I grew up. I lived next to the old, original market. This was to become my pantry, where I would make daily raids to settle my hunger pangs with down-to-earth hawker fare.

In those days, the market was the place for all the best local picks. Faced with exotic choices, my favourite was actually a very simple, humble Singaporean dish – mee siam.

I think mee siam is itself a lesson in Singapore's transformation.

The earliest mee siam stall was a pushcart with no tables or chairs – customers like myself just stood next to the cart and ate. Then, the stall moved to a spanking clean first-generation hawker centre. There were tables and seats, but no shelter – so mee siam was often mixed with rain water.

The mee siam seller took great pride in making the very best that could be offered. It was really the sincerity of the seller that delivered the honest-to-goodness great taste.

Actually, the most memorable part of the eating experience was watching the piece of thread that the stall owner used to painstakingly cut the hard-boiled egg into thin slices.

Fast forward some 50 years, and mee siam has become such a cheerful treat now – it comes with a whole egg and is often laden with sumptuous prawns.

And there is the story of Singapore. From being a labour-intensive country with a low standard of living, we have advanced – with earnest, hard work – to become a nation that offers a high quality of life.

Sophisticated Little Red Dot

Johan Sulaeman
Assistant Professor of Finance

I grew up in Indonesia, and spent the past 20 years in the United States before moving recently to Singapore. I would have come here sooner if not for my mother's lack of confidence in my work ethic, particularly relative to the best Singaporean students – such was the image of its disciplined educational system that had been etched in my mind.

While I was at college in the US, my father was diagnosed with cancer and came for treatment in Singapore. I was concerned, but did not visit him because I knew he was under the care of the best medical experts. Such was the aura of Singapore's medical service – one of the finest in the world.

From the perspective of many Indonesians, Singapore is a land of sophistication. Our airports look nothing like Changi, our city rivers nothing like Singapore River, our highways nothing like the ECP or the AYE, our drivers are nowhere as law-abiding, and Jakarta still does not have a subway system.

Even though Indonesia has made tremendous progress, Singapore remains the sophisticated ideal. Maintaining and advancing such a level of sophistication is impossible without a well-educated population.

For me, Singapore offers opportunities to collaborate at a global level, and engage in ground-breaking projects that will put us on the international map.

As a professor, I look forward to contributing to the next 50 years of nation-building through education and research. I hope to see Singaporeans becoming more creative, inquisitive and thoughtful – to be an inspiration for others to aspire to.

A rugged nation – mentally and physically

Ang Swee Hoon
Associate Professor of Marketing

Growing up, my father held down three jobs so that my mother, a homemaker, could keep an eye on their three children. I hardly saw my father, who would wake up at 4am to start his landscaping job, continue as a gardener, and then wash cars in the evenings. He cycled to save money. He did not miss a day's work.

Such was the hard life that the pioneer generation endured to eke out a living. To come to a foreign land, almost penniless, speaks of a toughness of the heart.

With this legacy, modern Singaporeans have made strides in physical ruggedness – hosting the inaugural Youth Olympic Games and the world's first Formula One night street race shows not only an interest in sports but also that, as a nation, we are willing to take calculated risks on new and untried ventures.

Participating countries need not have sent their best sportsmen to the Youth Olympics; the F1 could have proved a major drain without substantial returns – yet, both succeeded and helped Singapore stake a place as a global player.

National service has raised the physical ruggedness of our young men, and brought a sense of discipline and maturity as well. Otherwise, with economic abundance, Singapore could become a nation of wimps.

Still, to me, the most poignant illustration of Singapore as a rugged nation came from the thousands of Singaporeans, young and old, abled and disabled, who braved torrential rains to bid farewell to the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew.

Brand Singapore is toughness with a heart, and a willingness to venture forth with a disciplined view of the risks.

stopinion@sph.com.sg