

COUNTRY BRAND I FEEL SLOVENIA: FIRST RESPONSE FROM LOCALS

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the concept of country branding. The focus is placed on influential stakeholders who should participate in country brand development and implementation. Specifically, the important role of local inhabitants is stressed. The paper focuses on the country branding in Slovenia and investigates the residents' first response to the new brand I feel Slovenia. The research was conducted half a year after the new brand was born. The results imply that the brand has great potential to become successful, since it is generally well recognised and perceived by its largest internal stakeholder group – local inhabitants.

Country brand I feel Slovenia: First response from locals



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Not long ago a systematic and strategic country branding was introduced to branding theory. In the recent years a number of countries have started to adopt country branding principles. Similar steps are evident in Slovenia, since the Slovenian government has recognised the importance of building a strong country brand. Furthermore, they became aware that building a country brand firstly requires defining elements of Slovenian identity. The success of the county brand highly depends upon the identification of local inhabitants. Therefore, the paper investigates the inhabitants' first response to the new brand I feel Slovenia. The survey among residents was conducted half a year after the new brand was born. Since country branding is a long-term process, the results provide only the first feedback and opinions of the largest stakeholder group on the new brand I feel Slovenia. The survey results are encouraging and indicate that the new brand has great potential for success and long-term survival. Nevertheless, respondents also showed low identification with the I feel Slovenia brand and the lack of willingness to help in the brand's future development process. These results should be seriously investigated and appropriate steps should be implemented to include the locals into brand implementation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Seeking greater success and more recognition, many countries have started to plan how to manage and market themselves so as to find a unique position on the world map (Morgan and Pritchard, 2002). At the beginning, the whole process regarding country presentation related primarily to promotion or, even better, the advertising of the country. Nowadays, country branding is becoming more and more important, since powerful country brands add additional value to country equity. Countries with strong brands are more recognisable, have a better image and reputation, higher loyalty of their consumers, attract more investments and tourists, export more domestic products and have a higher standard of living (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009). Due to these positive effects, countries have to manage their brand systematically and strategically. This is how country branding occurred.

It was only a few years ago that systematic and strategic country branding was introduced to academics and practitioners (Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2005 and 2007; Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Konecnik & Go, 2008; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggot, 2002). Some countries, which are perceived as pioneers in this area (i.e. Australia), already have positive and encouraging results regarding their equity. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number of other countries have slowly started to adopt the country branding principles that have been developed recently.

Governments from all over the world are aware more than ever that country branding is highly significant for future development. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), most country promotion budgets are funded by governments, and the amounts of money spent on campaigns are enormous and still growing. UNWTO reports show that small countries, too, strongly believe in country branding, as even the smallest ones spend vast amounts of money on promotional campaigns (Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005). Nevertheless, governments have started to realise that the discussion on country campaigns does not

only concern the budget and resources spent mostly on advertising, but also the systematic development of the country brand and its long-term marketing, which should strive to go beyond advertising.

Similar steps are evident in Slovenia, a young European country, which declared its independence in 1991. In the last few years, the Slovenian government has recognised the paramount importance of building a strong country brand, and become aware that building a country brand does not only require finding a new slogan or logo and launching short-term advertising campaigns, but, more significantly, requires defining the essence of the country brand by developing the elements of Slovenian identity. The Slovenian identity can serve as a basis for further development of a fresh and unique story, which will help position Slovenia on the world map as a unique country.

With the purpose of positioning Slovenia on the world map as a unique country and consequently increasing its equity, the new brand I feel Slovenia was developed and implemented at the end of 2007. This was the first systematic branding process adopted in the short Slovenian history (Konecnik Ruzzier, Lapajne, Drapal & de Chernatony, 2009). In contrast to previous marketing activities of country brand Slovenia, at least the following two facts should be emphasised: firstly, the brand was developed from an identity perspective with an emphasis on its long-term survival and; secondly, all relevant stakeholder groups of the country were involved in the brand development and implementation, which is particularly important for its long-term survival and success.

The I feel Slovenia brand was developed for the whole country and not only for tourism purposes, which had generally been the practice in the past. The following key areas of Slovenia were selected: economy, tourism, culture, science, sports, state and the civic sphere. In order to capture the main perspectives on its development, all influential stakeholders were invited to participate in the project. The so-called three-step approach to identity building was employed, and the following three target groups were invited to take an active part in the brand development: opinion leaders from key areas, representatives of key areas, and finally, the largest stakeholder group - the residents of Slovenia.

Since the success of the country brand highly depends upon active participation and identification with the brand by local people, the main purpose of this paper is to present the residents' first response to the new brand I feel Slovenia. The survey among residents of Slovenia was conducted half a year after the new brand was born, thereby providing the first feedback and opinions of the largest stakeholder group that lives the brand.

II. COUNTRY BRANDING

Szondi defines the process of country branding as marketing of a country's economic, commercial and political interests both home and abroad. The key activities should therefore be focused on creating a strong country of origin effect, which would attract both investors and highly educated workforce (Szondi, 2007). Furthermore, Anholt (1998) argues that country branding refers to a reliable strategy which should consist of the most realistic, competitive and compelling vision for the country. The strategy should ensure that this vision is supported

by any kind of communication between the home country and the rest of the world (Fan, 2006).

Kotler and Gertner (2002) suggest that country names help consumers to evaluate products and are responsible for diverse associations. They either attract or avert their purchase decisions. The authors underline that even when countries do not manage their names as brand names, the latter still tend to trigger a certain image of the country. The biggest problem with these images lies in their longevity, since they are difficult to change. Perhaps even more alarmingly, most images are stereotypes and severe simplifications of reality and are generally not consistent with the real situation in the country. Mossberg and Kleppe (2005) compare a country image to a pool of associations, which is not connected to any particular context; a country image is thus comprised of all associations linked with the country. Country branding is consequently an essential activity when attempting to change the false associations to country images.

Kotler and Gertner (2002) define the necessary steps and tools for building a successful country brand:

1. formation of attractive, authentic and unique brand image;
2. defining characteristics that form a basis of a strong brand;
3. developing an umbrella concept to cover different kinds of branding activities;
4. appealing slogan;
5. appealing visual images and symbols;
6. organisation of special events.

Cai (2002) defines destination or country branding as a process of selecting a consistent element mix to identify and distinguish a destination through positive building of a destination image. The destination brand consists of different elements, such as name, term, logo, sign, design, symbol, slogan, package, etc. The name has a leading role, as it is relatively fixed and cannot be changed. Cai also emphasises that destination image formation does not equal destination branding. The key element of destination branding is brand identity formation.

Within Cai's (2002) contribution, it is clearly stressed that although the image is very important in the destination branding context, it is not the only dimension or perspective which should be highlighted in relation to the country branding concept. The emphasis lies in the identity concept, i.e. the perspective of the country's internal stakeholders (Konecnik & Go, 2008). Internal stakeholder groups play a highly significant role in the process of country branding, since they are the active players sending the signals about the situation in the country

and in long term contributing to formation of the country's image in the eyes of external stakeholder groups. Systematic and strategic country branding should therefore include and combine both (internal and external) perspectives on country branding (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007; Konecnik & Go, 2008; Konecnik & Ruzzier, 2008). Active participation of relevant internal stakeholders (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggot, 2002; Ryan, 2002) is essential for building a strong country brand, a brand that has high equity in the eyes of its external stakeholders.

Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) point to various benefits of strong country brands. The most important ones are export support because of the strong country of origin effect, promotion of tourism, attention of highly educated workforce, investors and decision-makers focus, country promotion via public diplomacy and high increase in feelings of national affiliation and self-esteem. Strong country brands thus help everyone from local inhabitants, companies and other organisations to the country and its diplomatic partners.

The role of local inhabitants or residents is extremely important in the process of country branding (Anholt, 2002; Konecnik & Go, 2008; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggot, 2002 and 2003; Pike, 2005; Ryan, 2002). From one point of view, residents can be treated as an internal stakeholder of the country, as this is the largest group that constitutes and lives the brand. Their active participation in the process of formation and especially in the process of brand implementation is precious. In this way, they act as ambassadors of the country brand. On the other hand, residents can also be treated as an external stakeholder (i.e. like domestic tourists, consumers, etc).

III. STRONG COUNTRY BRANDS AND THE PROCESS OF COUNTRY BRANDING IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

As the country branding theory and practice is evolving and developing, much interest is directed to measuring the strengths of brands. This begs the question: which countries can be claimed to have strong country brands? Among researchers and practitioners, there is no uniformly accepted measurement instrument or index. During last few years, the Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI) and the FutureBrand Country Brand Index (CBI) have gained in significance. Both indexes measure the country brand equity and will be shortly compared in the following section.

In order to measure the power and appeal of a country's brand image, Anholt introduced an analytical ranking of country brands called the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index. Each quarter, people from all over the world take part in a survey that measures their perceptions of 50 different countries. They are asked to evaluate six dimensions of country assets: people, culture and heritage, exports, governance, tourism, and immigration and investment. The overall sum assesses the power and appeal of a country brand (GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media, 2008).

Another model that measures the country brand strength was developed by FutureBrand and is called the Country Brand Index (CBI). The framework is based on eight dimensions

which identify strengths and assets that can help in the future development of the country brand platform. The framework is divided into two parts: the needs-based dimensions and the wants-based dimensions. Infrastructure, geography, economy and governance compose the needs-based dimensions, whereas the wants-based dimensions are comprised of attractions, authenticity, ethos and culture (FutureBrand, 2008).

TABLE 1— Top 10 country brands - NBI and CBI comparison for the year 2008

	NBI 2008	CBI 2008
1	Germany	Australia
2	France	Canada
3	United Kingdom	United States
4	Canada	Italy
5	Japan	Switzerland
6	Italy	France
7	United States	New Zealand
8	Switzerland	United Kingdom
9	Australia	Japan
10	Sweden	Sweden

SOURCE: Anholt-GfK Roper NBI, 2008 and FutureBrand Country Brand Index, 2008.

Table 1 offers a comparison of the two country brand evaluation indexes for the year of 2008. Although country positions differ, the countries that made it to the top 10 are mostly the same. Eight out of ten country brands are ranked in the first ten positions in both indexes (Australia, Canada, United States, Italy, Switzerland, France, United Kingdom, Japan, Sweden). The results imply that those eight country brands are the most powerful ones. However, there are still considerable variations between country positions in the two indexes (for instance, Germany, which is the strongest brand in the NBI 2008, is not even included in top 10 country brands according to the CBI 2008). The reasons for variations can be attributed to the use of diverse dimensions and different model formation. Considering the dimensions employed, it can be concluded that the Anholt-GfK Roper NBI is more general, while the FutureBrand CBI has more parameters connected only to tourism. Nonetheless, the results of both rankings are very useful to show which country brands are perceived as the most powerful ones.

Since Australia is one of the pioneers of country branding, it is not surprising that its brand is one of the leading country brands in the world. Indeed, both above presented indexes confirm its strength. The awareness of the Australian brand in the USA was considerable already in the 1980s due to the launch of the country presentation campaign known as the “shrimp on the barbie” campaign. The campaign’s advertisement “Come and say G’day” was so successful that it still remains the most memorable campaign ever launched by a foreign country in the USA. The campaign had everything needed to create a powerful brand. The

advertisement presented Australia as a country with its own personality. The country was portrayed as friendly, fresh, different and full of adventures, fun and energy, thus sending out a completely different image from others (Blackadder, 2006). The same marketing and advertising for the brand of Australia was in use until 2006, when Tourism Australia launched a new campaign named “Uniquely Australian Invitation” with the slogan “So Where The Bloody Hell Are You?”. The aim of the new campaign was to change consumers’ behaviour and encourage people to become more actively involved with planning their visit to Australia. According to the first results, the new campaign is successful and has already gained positive feedback from locals and foreigners (Tourism Australia, 2007).

The most powerful country brands in the world have at least three characteristics in common: they have a long history, their economy and standard of living is very high, and all of them have a stable political environment. Contrary to countries that have strong brands with high equity, a number of countries have yet to find the appropriate way of presenting themselves on the world map and building a strong country brand. Among many others, these include transition countries from Central and Eastern Europe, which were marked by the change from the communist regime to the formation of their own democratic state. Indeed, they have faced comparable challenges when marketing their country abroad (Hall, 2002; Hughes & Allen, 2009; Konecnik, 2004; Szondi, 2007).

Country brand development in the region of Central and Eastern Europe is focused mainly on visualisation and symbolism. National tourist boards, which generally become guardians of country brands, are therefore concerned about developing logos, slogans and other design elements. Logos either contain country names in English or in their own language, like, for example, “Lietuva” for Lithuania. Sun, sea, sky, flowers, mountains and hearts are the most commonly used country symbols. Logos, on the other hand, mainly reflect the colours of their national flags. Since countries from this region tend to employ highly similar country images, their campaigns have not been as successful as they were hoped to be. Consequently, none of these countries have succeeded in differentiating themselves from their competitors or distinguishing themselves as a unique tourism destination (Szondi, 2007).

In light of previous findings, Szondi (2007) defined the most common challenges and mistakes in country branding in Central and Eastern Europe:

1. late beginning of country branding, not before the 1990s;
2. country promotion depends on political interests;
3. short-term thinking;
4. lack of coordination among organisations responsible for country branding;
5. lack of both financial and human resources;

6. lack of strategy and continuous development;
7. no differentiation among diverse countries;
8. slogans and messages are too general and old-fashioned;
9. too much advertising and lack of public relations;
10. messages and country images are not credible and transparent;
11. local people do not identify with the brand and do not support it.

IV. THE SLOVENIA BRAND

After declaring independence in 1991, Slovenia immediately started taking partial steps to build its country brand. Although it used to be a part of former Yugoslavia, it had always been closer to the countries of Central Europe than to Balkan countries. Hence, after independence its country brand development focused on distancing Slovenia from the old economic and political system before the transition. The rebranding of the country had an aim to disassociate the country from the notion of “Balkan-ness” and instead promote itself as a Central European country (Hall, 2002).

The first country branding campaign was launched in 1986, when Slovenia was still part of the former Yugoslavia. “Slovenia – my country” was a campaign that was immediately accepted by local inhabitants. One of its goals was to raise national awareness and self-esteem of locals. The slogan “Tourism are people” encouraged inhabitants to market Slovenia to foreigners, and in this way fostered involvement in the branding process. In the same period, the slogan “On the sunny side of Alps” was launched to promote Slovenia on foreign markets. The entire campaign was accompanied with a linden leaf logo that represented a symbol of Slovenian identity. The campaign (including slogans and logo) was in use for a period of ten years and was well perceived by locals and foreigners.

In 1996, the logo as well as slogan changed. The linden leaf was replaced by a bundle of flowers, which was in use until 2006. The bundle of flowers logo was not well accepted by locals, but it was positively adopted by tourist workers, since they used it in promotional activities for a decade. During this period, slogans were frequently changed. In not more than an 8-year period, there were attempts to use at least five slogans, among which the slogan “The green piece of Europe” was used most commonly. In 2004, with the accession to the European Union, a new campaign and slogan “Slovenia invigorates” was introduced. This campaign represented the first attempt to establish a brand and slogan not only in the field of tourism, but also in other areas. The campaign was discontinued in 2006, since foreigners

as well as Slovenians had many difficulties understanding both the campaign and the slogan. All marketing activities during this period were primarily focused on and oriented to foreign markets and not to local inhabitants.

In addition to a variety of slogans and attempts to build the brand of Slovenia in its short history, several additional marketing activities were prepared for specific purposes only and aimed at specific media. These campaigns were not designed in line with brand directions. One of such was the advertisement about Slovenia on CNN Europe, implemented by the Slovenian Tourist Board in 2006. The advertisement was accompanied by a slogan “Slovenia, a diversity to discover”, which was used only in this campaign. Moreover, the bundle of flowers, Slovenia’s official logo in that period, was replaced by the Slovenian flag.

Looking through the short Slovenian history and its brand development, we can conclude that the majority of mistakes in country branding in Central and Eastern Europe, stressed by Szondi (2007), can also be observed in branding Slovenia. To indicate only the most important ones: lack of strategy and continuous development evident in short-term thinking; too frequent slogan changes, which were, at least in the recent period, too general and did not differentiate Slovenia from its competitors; the emphasis was based only on advertising, while other marketing tools were not used enough; lack of knowledge about effective country branding; in the period of the last 10 years, local people did not identify with the brand, nor did they support it, which was one of the reasons for frequent changes in separate marketing activities and campaigns.

Excessive and too frequent changes (mostly in slogans) were met with opposition and negativity, as Slovenian residents felt that future attempts of brand development would fail to be successful. Finally, the Slovenian government recognised that the country did not only need a new slogan and logo, which had been the main discussion until that period, but also a real and systematic branding strategy to be followed in future management and marketing activities for Slovenia.

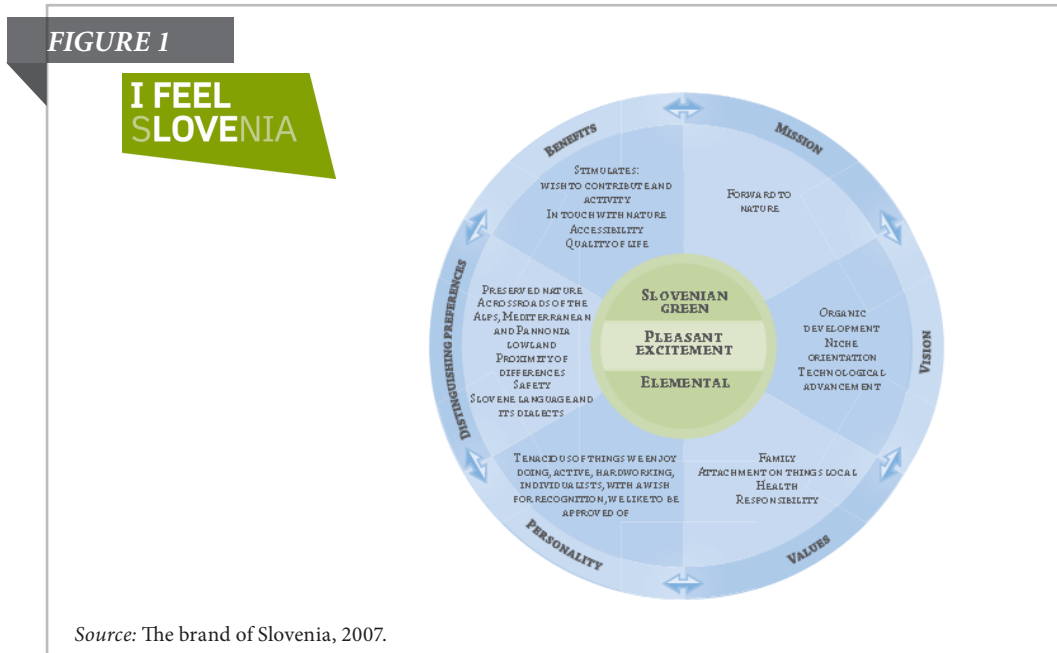
In 2007, a large-scale project for building the country brand of Slovenia was implemented (Konecnik Ruzzier, 2011; Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony, in press). The latest findings in the field of country brand development and marketing were considered (Cai, 2002; Morgan & Pritchard, 2002; Morgan, Pritchard & Piggot, 2002 and 2003). The new project differed from past country marketing activities primarily in the following two aspects: brand development was carried out from an identity perspective and aimed at the brand’s long-term survival, and all relevant stakeholders of the country participated in brand development and implementation, thus paving the way for its long-term survival and success.

The new Slovenia brand was not built merely for tourism purposes, as it had been the case in the past, but instead strove to embrace all important parts of Slovenia. The following key areas were included: economy, tourism, culture, science, sports, state and the civic sphere. Furthermore, in order to gain important feedback on the topic, all crucial stakeholders were invited to take part in building Slovenia’s brand identity. Employing a three-step approach to identity building, the following target groups were invited to actively participate in the brand development: opinion leaders from key areas, representatives of key areas and the largest target group - the residents of Slovenia.

During the I feel Slovenia brand development, the efforts were aimed at including identity

characteristics of the country of Slovenia, and ensuring that the key idea, which was to be communicated at home and abroad, would be clear and simple. All identity elements clearly indicate the necessity of including nature and natural concepts in the Slovenia brand (Figure 1). The identity elements (vision, mission, values, personality, benefits and distinguishing preferences) served as a starting point for developing the story of the Slovenia brand, constantly interacting to fulfil brand promises at the functional, emotional and experiential level. The Government Communication Office became the brand guardian, and its mission for the following years is to present the brand to local inhabitants and foreigners.

BRAND I FEEL SLOVENIA



During the process, our aim was to develop a brand and marketing strategy that would be considerably different from branding strategies applied in other countries. In relation to that, the following features of the I feel Slovenia brand should be pointed out. Firstly, the principal identity meaning of the brand is generated through the experiential promise of the Slovenian green. In this context, the shade of green is not associated solely with the colour, but also with the entire experience that one enjoys in Slovenia. Secondly, the mentioned identity story is narrated through its two visual elements (slogan and logo). Designed in accordance with the suggested colour, the logo serves as an enhancement of the slogan, while the brand carries the same name (Figure 1).

V. RESEARCH ON THE FIRST RESPONSE OF LOCALS TO THE NEW BRAND I FEEL SLOVENIA

The survey on the first response of locals to the new brand I feel Slovenia was conducted in July 2008. The sample for data analysis included 200 residents of Slovenia, who were interviewed in person in the three largest Slovenian cities: Ljubljana, Maribor and Novo mesto. The sample is a convenience sample.

The main research goal was to obtain local inhabitants' first reactions and responses to the new brand I feel Slovenia. The survey refers to Slovenian inhabitants only and not to the foreign public, since past experience showed that brands which were accepted by locals could survive and be successful for a long period.

It should be noted that the study was conducted half a year after the brand formation, which is a relatively short period of time for this kind of research. Within this period, only a few marketing activities were implemented in relation to the new brand, which centred merely on some branding aspects, such as the slogan, logo, colour and main story, and less on the brand's identity elements. Before the survey was carried out, the following general or specific marketing activities were undertaken: the brand development process was intensively covered by the Slovenian media; some promotional material was prepared; brochures were sent to all Slovenian households at the beginning of July 2008; and at the beginning of July 2008, advertisements about I feel Slovenia were released in print media and related billboards were launched. This should be born in mind when interpreting the results regarding the residents' first response.

Stemming from the above mentioned facts, further hypotheses guided our study:

Hypothesis 1: Slovenians will be aware of the new brand I feel Slovenia and have some knowledge about it.

Hypothesis 1 a: Slovenians will be familiar with visual elements of I feel Slovenia brand.

Hypothesis 1 b: Slovenians will be less familiar with separate brand identity elements.

The study instrument included questions about the knowledge of and first response to the new brand I feel Slovenia. Furthermore, some questions compared the new brand with previous branding activities in Slovenia. Sociodemographic questions about respondents were added at the end of the study instrument. With the exception of one question, the study instrument included closed questions. All closed questions can be placed into one of the following categories. First, most questions required respondents to select one or more answers. The answers to the latter are analysed as percentages. Second, some questions included Likert-type scales, where respondents ranked items on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 means strongly disagree and 5 means strongly agree). These types of questions are analysed with means and standard deviations. Third, in one closed question, respondents had to rank the indicated slogans according to their preferences. The results of this question are analysed as percentages. The only open question referred to the recall of brand logo, where respondents were asked to draw it or describe its characteristics with a few words.

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Sample

The sample consisted of 200 respondents, 55 percent of which were female and 45 percent male. Most were aged from 25 to 34 years (31.5 percent), followed by the age group up to 24 years (27 percent). Fifty-five point five percent of respondents fell in the 35 to 44 age range, while a lesser percentage belonged to the age range of 45 to 54 years (13.3 percent). Nine percent were aged between 55 and 64 years, with the smallest share of respondents aged 65 or more (3.5 percent). Respondents were from all parts of Slovenia. The largely represented region of residence was Dolenjska with Bela Krajina (32.5 percent), followed by central Slovenia (26 percent), Stajerska (24.5 percent) and less represented Gorenjska (6.5 percent). Other regions were represented with 2.5 percent or less. Thirty-five point five percent of the interviews were carried out in Ljubljana, 32.5 percent in Novo mesto and 32 percent in Maribor.

B. Recognition of the new brand I feel Slovenia and noticing initial marketing activities

To begin with, respondents' recognition of the new Slovenia brand was examined. Seventy-one percent stated that they had heard about the new country brand, whereas 29 percent of them answered that they had not heard about it.

We were interested in when and where respondents first noticed initial general marketing activities of the I feel Slovenia brand. Most of them, 34 percent, became familiar with the new brand at the end of 2007, during the process of brand development. A smaller share, 20 percent, first noticed brand-related activities during the first three months of 2008, from April to June (16.5 percent) and from the beginning of July until the day of the interview (7 percent). Communication activities were not observed by 22 percent of participants. We also asked respondents about the media to find out where they noticed marketing activities. The majority saw the brand marketing activities on television (48.5 percent), followed by print media (25.5 percent), billboards (24 percent) and tourist brochures (13.5 percent). Only 5.5 percent heard about the new brand on the radio, not more than 3 percent read the Guide to the brand of Slovenia, while 3.5 percent noticed promotion in other places (tourist fairs, promotion brochures or heard about it from friends).

Further on, respondents were asked about noticing any kind of special promotional material and communication activities of the I feel Slovenia brand. The majority, 48.5 percent, were familiar with promotional material (T-shirts, caps, paper bags, etc.), followed by household brochures with 43 percent. Moreover, 27 percent of respondents already visited the brand's webpage. Special newspaper advertisements and billboards, which had been released at the beginning of July 2008, were indicated least frequently (only by 13.5 percent of respondents).

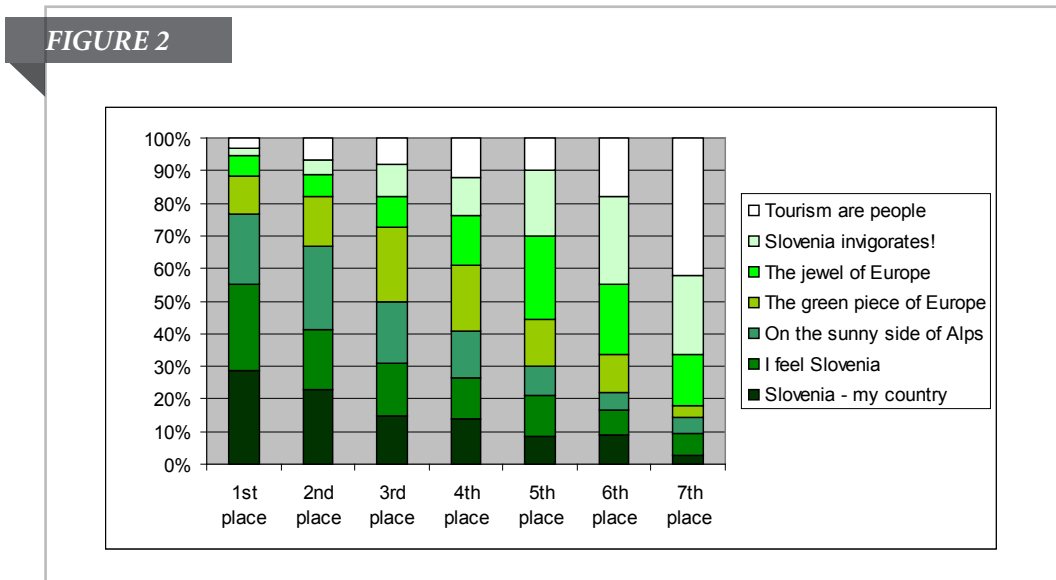
C. Visual identity of the new brand I feel Slovenia

It was discovered that the slogan “I feel Slovenia” is very recognisable, since 86 percent of respondents successfully identified it as the new slogan. “The green piece of Europe” was identified as Slovenia’s new slogan by just 7.5 percent of respondents, and was followed by slogans “Slovenia – my country” (3 percent), “On the sunny side of Alps” (2.5 percent) and “Slovenia invigorates” (1 percent). The results show that the recognition of the new slogan is very high.

Going even further, we asked respondents about their slogan preferences. The majority put two slogans on the first place, that is, the slogan of the “Slovenia – my country” campaign (28.5 percent) and the new slogan “I feel Slovenia” (26.5 percent), while the slogan “On the sunny side of Alps” made it to the second place and “The green piece of Europe” to the third and fourth place. The slogans that followed were: “The jewel of Europe” on the fifth place, “Slovenia invigorates” on the sixth place and “Tourism are people” at the very end. The survey results indicate that the slogan “Slovenia – my country” remains the favourite slogan among respondents. However, the new slogan, “I feel Slovenia”, was positioned very close to it. Until today, no other slogan came as close to the first campaign as this one, which is a very good indication. We can assume that the new brand could become at least as popular as the first campaign. The results of respondents’ preferences are shown in Figure 2.

Country brand I feel Slovenia: First response from locals

RESPONDENTS’ PREFERENCES OF SLOGANS



SOURCE: Author

High recognition of and high preferences for the new slogan were confirmed in both statements that required respondents to use a scale from 1 to 5 (Table 2). Both statements regarding slogan perception were rated higher than the neutral mean (3). “I like the new slogan” was rated with a mean of 3.45, while the statement about the slogan not being too

general received the mean score of 3.11. Nevertheless, standard deviation of the first statement is 1.11 and 1.05 regarding the second statement, which tells us that variability in opinions about the statements is high. Values in the data set are on average spread farther away from the mean, which tells us that respondents' opinions regarding the slogan were quite different. We also merged both sentences, calling the new construct the likeliness of the slogan. The value of Cronbach's alpha was 0.676.

TABLE 2— Mean values and standard deviations for rating of slogan "I feel Slovenia"

Statements	Mean	SD
I like the new slogan "I feel Slovenia".	3.45	1.11
The slogan "I feel Slovenia" is not too general.	3.11	1.05




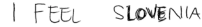

Notes: 1 - strongly disagree

5 - strongly agree

SOURCE: Author

Furthermore, the recall and knowledge of the new logo were examined, as respondents were requested to sketch the brand logo. The sketches were then classified into five different groups according to the recall of the new logo (Table 3).

TABLE 3— Sketches of the recalled "I feel Slovenia" logo

Example	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
				

SOURCE: Author

The first group represents the precisely drawn logos, which means that respondents drew a correct quadrilateral and indicated the green colour as well as the bolded phrase "I feel love" inside the slogan "I feel Slovenia". Four point five percent of participants sketched the new logo correctly, while 5 percent drew the logo nearly properly, missing one of its characteristics. The third group comprises drawings that included just the written slogan, without the logo; those amounted to 17.5 percent. Respondents from the fourth group sketched logos of past presentation campaigns and other state symbols (10 percent), whereas 63 percent of respondents did not manage to recall or draw any logo. Based on survey results, we can conclude that the recall of the new logo is not very high among respondents.

In addition to logo recall, we were interested in whether respondents liked the logo and found it recognisable (Table 4). The statement about liking the new logo was rated with a mean of 3.32, while the statement about the logo being very recognisable was also rated higher than the neutral mean, i.e. 3.07. Standard deviations for statements are 0.94 and 0.83 respectively, which tells us that the variability in respondents' opinions of the new logo was quite high. The new likeliness construct of the new logo, where both sentences were merged, is reliable, with Cronbach's alpha of both statements amounting to 0.759.

TABLE 4— Mean values and standard deviations for rating of the I feel Slovenia logo

Statements	Mean	SD
I like the new logo of the Slovenia brand.	3.32	0.94
The slogan “I feel Slovenia” is not too general.	3.07	0.83

Notes: 1 - strongly disagree
5 - strongly agree

SOURCE: Author

In contrast to a low recall of the new logo, logo likeliness and its recognition received more favourable responses. Both statements were rated higher than the neutral mean, which implies higher agreement than disagreement with proposed sentences.

According to the above presented results, Hypothesis 1 a can be confirmed. On average, Slovenians were aware of the new brand, especially there were familiar with the new slogan I feel Slovenia.

D. Brand identity I feel Slovenia

In addition to knowledge and likeliness of the visual elements of the new brand, we also asked respondents about the content of the brand. Thirty-five percent of them answered that they were familiar with the brand content, 33 percent of them had some idea about the content, while 32 percent were not familiar with it.

Similar results regarding the brand content are evident in responses to the statement “I know a lot about the content of the new brand I feel Slovenia”, which was rated with the mean of 2.98 and standard deviation of 1.12. The results imply that respondents neither agree nor disagree with the proposed statement. They usually have some general idea about the brand content, but are not familiar with all identity characteristics of the new brand.

The majority of respondents recognised that the main colour denoting the new brand is green. The green colour was chosen by 76.5 percent of respondents. The second stated colour was blue (10.5 percent), which was followed by red (5.5 percent), white (4.5 percent) and yellow (2.5 percent). Respondents’ high agreement regarding green as the most appropriate colour for our country was also confirmed in responses to the statement “The green colour describes the country of Slovenia the best”, with a mean of 4.14 and standard deviation of 0.83.

Moreover, we investigated respondents’ identification with the I feel Slovenia brand and their willingness to help in the brand’s future development process (Table 5). With regard to the three proposed statements, respondents reported that they had not identified themselves with the new brand yet and did not feel like brand contributors at the time of investigation, nor were they willing to contribute to its development in the future. Also here standard deviations reflect quite a large amount of variability in the proposed statements. Furthermore, the three sentences were combined in the construct of identification with the brand’s identity, with

Cronbach's alpha at 0.764.

TABLE 5— Means and standard deviations of respondents' identification with the brand

Statements	Mean	SD
I can identify myself with the brand.	2,80	1,03
I feel like a contributor to the brand.	1,96	1,02
In the future, I will contribute to the brand's development.	2,32	1,02

Notes: 1 - *strongly disagree*
5 - *strongly agree*

SOURCE: Author

According to these results, it can be speculated that such low identification and willingness to contribute to the I feel Slovenia brand partly relates to not being familiar with the brand content, story and identity. Therefore the hypothesis 1 b can be confirmed. Furthermore, the reason for the low motivation for brand contribution could also be attributed to past branding activities of the country, which were subject to rapid changes in the past. Consequently, respondents no longer believe that the new brand has a brighter future. Our findings imply that additional efforts are needed in the future to bring the I feel Slovenia brand closer to local inhabitants.

VII. CONCLUSION

Countries in the global marketplace are facing the greatest challenges ever. The signals they are sending to the world are becoming increasingly important, since a lot of countries are fighting for the same achievements, such as more investments, larger numbers of tourists, higher exports of their goods and services, and enhanced reputation. Instead of merely taking country branding into consideration, governments must work strategically and systematically on their country brands.

It is not easy to build a strong country brand in a saturated marketplace, as they are even more complex than other types of brands. The brand manager or guardian of a country brand must therefore take into account a variety of influential stakeholder groups that constitute and live the brand. Influential stakeholders should be invited to take an active part in brand formation or development, as well as in its further implementation. The brand guardian, many times the government or national tourist board, needs to take care that the most important country characteristics, as perceived by influential stakeholders, are integrated in the brand's identity and story. The guardian also needs to ensure that the new brand can truly offer the promised characteristics and experiences.

The role of local inhabitants or residents is extremely significant in the process of country branding. Many studies stress (i.e. Morgan, Pritchard and Piggot, 2002 and 2003; Szondi, 2007) that the success of the country brand highly depends upon the active participation and identification with the brand of local people, who could be treated primarily as an internal, but also as an external interest group.

This paper discusses the first response of local inhabitants to the new brand I feel Slovenia.

The review of branding activities of Slovenia in its short history is presented, analysing the process of country branding from past presentation campaigns to the systematic and strategic development of the I feel Slovenia brand. Due to the first systematic approach undertaken in the branding process, which has been developed as a result of collaboration and opinions of various stakeholders, the brand has huge potential for future success. Local inhabitants were invited to take an active part in brand development. In addition, their role in brand implementation was considered precious. Therefore, obtaining the first response of locals to the new brand was crucial. The results imply, that the main hypothesis of the study can be confirmed, because Slovenians were aware of the new brand I feel Slovenia and had some knowledge about it. The research was conducted only half a year after the new brand was born. Since country branding is a long-term process, the survey results provide only the first feedback on the new brand I feel Slovenia.

Research results reveal that the recognition of Slovenia's new country brand is high, as 71 percent of local inhabitants stated that they were familiar with it. A considerable number of respondents (34 percent) heard about the new brand already during the process of brand development, mostly likely due to the fact that this significant topic and systematic branding approach were covered regularly in the most important Slovenian media. The slogan "I feel Slovenia" was very recognisable despite the short period of its existence, since 86 percent of respondents identified it as the new slogan. In addition, it was ranked very high among the preferences, even in comparison to the best campaigns and slogans in the short Slovenian history. The slogan was also well rated with respect to the construct of likeliness. The recall of the new logo was not very high; however, its recognition and likeliness were rated quite well among locals. Undoubtedly, the above survey results are encouraging and indicate that the new brand has great potential for success and long-term survival.

In contrast to encouraging results regarding the new brand and its visual identity recognition, some findings imply that further work on the brand is needed. Only thirty-five percent of respondents reported that they were familiar with the brand content, while 33 percent of them had some idea about the content, probably relating to the main brand colour. The green colour was chosen by 76.5 percent of respondents. According to respondents' opinion, green is the most appropriate colour for denoting our country. Having relatively little knowledge about the brand content can be partly ascribed to respondents' low identification with the I feel Slovenia brand and the lack of willingness to help in the brand's future development process. These results should be seriously investigated and appropriate measures should be implemented to include the locals into brand implementation. In order to encourage local inhabitants to become actively involved in promoting and living the new brand, the guardian could, for example, organise price-winning games and award winners with promotional material of the I feel Slovenia brand.

The presented research results show that the brand guardian will still have to face a number of challenges. The branding process was developed systematically; in the future, it is time for its implementation on domestic and foreign markets. As the focus in this paper was placed only on the domestic market, some ideas on implementing the brand among local inhabitants are provided. It should be noted that systematic and related branding activities can bring the I feel Slovenia brand closer to local inhabitants. The real success of the brand will be reached only when the Slovenians and local organisations use and live the new brand. The results will thus be seen on a long-term basis.

The research has several limitations. First, as was already mentioned, it was conducted only half a year after the new brand was born, which is a really short time for this kind of study. Second, since the convenient sample was chosen as a non-probability sample, we cannot extrapolate conclusions from the sample to the whole Slovenian population. Third, to truly capture the locals' identification with the new brand, more indirect statements should be proposed in the questionnaire. The present study should be replicated on a probability sample of local inhabitants in a reasonable period of time.

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DRŽAVNI BREND I FEEL SLOVENIA: PRVI ODAZIV NA LOKALNOM NIVOU

SAŽETAK

Rad analizira koncept brendiranja države. Središte pažnje je na utjecajnim dionicima koji bi trebali sudjelovati u razvoju i implementaciji branda. Točnije rečeno, naglašava se iznimno važna uloga lokalnog stanovništva. Rad se usredotočuje na brendiranje države u Sloveniji i istražuje prvi odgovor stanovnika na novi brend I feel Slovenia koji je implementiran 2007. Istraživanje je provedeno godinu i pol nakon uvođenja novog branda. Rezultati ukazuju na to da brend ima velike potencijale za uspjeh jer je općenito dobro prepoznat i percipiran od strane najveće unutarnje interesne skupine – lokalnog stanovništva.

Ključne riječi: *brend, država, lokalno stanovništvo, Slovenija, I feel Slovenia.*