

Branding Cyprus: From the Cyprus Problem to Markos Baghdatis

At the end of Marcos Baghdatis' defeat at the Gerry Weber Open final in Germany earlier this month, the organizers brought out a small unappetizing cake to celebrate the Cypriot's tennis star's 22nd birthday. A polite and genuine gesture for a colourful sportsman whose temperament and talent by admission of the International Tennis Federation have animated an otherwise dull (bar Nadal) circuit.

The cake was marked with the Cyprus flag. In the world of fast information and images and faster impressions the Baghdatis-Cyprus connection at that moment generated more positive recognition for Cyprus than any Cyprus Tourism Organisation campaign featuring computer tampered squeaky clean images of beaches and mountain tops.

We all have 'brand' perceptions of countries, cities and companies which tend to determine our behaviour towards them. In Cyprus we've always been conscious of what foreigners think of us both as a tourist destination but above all in terms of how they understand our position on the political problem.

Every year Global Market Insite Inc (www.gmi-mr.com) ranks many of the world's 'nation brands' by surveying over 25,000 consumers in 35 nations. The brand of a nation is produced by analyzing perceptions of the cultural, political and commercial assets, the investment potential and tourist appeal of each nation. This in turn is interpreted into a measurement of 'national brand power'. A good result indicating a positive nation brand provides a competitive advantage in today's global marketplace. Like multinationals, countries compete with each other for the attention, respect and trust of investors, tourists, consumers and the media.

We've all read about how the World Cup in Germany – by far the biggest media event of 2006 - elevated the German brand, crushed deeply held negative perceptions about Germany and improved the country's image (even, it is said, among Germans themselves). We saw it happening after the successful organization of the Olympics in Athens which, combined with Greece's victory in the UEFA Football Championship in Portugal that year, elevated a whole nation and altered its own outlook and particularly the way others saw it.

Cyprus and Greece are not included in the GMI survey (Sweden tops the list, Germany is ranked sixth and Turkey last after Russia, China and India).

It is not difficult to identify the key elements that form the basis of the global brand recognition of Cyprus: Souvenir shops on the islands of Milos and Ios would disagree but it is safe to assume that Aphrodite holds a Cypriot (and EU) passport and is a popular reference vehicle for the Cyprus brand. Richard the Lionheart's connection to Cyprus was too dreamy to feature permanently. True the oft asked "isn't there a problem there with the Turks?" element and the much advertised 'last divided capital of Europe' are popular perceptions. Throw in some halloumi if food is your portal to the world and that is where roughly it all ends. Our accession to the EU gave the country some brand credibility but missed opportunities such as Cyprus' huge ship register making the EU the biggest ship register in the world were left unexploited when in fact they could have boosted our global brand.

Enter Marcos Baghdatis. Born 11 years after 1974, talented, charming, laid-back but also temperamental; tri-lingual and very European. If he wins any grand slam down the line he'll be elevated to Cyprus' global ambassador. He will personify the way the world identifies and appreciates Cyprus. Of course, like him, Cyprus counts hundreds of agile, hard working and focused professionals both here and abroad who are capable of carrying the Cyprus brand. At the

end of the day we know we will never host a World Cup or the Olympic Games. So all we can do is to encourage more Baghdatis' to excel in what they do and hope that the state will prove clever enough to help and embrace them. It appears our only asset with branding potential is the human one.