

Branding the Baltic Sea Region: "Just do it"

by Uffe Ellemann-Jensen

Branding – everybody speaks about it and takes possession of the word as if it alone is a stamp of recognition and respect. If you are talking about branding you must be up to something big whether you are a local politician or the CEO of a huge corporation. The word has been used and abused so much and so often by politicians, businessmen and marketing hot shots that it is on the verge of becoming a cliché, defunct and useless.

Let me tell you that within Baltic Development Forum (BDF) branding is not just a fad or a fancy buzz word. We have been looking at branding the Baltic Sea Region ever since we first put it on the agenda of our St. Petersburg Summit in 2001. In the past few years it has gained a still higher priority as we have recognized the need to create more awareness and give the region a more distinct profile so it can stand out in an increasingly competitive global environment.

In the global competition, you have no choice – there is only the fast lane. That's why we, at BDF, have decided to focus on the region's strengths and not ignore our weaknesses in order to identify our comparative advantages and devise a strategy that will ensure that the region can remain a frontrunner and a magnet for capital, talent and innovative thinking.

What we may lack in natural resources we have, over the years, compensated for by developing infrastructure, bringing our education systems up to the highest levels, and creating friendly business environments. When we look around in the region and its 11 fabulous countries today, it is obvious that this strategy has paid off. What we see are the clusters of biotech companies in Medicon Valley, the global leaders in high tech, the prowess of the region's financial sector, and the power houses of innovation backed and funded by a combination of private and public resources. All this testifies to the fact that the region already has accomplished a lot and has a lot more going for it.

At a string of conferences, seminars and, of course, at several summit sessions, BDF has taken a stab at how we can present the Baltic Sea Region as a coherent region that is equally attractive to investment, business, research and tourism despite the obvious differences and obstacles in geography, history and culture. Whether we would call it branding or something else, the task and the challenge was to define the differences that divide the region and the similarities that tie it together in order to build identity and help it with positioning itself as a leader. The issues at stake are image, identity and perception.

The goal we set for ourselves was to promote the Baltic Sea Region in a way that in future rankings by the Economist or other respectable magazines and organizations, the region would come up on top of them all as the leading region preferred by companies and people from all over as their favourite place for business, investment, education, entertainment and leisure. This is setting the bar very high, but the point is that this is where you want to go when you start a branding campaign – you want to be on top and not running just as one of the numbers in the pack.

We have clearly chosen to be on top of Europe, and we have, indisputably, much working for us in that respect. One of our core advantages is the high level of education in the entire region – one of the absolute preconditions for achieving success in today's world. Research and development comes on top of that and several of the regional centres have over the years proved that they can be world leaders in their particular fields. But life in the fast lane of global competition does not let anyone rest on their laurels. In yesterday's world there was not such a thing as a free lunch. In today's world, there is not such a thing as a secure position when we talk about competition in a globalized market place.

I feel that history has given our region a unique chance not just by putting the conflicts and divisions of the past behind us, but also by bringing together societies that are quite diverse in economic development and creating a dynamic mix between mature economies and the transition economies which show growth rates that are very hard to achieve for others. There is no doubt in my mind that with the adequate policies, we will be able to exploit these differences and turn them to our advantages both in our own growing home market and in our position as a gateway to the EU.

The free movement of labour and the exchange of talent across the borders will become one of the region's lifelines and help building the foundations for its future success. One of the future challenges will not just be to keep attracting capital and investment, but to create an environment that will remain attractive to the best and brightest among the talents that our region will keep producing. In today's reality, there is no doubt that many of them will go to other parts of the world in search of opportunity. It is our task to create the conditions that will appeal to our home grown talents and make our region appear as the most attractive place for them to pursue their professional aspirations and fulfil their dreams.

To brand an entire region is an enormously ambitious task. It's much easier to talk about devising the right policies, cross border collaboration and coordination, and implementation of strategies. Whatever word we choose, whatever road we prefer, and whatever tool we select, it is clear to me that the Baltic Sea Region, after the years of post-cold war euphoria, now is in the process of taking ownership of the new opportunities and transforming some of the dreams into reality.

It certainly is more demanding than cheering and toasting with champagne. But we have already seen some of the results and despite hardship and some inevitable failures, the progress is encouraging. It will be the prerogative of the future generations to pass the final judgment on how successful this process has been whatever name or label they will put on it.

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