

Emerson Students Be-Brand Israel

By Allison Moore - Wednesday July 30 2008

One of the posters featuring aspects of life in Israel. Marketing program promotes Israeli culture

A group of local graduate students was recently tasked with an unusual marketing project. Rather than attract customers to a new product, they needed to create a more positive image for the entire State of Israel.

The students, finishing a master's program in Global Marketing Communication and Advertising at Emerson College, worked with the Israeli Consulate General in New York City to find ways to make people, particularly young liberals, see Israel in a more positive light. Working in two small groups under Professor Thomas Vogel, they brainstormed how to make people stop thinking of the country as a war-torn territory.

David Saranga, consul for media and public affairs, said he chose this group to help with the project because the students represented the people he wanted to target.

"One of the challenges we have is with this young generation," he said. "We want to see what they want to hear, and what Israel can do for them."

Focusing on areas from gay rights to environmental technology, the students sought to re-brand the country as a progressive, technologically advanced place to visit. Their "Think again" campaign, a series of print ads, drew connections between Israel and issues that their demographic cared deeply about.

"We had to change the perceptions of people," said student Deniz Caner. "They didn't know about Israel, just about the conflict. Some were not even curious, and we had to change that."

One group researched the green movement in the country, and was surprised to find that Israelis contributed a large percentage of the technology that powers solar panels and wind turbines around the world. They also highlighted how progressive Israel has proven to be

in terms of gay rights; Tel Aviv in particular has shown an incredible amount of support for the gay and lesbian community.

Other ads focused on areas like food and wine and well being, ideas the groups found most tourists could relate to. One ad portrays the Dead Sea as “the world’s largest natural spa,” while another highlights the fact that Israel is one of the largest producers of sushi.

“We wanted our audience to be influential,” said student Jonathan Rodrigues, explaining how he and his classmates narrowed their targeted demographic. “Members of the gay and lesbian community, for example, are being heard by tons of people. They’re a symbol of progression.”

Picking specific groups also helped cut costs, said class member Nathan White. For instance, he said, the students found they could target ads on popular social networking site Facebook to incredibly specific types of people.

The students also zeroed in on the idea of “voluntourism,” a trend that shows more and more travelers using their vacations to do service projects and learn about improving the world.

“These people are culturally curious,” said student Gizem Salcigil. “They’re the best people to spread the word [about our ideas]. They come back from their trips and want to share their experiences.” She and her classmates wanted to help people see Israel as a reliable, helpful country that is willing to work together with others for a better tomorrow, she said.

This project was unlike any other the marketing students had worked on.

“In a nutshell,” said Rodrigues, “it was like branding a forbidden product. Not everyone agrees on the positions Israel takes, so it’s had problems with image in the media.” When studying advertising or marketing, there’s a tendency to work on consumer goods or services, he said. “This time we’re doing neither. A country is not something you use and then throw away – this challenge was very different.” His classmate Varot Chittangwong agreed, but said that the fact the students all came from different backgrounds, many outside of the U.S., helped them maintain a global perspective.

Keeping in mind their limited resources and time allowance, the students felt they accomplished their goal. The consul agreed. “I was impressed with the level of creativity,” Saranga said. “Creativity in marketing is so important. I was also very impressed with the profound work they did.” He and his staff plan to implement some of

the students' ideas in the near future, he said.

“[The class] was able to use consumer insight, trying to ultimately focus on human behavior within a cross-cultural environment,” said Professor Vogel. “We built bridges and created matchmaking opportunities between the demographic and the ideas... I think we’ve done a fairly interesting and very successful job.”

“It’s an ongoing process,” said student Ameay Kumar. “It’ll take some time, but this is a good start.”