

ADVERTISING IS A SERIOUS THING

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Imagine a TV ad that goes like this – a smiling person appears on the screen and starts explaining how ordinary and normal he or she is, and telling you about his or her life, dreams and everyday routine. They're not trying to sell you a cleaning product, some foodstuffs or anything else. What we are supposed to "buy" is the conviction that this person is really as depicted and that we could imagine him or her to be our favourite neighbour. This is happening in Italy and in Spain, and the people in these commercials are immigrants from Romania – more precisely they are the few of them selected as a positive example, to improve the reputation of all the entrants from that country. The Romanian Government has decided for this step because the media sensationalism in Italy and Spain had created such an ugly atmosphere around its citizens who live there. The project "Romanians in Europe" has costed the Government about 7.5 million Euro, but the reactions are not easy to predict. Citizens might appreciate the initiative, but the economic issue will be discussed as well. To an average TV viewer, however, this will open a window into an unknown world, because even if Italy is a home of more than 600.000 Romanian citizens, a great number of the locals don't know any of them personally. The attitudes and the fears, research shows, are caused by what is shown by the media, and not by direct experience, and this may be why in Italy the campaign has been called "Romania, nice to meet you", and its slogan reminds us: "To understand a people – we must know the persons who comprise it."

The great number of Romanian immigrants in Italy and Spain is not surprising, because there is a significant similarity between these Romance peoples, especially when it comes to language.

Marketing with a cause

At a first glance – it's an example of cause related marketing, the kind of advertising for the common good, known in Italy as *Pubblicità progresso*, like the foundation that's working on that for decades, and is a category which also includes the *public service announcements*, associated, in the US, with the Ad Council. But the situation is, however, more complex. In Romania, there are elections this year [2008], on November, 30th, and the number of voters abroad is really considerable; furthermore, quite a few of them live exactly in Italy and Spain. I wouldn't want to create controversies, but I must note that Italy has used the reputation of Romanian citizens to influence its election results, more than once, and now Romania is trying to act – perhaps with different motives, but undoubtedly during its election campaign – helping its citizens abroad, instead of worsening their situation.

It is becoming ever more difficult to understand what is really going on in the world we live in, especially if someone is using the methods which are not exactly correct. In Italy, for example, a research has discovered a surprising increase in the presence of the crime section on the TV news in 2006 and 2007. It has also been disproportionately concentrated on the culprits from the immigrant population, and used by the politicians, who have discovered that if they use the brands "security" and "extracomunitari" (which the Romanian citizens no longer are since Romania is a member of the EU), every statement sounds more convincing. Our "mental space" is getting fuller, and the presence in it is fought over by all kinds of ideas, messages and information, as is explained in the book "Advertising is a serious thing" by Michele Rizzi, still in 1987. The competition for our mindshare goes on, everyone wants a part of our attention, since accordingly to this theory it is only able to take into consideration a certain number of brands and keywords at a time. Therefore it is becoming increasingly frequent that the politicians employ or even surpass the advertisers. But let's go back to the campaign I am writing about.

The real life

The job has been assigned to two agencies – in Italy to the relatively young Playteam (and the website creation has seen the participations of Digital Kitchen and Reality Engine as well), and in Spain to the Romanian office of the international giant Saatchi&Saatchi. It has started in September [2008] and lasts for months. Different communication channels are being used, like the television, the press, thematic events, the Internet, organised trips to Romania for the journalists, etc. It wasn't easy to choose the right approach, for the delicacy of this subject and for the animosity of the atmosphere. Playteam have even admitted to have abandoned the idea of making posters, for the fear that these might be damaged, and for the questions of "the target", that is the group of people the message is intended for. Both in Italy and in Spain, they are hoping to reach the so called opinion leaders, persons capable of influencing others, thus spreading the message, and mention the "integrated communication." Spain has been dealt with by Saatchi&Saatchi Romania, who underline their "360 degree" approach. That means surrounding the consumer on all sides with ones idea, by various means. This includes a collaboration with the Spanish actor and director Carlos Iglesias, who had previously done a documentary about the life of Spanish immigrants in Switzerland. One hopes that the comprehension of the similarities between the Spanish and the Romanian migrations might help understand the relativity and the universality of the phenomenon. Both the "Italian" and the "Spanish" web site host various contents, and on the Spanish one there's also a discussion forum.

As far as the content, there's been a strategic decision to concentrate on the real life and underline the process of integration. Some doubt that the negative generalization, unfortunately, works better than the positive one, and that a more complex approach might have been called for, considering the nature of the task. In this period, in Italy, yet another campaign has been started (this time by the Italian Government), which shows immigrants who gladly accept local traditions. It also reminds us that they are industrious and harmless, and that "no one is born learned", whilst inviting us to read a "manual of integration" on their web site. Furthermore, the protagonists of these commercials are described both by citing their country of origin and by attributing them a local identity, such as: "Neapolitan for 3 years now." At least there's a recognition of the plurality of today's identities, but it is a pity that the immigrants are depicted only in inferior roles, and that the text invites them, in a very insistent and direct way, to know and respects the laws, which can be understood as useful, even for the realization of their own rights, but more often might be misinterpreted as distrust.

Shortcuts to a decision

The reputations of states, and places in general, and that of their populations, has been, for years, the area of study of Simon Anholt, who has coined the term nation branding in the nineties. He explains that there is a vicious circle, thanks to which a good reputation helps the already successful places to continue progressing, while the others, in spite of all the efforts and the results, remain the victims of a who knows how outdated bad fame and some often undeserved stereotypes. The vision that branding and advertising are a key to understanding different processes in today's societies can be found both in Anholt's writings and in an essay by Stefano Marsiglia who cites Vanni Codeluppi. The thesis is that - at the end of the eighties - capitalism becomes the only big ideology on the global level, and advertising its principle ideological paradigm. There is so much data, and so little time; so a brand serves as a shortcut to a decision, we are reminded by Anholt. He occupies himself with the practical implications of this approach as well, as an adviser to institutions, and giving conferences around the world (in the last years this has included Romania), and by creating a classification of brands of nations, states and cities. He underlines, though, the importance of a bidirectional dialogue between the communication and the political practice, since politics based solely on illusions is not nation branding, but propaganda. He refers to the citizens' criticisms and market feedback which should help in perfecting, and considers such an approach to society to be democratic because it is based on persuasion and not on coercion. But what comes to mind to me is that even an abuse of persuasion can be - if one has access to certain means and lacks in scruples - dangerous for the democracy. The same thing could be said for the

tendency to treat a state too much like a firm, like it happens in Italy, for example.

The Brazilians of Europe

Romania is not a simple country, and to understand it better I have spoken to Mihaela lordache, a Romanian journalist in Italy, whose article on the campaign I had read on the portal "Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso." Regarding the minorities, which have been cited as a controversial aspect due to the use of the term "Romanian", she says they are treated rather well, even present in the Parliament. Of course, when it comes to such a sensitive and important topic - we can never be too mindful. Mihaela has then described an interesting country in transition. Bucharest is still an interesting place, and Sibiu has been declared, in 2007, together with Luxembourg, as the European capital of culture. The foreign investments are enormous, including those by Italian firms, big and small, and there have also been some contributions for the European Union. The country is progressing, but in an unbalanced fashion, with the coexistence of a great numbers of the poor and some others, who are more or less rich, and a significant interest for the numerous new stores. There are many new private televisions, advertising agencies, etc. I notice the positioning, by Saatchi&Saatchi Romania, as the third at the Slovene advertising competition Golden drum. The senior copywriter of this agency, Theodora Szabo, has explained the development of the scene, from the transition when they've, she says, started from zero, to the role of the big international agencies like Ogilvy and McCann Erickson, and finally the contemporary stabilization of the market. The ads are everywhere, so they sometimes create resistance and other times become "a part of today's culture." They find inspiration in the local atmosphere and the billboards, some of which they find boring and others for which they wish they'd thought of it themselves. Jure Apih, the founder and president of Golden Drum, explains that they had noted the creativity of this country five years ago, and cites an article which has called its creatives "the Brazilians of Europe."

This reminds me of the title of a documentary on the theme of Italian emigration, which has a richer history that the immigration, that is so relevant today. The title suggested that a foreigner is something you - become. It is relative, who is foreign to whom in today's world, and I retain that communication, with its good and bad moments, in advertising and in everything else, has the most important role to play in these processes.

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