

POMMES FRITES & MAGRITTE

Branding Belgium as a prime investment location for foreign business, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister took to the airwaves and the print media to explain that being inventive and lucrative go hand-in-hand 'Only in Belgium'.

by Daniel F. Le Ray



Despite being the centre of the European Union and one of the most important countries on the world stage, what Belgium might be best known for is being known for nothing at all. But earlier this year the Chancellery of the Prime Minister commissioned the “Only in Belgium” campaign with Ogilvy & Mather, and the country stepped into the PR limelight: a series of print and broadcast advertisements aiming to attract new foreign investors presented Belgium as both a creative and lucrative place to do business. The ‘Invest in Belgium’ website was set up for an initial 50,000 Eu-

ros in November 2005 as a one-stop location for companies and financial advisors looking for investors’ information. Redesigned for each successive campaign, Director General for External Communications to the Office of the Prime Minister Olivier Alsteens calls it a small portal “to put people in contact with those who help build an investment here in Belgium. For instance you have the contact points of many different countries—the foreign investment

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bureau from the finance ministry.” From 2003 they had “tried to rebuild the image of Belgium towards investors—CEOs but also CFOs of companies—to convince them that something changed in Belgium.” What had changed were a number of industry fiscal laws, such as the new notional tax deduction regulation and tax exemption for Eurozone countries and their business partners.

Ogilvy was chosen to take up the promotion for the ‘Invest in Belgium’ message at the beginning of 2008 after an “official tender” to contract and assess several agency proposals. Alsteens explains that “we went to the market, asked different agencies to give us different proposals for the campaign and of these different proposals Ogilvy was very important because it was to the point, very strong. It’s Only in Belgium, and was a little bit joking.” The third round of the campaign was intended for 2007, but more pressing political problems interrupted those plans as the Belgian elections failed to produce a new government. Mie Demin, Strategic Creativity Advocate for Ogilvy Belgium, says that the Chancellery wanted the campaign to be “one hundred per cent non-political because of the political situation”. Newspapers such as *The Economist* were writing about how Belgium was broken in the wake of the general election, and the media were reporting on a supposed Belgian image campaign rather than an investment-focused promotion.

BOWLER HATS AND SAXOPHONES On March 10th Guy Verhofstadt launched Ogilvy’s campaign with a quotation from Oscar Wilde: “There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about”. With

a total budget of 1.5 million Euros, “Only in Belgium” would support the investment message with advertisements aired on BBC World and CNN, as well as print adverts in *The Economist*, the *Financial Times*, *The Bulletin* and other major news outlets.

Ogilvy set five or six “clear strategic choices”. Demin says that “the federal government explicitly wanted a commercial” but the challenge was not letting the campaign tread on the toes of regional communications designed to attract investors via promoting national fiscal regulations. Finding figures to use in the adverts was a matter of rights (obtaining

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copyright permissions for the Magritte and Lucky Luke images) as well as of politics (not presenting a divisive figure or one who would be well-known only in one Belgian region). “Magritte is quite well known, so we went to discuss with the owners of Magritte to say: ‘we need you to help our country, do something for us,’ and they accepted it quite keenly,” says Alsteens “And you have Adolphe Sax—I think everyone in the world knows the saxophone but not too many people know it comes from Belgium.”

PAINTING THE RIGHT IMAGE Alsteens also emphasises the importance of the iconic figures in relation to the market: “we were talking to relatively well-educated people who know Sax, who know Magritte, know the cartoons of Belgium, and we made the message that, ‘we have heart, but with heart you can also make money. Where? Only in Belgium’. It’s kind of making them a part of a joke.” The inventiveness of René Magritte or Adolphe Sax pointed out in a surprising way that “if you have imagination and an idea you can realise projects and profits”, according to Demin.

Ogilvy knew that it would “open the door to cynical remarks” about the nature of an ‘Only in Belgium’ message, but that such cynicism would only promote discussion and draw attention to the campaign. After the fallout from the 2007 elections, there may truly have been no such thing as bad publicity. Even Olivier Alsteens acknowledges that “we have a problem with image here in Belgium. There are questions inside the country about our future, about the reforms. We have some assets but it would be not responsible for me as the advisor for communication to say ‘we will

EXPERT OPINION

➔ **Only in Belgium: but should it be?**

The interesting point about the Only in Belgium campaign is that, while it presents itself as a campaign to encourage external investment, it could also build an image of Belgium as a nation. The nation of Belgium may well be subsumed within the global public consciousness beneath its links to the European Union and, despite its long history and associations with lace, chocolate and beer, have a little independent identity. So far the campaign is successful in terms of encouraging web traffic, though little evidence as yet points to increased investment or significant shifts in perception. Whether these will occur is a big question. The target audience is admittedly relatively well-educated, meaning this will reach and have impact upon an elite audience. Furthermore, despite being compatible with the traditional humility associated with the Belgian character, the simple yet humorous print advertisements may not be the best vehicle to promote a nation upon the world stage; raising a smile is not the same as raising intention to invest. However, the combination offered by the communication online and in print certainly makes the reader ask questions, such as how the Belgian tax system works, thus the campaign should grab attention and could place Belgium on the investment location map through offering these simple, memorable mental cues. It equally positions Belgium as a nation that offers more than a home to the European Union, one that has a strong history of innovation; perhaps Ogilvy's branding is equally one worth copying.



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➔ **Too much looking to the past?**

It is always a shame when advertising campaigns fall hostage to current affairs. History is littered with campaigns pulled at the last minute, or going ahead despite a change of circumstances. In Belgium's case, it is the difficult political situation that has monopolised headlines of late, not the country's investment-friendly tax regime. Legal and political stability are crucial issues for potential investors, and Belgium has unfortunately suffered from a lack of the latter. That being said, one also has to question the very thinking behind the campaign. While light-heartedness can be extremely effective in generating goodwill, the examples used were all firmly grounded in the country's past. Magritte, Morris and Adolphe Sax were undoubtedly geniuses, but none is any longer of this world. Investment is about the future! The jokey tone contrasts with the complicated underlying information on tax. The website itself, while simple and well-designed, does not adequately explain Belgium's tax benefits for foreign investors, concentrating mainly on the audiovisual sector. Finally, the campaign may have suffered from a scatter-gun approach even if the political situation had been more benign. It is difficult to make a detailed assessment of which communications channels would have been best to use, but quality undoubtedly matters more than quantity, especially regarding complicated tax issues. A more targeted approach, aiming at discerning opinion leaders and key investors, using techniques more akin to PR than mass advertising would probably have been more effective. And cheaper too!



Rurik Ingram
Partner, Brunswick Group

Since joining Brunswick in 1999, Rurik Ingram has helped develop its client-base within the European Union, advising on numerous cross-border Merger and Acquisition situations. He has also led several European Internal and Public Relations projects for clients. Ingram grew up in Portugal and France and is a Yale graduate.

make a big campaign worldwide to say we are the best.' With humility, he says: "we know we are not, but we have some very interesting assets for investors, so we organise campaigns to reach that public. For the brand of Belgium, of course."

Though reluctant to talk about any resultant contracts, he had recently spoken to the Prime Minister about another promotional tour, and can say that "about 40,000 people went to our website. About 10,000 of them come from Belgium, but 30,000 are from abroad. Firstly it is the United States—12,000 people—then you have British people, Germans, Chi-

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nese and Indian people.” Most of the traffic was directed towards the taxation advice pages, meaning that not only had they reached a healthy number of unique visitors, but that these visitors had also ended up at the most promising page.

Alsteens ends by stressing that "it's not a one-shot campaign." A new round will begin in October or November of this year, though it remains to be seen whether the "Only in Belgium" advertisements will expand beyond the current selection of newspapers and TV stations which are involved. While it may not be a campaign to create a national brand, it certainly seems to be attracting enough attention within its intended demographic, and perhaps it is only in Belgium that René Magritte could be promoting fiscal regulations. |

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