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Letter from Washington: Combating the image of the Ugly American

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WASHINGTON Maybe the Muppets can help. Even Ronald McDonald. After all, nothing else seems to be working so terribly well.

The challenge: if not to make the United States loved, then at least to cool the sometimes searing antipathies that can make life rough for Americans involved in international business, travel and life. The Ugly American image - a person of arrogance, incompetence, insularity and insensitivity - is hardly new. The phrase comes from a 1958 novel, which ironically contrasted the work of one decent man with cascading American blunders in Southeast Asia.

But its latest incarnation, stirred by resentments over U.S.-led wars and a long list of disputes, has been particularly troubling. Two years ago, Allyson Stewart-Allen, an American marketing consultant with offices in London and Los Angeles, asked consumers in several countries their views of the United States and American brands.

"It was pretty damning then," she said, "and I can't imagine it's improved much since."

So she and other businesspeople have been organizing, cajoling, militating for change. A group called Business for Diplomatic Action, or BDA, is working to sensitize American travelers and businessmen, foment a new internationalism in the United States, introduce more foreigners to American ways of life and business, and lobby the government to present a more welcoming face.

The first step in recovery, of course, is acknowledging the problem.

"There's a great deal of ignorance, denial," said Keith Reinhard, president of BDA and once a leading ad-man. "A lot of Americans believe we're still seen as admired around the world, as this great benevolent leader. Even in the business community there is some denial."

Reinhard frets over long-term trends. A survey of teens in 13 countries found no American brands in their lists of three top favorites. American rock bands once dominated play lists in many countries. Now, Reinhard said, "the top five bands in Germany are German, and singing in German.

"There is a drop in affinity toward American brands," he said. "We could almost refer to it as a global cooling in American culture." He wants to alter perceptions that Americans "are arrogant, ignorant, totally self-absorbed, loud, unwilling to listen, and monolingual." He wants to find ways to appeal to young Arabs, to "out-recruit bin Laden."

BDA, with support from companies like ExxonMobil, McDonald's, UPS and Microsoft, has an ambitious agenda. To sensitize travelers, students and businessmen, it has produced a "World Citizens Guide" with tips like "think as big as you like, but talk and act smaller" and "remember that your religion is YOUR religion and not necessarily theirs."

A program to enlist young Arabs for U.S. business internships is in progress. "They're from the region and have a vested interest in going home and creating a better future," said John McNeel, president of Nissan TBWA Worldwide and a BDA board member.

Reinhard wants to publicize charitable efforts by U.S. companies such as drilling wells and river blindness medicines.

BDA urges U.S. schools to emphasize geography, world history and languages. And it wants the government to streamline visa processing and offer foreigners a better welcome at U.S. airports. Visa delays have real costs, including the post-2001 declines in tourism to the United States that cost the country billions. That trend has finally turned a slight corner. So has a decline in the numbers of foreigners studying at American universities.

The government says it has made progress on the visa problem. And in 2003, Congress appropriated money for the first time to promote tourism - no longer to be outspent in this area by, say, Fiji. "When people actually visit the United States, they have a much higher regard for the American people," Reinhard said.

The image-fixers also hope to turn a page on the ugly old take-it-or-leave-it arrogance of some in business. McDonald's executives listened to local customers before creating the Maharaja Mac in India ("two all-lamb patties, special sauce ...") or the McFlurry in Britain (using Cadbury chocolates).

In France, but the company there offers yogurt from Danone, Carte Noire coffee - and no genetically engineered food. Sales are among its best in Europe.

Or consider Bert, Ernie and Big Bird, those purveyors of - dare we say it? - a warmer and fuzzier business model. Sesame Workshop has programming in 120 countries, about 30 international co-productions under way and is working on more. Before "Galli Galli Sim Sim" premiered this week in India, not all decisions on the content of this localized version of "Sesame Street" were made at 1 Lincoln Plaza in New York.

The process starts, said Gary Knell, the company's chief executive, with "a listening tour," involving consultations with local educational advisers, academics, child development experts, pediatricians, sometimes government officials to suggest themes and brainstorm Muppet characters.

Thus, in South Africa came an HIV- positive girl muppet named Kami. "We're able to deal with destigmatization in a country where one in nine children are infected," Knell said.

"This is really about respecting local values," Knell said. "The more we can vest our partners together with us - so this is not simply our approach and our risk - the better our chances of success."

Added Stewart-Allen: "You've got to understand the culture you're trying to work in, and by trying to understand it you really have to immerse yourself, you have to live there, have local people on the ground feeding you intelligence, listen to the intelligence - and do something about it."

The U.S. government has stepped up its foreign language training since

2001. Still, nearly 30 percent of foreign-based State Department employees in "language-designated positions" cannot speak or write the local language adequately - and twice that in places like Yemen and Egypt.

Even Big Bird knows you have to speak the language.

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