

Ad Industry Doing Its Own Public Diplomacy

By Wendy Melillo

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The State Department may have snubbed ad executives for its commission on public diplomacy, but the industry is confronting rising anti-American sentiment on its own.

DDB Worldwide chairman Keith Reinhard is leading a private-sector task force of agencies, businesses and academics to develop ideas for what U.S. companies can do to change anti-American perceptions abroad, including altering their business practices, if necessary.

“DDB has a lot of big U.S.-based multinational clients, and I wanted to better understand this issue so we could be more helpful to our clients in advising them,” Reinhard said. “Public diplomacy has also become a personal passion. When you are the richest guy on the block, you have a responsibility that goes with that.”

What worries Reinhard, whose clients include Anheuser-Busch and McDonald’s, are the results of a RoperASW study released July 1. They show that for the first time since 1998, consumers in 30 countries signaled their disenchantment with America by being less likely to buy Nike products or eat at McDonald’s. Worse, 11 of the top 12 U.S.-based global companies, including McDonald’s, Microsoft, Nike and Disney, saw their “power brand” scores—a measure of how well they are known or liked abroad—drop or remain the same. At the same time, nine of the top 12 Asian and European firms, including Sony, BMW and Panasonic, saw their scores rise.

“The winds of consumer change were in motion well before the U.S. entered Iraq,” said RoperASW managing director Tom Miller. “A confluence of factors, including rising nationalism, economic uncertainty and corporate scandals, has led to global cooling and a weariness of American culture.”

Reinhard’s task force met twice in May, at the University of Texas in Austin and Southern Methodist University in Dallas. On hand were staffers from The Richards Group, Temerlin McClain, Publicis and the Dallas, Chicago and New York offices of DDB, as well as reps from American Airlines, EDS, Exxon Mobil, Frito-Lay, Nokia and the Sesame Workshop.

Reinhard has hired Cari Eggspuehler, former assistant to Charlotte Beers during her tenure at the State Department, as a full-time consultant to the task force. Although he intends to make some of the task force’s work available to the government, he said the private sector is better suited to addressing the issue of public diplomacy as Washington moves into another presidential-election cycle.

“Businesses can operate without the bureaucratic entanglements that Charlotte Beers faced during her time at the State Department,” Reinhard said.

The task force hopes to produce ideas that agencies and advertisers can put into practice to deflect anti-American sentiment. One idea proposed at the meetings involved matching a U.S. technology company with Sesame Workshop and a Jordanian broadcaster to produce a children’s TV series about American technology. Another addressed the issue of how American companies can best target their charity dollars abroad.

Patricia Alvey, director of the Temerlin Advertising Institute at SMU and a professor of advertising, applauded Reinhard for spearheading the effort and holding the meetings at universities, places she considered “neutral ground,” given some of the State Department’s negative attitudes about advertising.

Alvey will host the next meeting, at SMU in September.