"Branding Israel" Beyond the Message of Conflict: An Interview with Amir Gissin

Jeremy Funk and Fang Wan
University of Manitoba

Executive Summary

Although research on branding consumer products and services abounds (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Brodie & de Chernatony, 2009), our knowledge of how to effectively brand a city, country, or destination remains limited. The need for this knowledge is becoming more significant with the escalating number of transactions occurring across international borders, placing a greater emphasis on how the economies of a region are connected to the perceptions of external stakeholders. Effective destination branding can directly boost economic outcomes (Baker & Cameron, 2008). This, in part, motivated our interview with Amir Gissin, Israel’s Consul General in Toronto, on “Branding Israel.” In addition, we suggest that the strategies used for this branding campaign also provide important lessons for organizational branding as well.

Our research on country branding reveals that there have been two primary approaches to brand a country. More dominantly, an external, or as we might label it, as a “facelift” approach has been taken. In this approach, the client recruits an advertising or marketing agency, uses celebrity endorsement (van der Veen, 2008), and generates extensive advertising campaigns. The focus is to communicate with external stakeholders—mainly tourists who may be interested in visiting the country as a result of the campaign. (e.g., New Zealand [100% Pure]; Paris [Paris is for Lovers]; Spain [Everything Under The Sun]; Las Vegas [What Happens in Vegas, Stays in Vegas]) (Baker & Cameron, 2008). This approach has two potential problems. First, it is capital intensive with many stakeholders who have minimal management control (Hanlan, Fuller, & Wilde, 2006). The initiators of these campaigns are tourist bureaus of a city or country—destination management organizations (DMOs) (Gretzel et. al, 2006), who have limited resources and require extensive collaborative initiatives between tourism organizations (Wang, 2008). As a result, their resources are exhausted after launching the campaign through expensive advertising agencies and they are not able to track the actual results. Second, the messages of
these branding campaigns do not necessarily resonate with the internal stakeholders since they are being imposed as an external expectation. The lack of strong buy-in from the internal stakeholders (e.g., citizens of the cities and countries) makes it problematic when tourists visit the country with the specific expectation generated through the campaign and find that the destination members are not delivering the brand as promised in the campaign.

We are particularly encouraged by the alternative approach that the “Branding Israel” initiative has taken. This is an internal or “soulful” approach of country branding. Unlike the external strategy, the project started with the internal stakeholders, and paid great attention to the alignment of the multiple stakeholders with the core values of the country. This strategy is more effective in establishing legitimacy (Elbe, Hallén, & Axelsson, 2008). Israel, like many other countries facing the traditional destination marketing challenges, also deals with a long and rich history that is most often characterized by conflict. In our executive interview with Amir Gissin, we focused on the processes, challenges, and strategies of the internal approach of branding in the attempt to rise above the history of conflict alone to deliver an inviting message of passion, creativity, and social vibrancy.

Amir R. Gissin was born in Israel in 1963. He graduated in 1990 from Tel Aviv University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. He served in the Israel Defense Forces from 1981-1984, specializing in IDF Education and Heritage. He has held numerous governmental positions such as Chief of Staff to the Minister for Diaspora Affairs, Assistant to the Prime Minister’s Foreign Policy Advisor, and Deputy Spokesman in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Gissin has also held several positions within the Israeli NGO and philanthropic arena during a leave from governmental service. These include Director General of the “Mosaica” Research Centre for Religion, State and Society and Director General of the “Shalom Beinenu” Foundation.

He became Israel’s Consul General in Toronto in August 2007. Earlier international postings include First Secretary at the Israeli Embassy in New Zealand (1995-1997) and Second Secretary at the Embassy in Denmark (1992-1995). Most recently, Mr. Gissin served as Director of the Public Affairs Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he coordinated Israel’s public diplomacy strategy and led Israel’s Branding Project through its initial stages.

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**Authors: What makes “country branding” so unique?**

**Gissin:** The difference between “country branding” or “place branding” and other branding efforts is that if a brand is a promise, and a good brand is a promise delivered, then it’s very clear why Coca-Cola is the best brand in the world. But, what do you do with a country? What is the brand promise a country can make? When I actually started as Israel’s first “brand manager,” I was more or less the only person in the world who knew what my job was. In the commercial company that sells products or services, the brand manager is reporting to the CEO and has certain authority over the employees of the company. And it’s quite clear that if a company chooses a certain brand policy and there is one employee who decides to go exactly the other way, there are possible sanctions. There are carrots and sticks and if somebody is working against the brand, then eventually they might lose their job. What kind of sanctions can
somebody who’s defined as Israel’s brand manager have? So I think the first thing to understand about the process of country branding is that this is a coalition building process. Country branding is a process that is first and foremost aimed internally.

Authors: What was the motivation for Israel to engage in such a branding process? How do you think the process was uniquely different from what other countries have attempted in developing a specific country brand?

Gissin: Branding is extremely important. The generic idea of country branding is usually a long process and eventually what you see as an outcome is an ad campaign, typically encouraging tourism to a certain place. And there’ll always be the same seashores and the girls in bikinis and the palm trees and you really don’t know whether it’s Cuba or France or Spain or Israel.

When you look back at countries that choose to engage in a comprehensive branding effort, there was a fundamental change and people had to reinvent themselves. Something major was happening like the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa or a change of government, like in the case of the end of the Franco regime in Spain. Or a very serious economic crisis that brought huge immigration, like in the case of Ireland and the many cases of the Eastern block.

Why do countries go into a branding process? Usually the reason is economic. They want to improve economic standards of living. They want to increase exports, foreign investment, and tourism. They engage in a process which is aimed at presenting their country in a more attractive and relevant way to target markets.

Branding Israel is something different. It is an effort that should be focused in, and only then out. It is not simply the reflection of the brand. In Israel we chose to take our time. We spent a lot of time on research and we spent a lot of time on presenting the concept, knowing that one of the biggest problems was the branding process itself. In Israel’s case, if somebody is engaged in the branding process, immediately they are being perceived as trying to deceive.

The case of Israel specifically, was a very different concept of a branding process than you’ll find in other cases. As a matter of fact, nothing happened. There was no one major event that forced the Israeli officials to change. It’s very difficult to deal with Israel outside of the context of a conflict. This is obviously not a positive phenomenon for a country. We made a mistake because by our efforts to convince the world that we are oh so right, we contributed to that identification between Israel and conflict. We voluntarily added to the fact that Israel has become a single dimension brand.

Authors: So if the single dimension brand is hurting your country’s image, how do you go about developing a multi-dimensional brand that will form a positive image?

Gissin: Now what is a single dimension brand? I happened to serve in New Zealand as a diplomat. The government of New Zealand chose at a certain time, a brand campaign which was very simple, straightforward. The slogan was “100% pure”. New Zealand enjoys eco-tourism “100% pure.” Its export is mainly meat, “100% pure” and wool, “100% pure.” So in terms of New Zealand, it’s a very logical decision to have a single dimension brand. And it’s working.
With Israel it’s the other way around. Instead of having a single dimension brand which is positive, we have a single dimension brand which is negative. And what we did for many years before we started to deal with the branding as an option, we were saying to the world, “You don’t understand. We’re not all bad. We’re all good. Everything’s great about us.” People do not buy that, because it was us who failed to define the product. *We failed to find out what is the right way to present Israel, what Israel has to offer or to share.*

*We are not trying to erase the conflict.* We are trying to add layers to our brand, so people could have a wider perspective and look at us and see us as we are—in a full way, including the conflict and this aggressive component. In that sense, that also answers the question, “What’s the goal?” The goal is to educate internally, to connect people, to create the buy-in internally and then start to do it externally without hiding the conflict.

Now I would obviously prefer to be praised for Israeli economic success and innovation that saves life, than to be viewed only through the filter of the conflict. But I can live with positive imaging of Israel as leading the innovation in the area of saving lives, alongside the conflict.

**Authors:** Changing the internal identity sounds like a somewhat daunting task. How did you go about identifying the message? What internal identity did you want Israel to communicate?

**Gissin:** I must admit there was a time where we, the branding team, were looked at as a cult or an underground. And we worked against the common wisdom of certain government agencies. It’s very frustrating when you’re working against the system, claiming that you have a new good idea, and nobody’s actually buying into it. If brand is a promise and the good brand is a promise delivered, what is the brand promise that a country can make?

The way we choose to look at it is the answer to the questions, “*What is an Israeli for me?*” and “*Am I proud of it?*” The thought was that if we’ll come to a situation where there’ll be a wide consensus about the answers, within the State of Israel, then we’ve got something. We would have a real essence of who is Israel in a positive way, and this is a so called product that can be presented in a way which will feel “truth.” We will be telling the truth. And I know that truth is a very problematic term when we’re talking in the business world. But it has to feel right, because if you’re not telling the truth, it will not work when it comes to country branding.

If you will be able to define an answer which will achieve consensus, you have in hand the DNA of your brand. It’s like a statue. At the beginning it’s just a piece of rock. You have to get the statue out of it. No country is the same as another. We all know that one of the most important brand attributes is differentiation. In the case of Israel, as you can imagine, we didn’t have a problem at all. Everybody understands that Israel is very different than other countries. That’s not a positive thing, most of the time, as Israel is constantly viewed through the filter of the conflict. Coming back to your question, we came up with five characteristics or clusters of characteristics that were in consensus with their definition as part of the Israeli brand.
Authors: What were the characteristics that you discovered? What is the rationale behind why these are so appropriate to the Israeli identity?

Gissin: We came up with five clear characteristics that were in consensus within the Israeli society. But two of them were unsuitable to use when presenting the country abroad. One was survival. All Israelis see themselves as survivors and they’re proud of it. Now this is an issue which falls within the framework of cultural differences and the multi-cultural aspects of branding. Israelis see themselves as survivors, not because of the holocaust, but rather because of the intense security environment Israelis lived through for the last 63 years. But who would like to come to visit or invest in the country of survivors? So we dropped it, not because we’re ashamed of it, but because it is not something that helps us reach our goal.

The second thing is mutual social responsibility. In the Israeli society people tend to care for each other. For instance, some years ago, when my young son was very little and we visited our family in Israel and we went to a shop and I bought Coke for him, somebody came to be and says, “It’s not very healthy to give your kid this can of Coke.” But, when you look at it from the point of view of outside markets of your target market, the situation where the visitor, the investor, the tourist, is feeling excluded and neglected is not a welcoming concept. But there were three genuine characteristics that were in consensus regarding the relevance to the Israeli brand.

One was passion. We love with passion. We hate with passion. We eat with passion. We fight with passion. We do think with passion and we’re proud of it. Now let’s be honest about it, passion is not necessarily a good virtue in Western societies. It actually reflects a lack of maturity, absence of a cool mind. Nevertheless, if that represents who we are in the essence that we really believe, then without it, our national brand will be unfocused and in a way, missing.

So one is passion, the other is creativity. Ingenuity, entrepreneurship, thinking on your feet—all those characteristics that come together through the concept of creativity. But, we have some proof as well and there are many examples. I will just tell you, that as a matter of curiosity, that a year ago when you look at the NASDAQ, after the US and Canada, Israel has more companies traded in the NASDAQ than any other nation on earth. Somebody’s not telling us the whole truth if a country, which all we hear about is in the context of conflict, all of a sudden has more companies in the NASDAQ than all EU countries combined. That was true until a year ago. Now the situation has changed because now Israel has actually passed Canada with the amount of companies traded in NASDAQ.

I don’t have to tell you about Canadian abilities and innovation. Actually, that brings into mind the Blackberry, which I would say is the symbol and the justified pride of Canadian innovation. The Blackberry has a dark secret... It has an Israeli heart. All the microprocessors that operate the Blackberry’s different functions are being made by a company called Marvel, which is located near Haifa, Israel. By the way, that does not mean that Canadians are not creative. It just means one thing; that Israelis and Canadians work well together.

The last attribute is a bit difficult to define. We call it fusion. Now, today everything is fusion, but what do we mean by fusion? I’ll give you an example. In Canada, in any city you’ll
find a multicultural society where one plus one is two. In Israel, one plus one is three. And why is that? Because the communities are not living together side by side, they’re mixed. And from this mixture you’ll see amazing things happening every day—new ideas being created—blends and mixtures of tastes and cultures and social behaviours. East meets west, old meets new, holy meets earthly. Where else in the world can you find sushi falafel or the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the world leading traditional symphony orchestras, playing in jeans, with belly dancers in the background? So this mixture, this social environment or vibrancy—fusion, is being created by a nation of people that are proud of being passionate and creative.

Authors: Were there any challenges in identifying and then gaining consensus on these identity characteristics?

Gissin: Let me just say that the Israeli society is a tribal society. You have large segments of society which have the same characteristics, in terms of religion, background and geographic origin, but those minorities are very different from each other and have very little in common. Israel is a little more than seven million people. We have roughly two million of the veteran Israelis. We have a little over one million Jewish Russian immigrants. We have around a million "Sefaradic," traditional Jews. We have just under a million national religious Jews—those who live in settlements and other places. We have around half a million ultra orthodox Jews who are very different in the way they dress and run their lives. And obviously we have 1.2 million Israeli Arabs/Palestinians.

When people talk about North America, they say that the U.S. is a melting pot and Canada is a mosaic. Israel started as a melting pot, but very quickly moved more into the Canadian model and positioned itself somewhere in the middle and it is still looking for its identity. There is one thing we share in common—we all eat hummus... but we're not looking for the lowest common denominator; we're looking for the highest one.

Authors: Earlier you identified two approaches to country branding. The first is externally driven, starting with an ideal country image portrayed by an ad campaign. The second is the way you are branding Israel, which is internally focused. How would you elaborate on these two approaches?

Gissin: Countries adopting the first approach often face the challenge of international companies encouraging them to work abroad in test markets. Based on the research in those markets, they promise results, but the brand promise they develop may be disconnected from your people. You can’t force your people to change. The only thing you do is to get the best out of them. You have to tell the truth. It has to come from the people.

With the second approach the order of things should be: first of all, find out the attributes of your brand from the internal stakeholders and then test them to see how external stakeholders respond to these attributes. We tested that for instance in Toronto and we saw that among the participants the level of identification of Israel with creativity is relatively low. But, if you ask, "How can you improve the image of Israel?" you’ll find out that what will improve Israel’s image is if people will start to relate to the qualities and virtues of creativity and ingenuity. For instance consider the book, Start-Up Nation. It doesn’t talk about Israel branding, it is Israel
branding. This is who we are. They really capture the DNA of Israel by a list of long stories of crazy things Israelis did. So that is exactly the message. Find out first what you want to sell, what you are proud of, and then package those things.

**Authors:** As more stakeholders are invited to participate, who is actually steering the process of branding Israel? Do you see this as something which originated more as a grassroots project, but now is being managed from a top-down position?

**Gissin:** Due to the risk of political influence, you have to involve the private sector and the media as safeguards to make sure that nobody can take the process from you. In Israel we chose to keep the process under the radar for a long time to avoid exactly that. I believe we are going to see the creation of some kind of authority or Government Company or some kind of organization within the government.

**Authors:** How do you proceed with making the Israel brand sustainable?

**Gissin:** The way we chose to look at it in Israel was a little bit different than the historic precedence. We decided to focus internally, because we knew that the change must start at home. The actual catalyst, the push towards starting a branding process in Israel came from a combination of officials, ad agency professionals, marketing people who started to communicate in an informal way. The process was initiated by expatriate Israelis.

This is where we are right now. That’s the first phase of branding a nation, the research, the internal check and coming to one product, a definition of the DNA of the brand. And if you’ll see that as the triangle for one second—passion, creativity and fusion, Israel’s brand is somewhere within this triangle. *The only problem is that Israelis don’t know it.* You know it, but they don’t. It comes down to brand ownership. It’s not enough that a few officials, some international advisors and several ministers know what the brand is and own it. You have to physically engage the people, because if your people will not own the brand, the branding process will not survive. So how do you do it?

It’s quite clear what you would do in a company. You educate your workers to become a part of the brand and to share the brand and to actually own the brand together with you. But what do you do in a country? For me, running the process of internalization of brand values into your society is like starting a new political party. You need to go out to town hall meetings, to community centres, to schools, to working places and win the hearts and minds of people, by sharing the concept with them. The message has to be presented in a way which they can actually improve the economic situation in their country, just by acting according to what they believe is good about their country. And everybody is included—people who work for hotels, taxi drivers, business people that go abroad, even tourists. This is a long process. It’s actually never ending. It has to be cool or otherwise people will not buy into it.

**Authors:** Once the research has been completed, how do you see the process continuing on in order to achieve its ultimate objectives? How will the message be promoted?
Gissin: Now it comes to the third and final part of the branding process, which can be called a campaign. And it also requires the kind of resources that usually are difficult to be found. We built something I would call a modular campaign.

When a company needs to run an advertising campaign to introduce a new product or a new brand, you start from a budget and work according to the budget. Twenty percent will go towards TV ads. Ten percent will go to radio. Thirty percent will go to newspapers and “x” percent will go to media events and so on and so forth. The concept of a modular campaign has a small core of activities and we try to add on to it, based on personal initiatives, based on expatriates of your country that live abroad. For instance, when we will come to the point of marketing Israel as part of its brand campaign, we will use friends of Israel all over the world, like Jewish communities, like friends among Christians and other ethnicities. You look to find partners who will buy in and will be prepared to work with you. Don’t count on the media that you buy with money. *Work on sharing the ownership of the brand.*

Authors: There are multiple messages being communicated when the Israeli government engages in both diplomatic policies and situations of conflict. How does this impact the brand promotion activities and how does the media become a factor in what message is heard?

Gissin: Three things come to mind today for Israel’s brand characteristics. Not fusion, creativity, and passion. It will be militaristic, aggressive, and religious. Unfortunately this is the way Israel is being perceived. I don’t like it because it’s not who we are.

The second thing is Israel has an image of being a militaristic society and with that I’m entering a little bit into media politics and you’ll excuse me for that. There is a narrative for Western media which says that at any given time, Israel will use excessive force. When you consider what you see of Israel in the media, I believe that you’ll come to the conclusion that that is the way Israel is regularly being presented.

Finally, *we do not hide the conflict.* The branding process is not a substitute of the conflict. If we will not present the conflict we will be lying and we will fail. The conflict is part of Israel’s brand. But, we have a life. We go to work. We raise kids. We send them to school. We do things. We celebrate. We live. And this is something which is absent [from the media]. *And we have to deal with the fact that we are, in the world presentation of the conflict, the “overdog,” not the “underdog.” That’s the reality.*

Authors: There is an even much richer history when you go back to the Old Testament scriptures in terms of the history of Israel. This brings us back to the dialogue regarding reframing the message around creativity.

Gissin: That is actually a huge problem. When we started, we thought we had the answer because we knew that creativity must come into it. But we said we can’t ignore thousands of years of history. We can’t hurt people’s feelings or relieve ourselves of Jewish history or Christian history. It’s the holy land. So we came up with the concept called “From Creation to
Creativity.” Great! And we were so proud of ourselves that we managed to have it all and made it click. It didn’t work. Nobody bought it because it didn’t have a human face.

But, if you really go to the people and find out what’s the real thing that they’re proud of and you define it and package it properly so that you’ll be telling the truth, you can’t go wrong. In the long run, if people are proud of belonging, are proud of a certain brand and they’re trying to virally share that with others, eventually it will work.

Authors: It also seems important to launch and measure localized campaigns outside of Israel. What is the Canadian perspective of Israel and how has the work you are doing in Toronto been helpful in developing the overall “Branding Israel” process?

Gissin: I have one term that comes from many years of advocacy and that concept is relevancy. *You have to be relevant to the target market.* That is the key for a successful brand strategy. I’ll give you an example. When I came to the consulate in Toronto 2-2 ½ years ago, I asked my staff, “What is it that you do?” So they told me, “Every morning we go through all the websites that have information about Israel and we know everything that needs to be known about Israel, we have the best information.” Then I questioned, “Okay, and what do you do then?” They responded, “Everybody that calls in, we give them the best information about Israel.” So I said, “Great product, lousy marketing. From now on we do it the other way around. You come in the morning. You don’t read Israeli papers. You don’t follow Israeli websites. You look at Canadian websites. You look at the story of the day. You try to find out what will be the debate that will interest the Canadian tomorrow and define Israel’s relevance in it.” We Israelis are extremely creative and we do things in ways that others don’t. And there is a lot to learn from our success and our failures. What I’m saying is we have a lot to sell. So first and foremost, be relevant.

Authors: Let’s go back to the internal identification of stakeholders. You talked about it being very much a bottom-up process. We’ve illustrated the two different processes (Figure 1) that are at work to engage the various stakeholders when it comes to country branding. Who did you identify as the stakeholders in this project and how did you involve them in the process?

Gissin: Very naively, *I believed in the power of one.* I went to see several people and I started the coalition building by going to some advertising people, the VPs for the creative of ad companies. I managed through personal contacts to bring around five of them that I knew would at least let me finish speaking. I presented the idea to them and bingo, there was a coalition. They saw the potential. Everybody wants to have their personal name on the team that actually started the branding process. So they gave me the buy-in. We started the discussion of how to do it and they did the initial work which taught me a lot. We started something which was built on voluntary work and apparently that made the process very strong.

First of all there was the group that came from the industry. Second was the first introduction to the government. You bring in this one person to effect another one and eventually, slowly but surely, we had this coalition of a minister who was willing to put her name on it.
At the beginning you’re taking a huge risk, because you’re selling a product you don’t have. At the beginning that’s the way you need to do it because it’s one-on-one. You are building a coalition and you have to engage in activity which means you need to leave your ego at home. When that is over, then you need a different set of qualities. You need the ability to build a systematic process. You need to continue the coalition building process between the private sector, government and media. And they all have links with each other. If you want to run the branding process, it will not come from the government, because this is a revolution and government does not make revolutions unless it is forced. It will not come from the media because the media is not coming with the ideas; they are the critics. You need to start with the private sector. The government responds to the private sector. And you need to keep the media on your side because you are coming with a new idea and the media tend to support new ideas. So this is roughly the sociological, psychological model that we engage in. There is a Hebrew term called “chutzpah” which is to be indifferent to authority and to do something which is unheard of and it’s what we did here on a very small scale.

Authors: Once you have established who you are and you’re at the point of trying to educate and inform your own nation of that message, how will you measure success of the actual campaign?

Gissin: There are many ways, but the basic thing is you run every six weeks, every six months, an opinion poll, which can be an Internet panel or polling. You don’t ask straight questions, but you check in a sophisticated way, general attributions to the brand. You find out whether people associate creativity with Israel.

Now in the case of Israel, you have lots of negative things to begin with and so that does not necessarily say that the creativity aspect is going to take over all the rest. Our aim is not to remain a single dimension brand country. What we want to achieve is to become a multidimensional brand. I want to be in the situation where somebody will say, “You know Amir, I don’t agree with your policies towards the Palestinians, but you invented this medical camera that saved my mom’s life and I appreciate that.”

Authors: Thank you very much for speaking with us.

Gissin: My pleasure.
Figure 1 – Two Approaches to Country Branding
References


About the Authors

Jeremy Funk is a fourth year PhD student in strategy at the Asper School of Business of the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. His research interests are in the area of small and medium-sized family business structures and the impact of corporate social responsibility on business success. He received his B.A. (Hons) in Business Administration from the Trinity Western University in 1985, and his MBA from the University of Manitoba in 1987. Following his initial post secondary studies, Jeremy worked for 12 years in a successful family enterprise (retail/wholesale grocery). This was followed by a couple of years overseas in Lithuania at LCC International University as a university administrator and business instructor. He was also most recently an adjunct professor of business at Providence College & Seminary while resuming former administrative responsibilities in the family business (property management & investment portfolios).

Fang Wan is an Associate Professor of Marketing, Ross Johnson Research Fellow, at the Asper School of Business of the University of Manitoba. Dr. Wan offers courses on International Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Brand Management and Cross-cultural Brand Management at
undergraduate, MBA and Ph.D. levels. In 2006, she established *Wan’s Mini Brand Consortium*. This platform connects the local business community to her earnest learners on brand management. With her students, Dr. Wan has helped more than 70 businesses/brands in Canada with regard to a wide range of brand related issues from the clarity of brand expression to the design of an internal brand culture. Dr. Wan’s research deals with brand related issues from both the consumers’ perspective (consumer and brand interactions) and the firm’s perspective (brand management strategies). She has won more than 15 national and university grants and has published articles in more than 20 journals, book chapters and proceedings, including the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Brand Management*, and *Journal of Interactive Marketing*. She had made more than 50 presentations at major marketing conferences or as an invited speaker at academic institutions.

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