



موسسه چشم انداز مدیریت تراز جهانی

دیرخانه اولین کنگره بین المللی
چشم انداز مدیریت کلاس جهانی
۱۴ اسفند ماه ۱۳۹۶



مرکز آموزش مدیریت دولتی

World-Class Marketing in Post - Sanction Era
Implication and challenges for promoting Persian products in global
market

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Abstract : Today global consumers buy products, use services and invest based on their trust, admiration, and appreciation for the companies, brands and country of origin that stand behind them. The strategic location of Iran in the Middle East together with natural resources, young and talented people and historical and enriched culture provide unparalleled potential to develop remarkable products and whole series of value added services opportunities. In recent years, global media represented an unfriendly image of Iran as a country which together with pressure from the international community through political and economic restrictions had a toll on Iran's economy. This image needs to be changed and stakeholders must encourage a unique kind of engagement and connectivity between the authentic culture and traditions of Iran and potential consumers of its products in the global market. The aim of this qualitative research is to a conceptual model to enhance this image in order to promote Persian products in the global market in the post-sanction era.

Keywords : Post-sanction , Iran Export Products, Persian Culture and Traditions, Brand Building, Export Strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today global consumers buy products, use services and invest based on their trust, admiration, and appreciation for the companies, brands and country of origin that stand behind them. The country of origin is related to both reputation perceptions and behavioural intent to support the firm. Iran's strategic location in the Middle East together with natural resources, young and talented people and historical and enriched culture provide unparalleled potential to develop remarkable products and whole series of value added services opportunities. In recent years, global media represent an unfriendly image of Iran as a country which together with pressure from the international community through political and economic restrictions had a serious toll on Iran's economy. These sanctions has limited the access of Iranian firms to the global market. Though oil and natural gas account for 82 percent of the country's export revenues, other sectors such agricultural and food products, building and construction materials, handicrafts and even machinery as well as consulting and engineering services played some role in forming the export portfolio of Iran despite all the challenges. On the basis of one focus group and 20 in-depth interviews, we explored the possibilities to change the image in order to promote Persian products in the global market. The paper is structured in six sections where the second section focuses on a current literature review on country reputation imperatives. In the third section, our epistemological approach in this pilot study and methods for collecting data are discussed. We further deliver the findings from our focus group and interviews in the

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fourth section. In the fifth section the findings are discussed and we then use content analysis to purify the themes and codes in order to prepare the building blocks for the last section. In the final section, we integrate the themes together in order to suggest a conceptual framework to build authentic Persian brands and promote them in the global market.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The label of the country of origin (CoO) which implies the source and reputation of a country where a product or service is originated, is becoming an important subject interest for the practice and research of public relations and public diplomacy (Journal of Public Relations Research, 20(4):421–440, 2008) and more importantly CoO is considered to be a critical criteria for consumers to buy a product or use a service. The major reason is perhaps the issue of a quality factor which cannot be fully known and evaluated prior to purchase decision in the global market. Cage and Rouzet (2015) indicates that inferring the quality of a good needs time and is realized both through search and experience. For these categories of goods, country-of-origin affect product evaluations and consumer decisions and set perception of quality (Roth and Diamantopoulos 2009). At the same, the overall position of the country in the global village from a variety of dimensions such as a behavioural, political, economic, social and cultural and more importantly technological status can support or even hinder a product or service. The analysis shows that the country of origin is related to both reputation perceptions and behavioural intent to support the firm (Vidaver-Cohen et al., 2015). The implication of country of origin on consumers' perceptions and purchasing intentions is widely discussed in marketing research.

According to Reputation Institute CRO Survey, 2012 “The Reputation Economy is an environment in which people buy products, take jobs, and make investments based mainly on their trust, admiration and appreciation for the companies and institutions that stand behind them.” According to Passow, Fehlmann, and Grahlow (2005), “Reputation management is by no means restricted to companies and other organizational entities. In fact, nations today are increasingly concerned with their reputation relative to other nations and turn to actively measuring and managing that reputation” It is argued that globalization and the resulting competition among countries have caused nations to be sensitive towards the way they are portrayed (Stock, 2009; Olins, 2002).;(Anholt, 2007

“Anhholt (2002) argues



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globalization is turning the world into a gigantic supermarket” where countries compete to stimulate exports, attract tourism, foreign direct investments (FDIs), and immigration. Governments are turning to branding techniques to establish a competitive edge over rival countries in the belief that a strong country brand can contribute to the country’s sustainable development (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001; Kleppe and Mossberg, 2006).

According to Kotler et al. (1993), place image is the sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions that people have of a place, herein a country for example, resides in the minds of the people of Nation B (Anholt, 2007). Fan (2006, 2010), in turn, refers to the actual image: “the real image of a nation held by another nation” and what is projected to the other. The two most popular methods which evaluate a country brand are introduced by two private sources ; the country brand index from FutureBrand consultancy and the Anholt GfK Roper nation brand index (NBI). FutureBrand, is a branding company which published 5th Country Brand Index in 2009. Simon Anholt is a nation branding specialist, which in association with GfK since 2008 published his 6th annual edition of the Nation Brands Index in 2009.

The Anholt’s Nation Brands Index every year conducts an interview with 20,000 adults in 20 core panel countries to measure the appeal of country image by evaluating six dimensions of national competence, which together make up the —Nation Brand Hexagonl:

Exports: This is called “country of origin effect” by the marketers and referred to strengths in science and technology or association with particular industry. The origin of a product can increase or decrease the likelihood of purchasing it.

Governance: This addresses the honesty and competency of government in the global arena with respect to fair treatment, human rights, environmental protection, security, and the world poverty reduction.

Culture: This aspect measures the perceptions of a country’s heritage, contemporary cultural and traditions including music, films, art and literature and perhaps the country’s superiority in different sports.

People: The general status of people’s friendliness generosity and kindness to attract visitors or being hired by foreign companies is measured here.

Tourism: The country is being rated in three major areas: natural beauty, historic buildings and monuments, and vibrant city life and urban attractions and the experience of visitors are reflected by adjectives such as romantic, stressful and spiritual

Immigration and Investment: Lastly, a country’s power to attract human/talent and monetary capital are studied here to know how people perceive the quality of life and business environment within that country.



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Fig 2 - 3) Anholt Country Brand Index

Futurebrand publishes the Country Brand Index every year, which includes an overall ranking of the 75 countries, rankings by dimension, complete perception dashboards for the top five country brands, regional leaders and averages and 'ones to watch' for the future. The country brand is very broad and unusually complex, therefore, as Fetscherin (2010) indicated, each model is limited by its use of proprietary methodologies in terms of specific questions asked as well as aggregation and statistical method used. Since the topic is broad, we decided to focus only on one dimension of country brand i.e. export and global business which is also considered as one of the most important aspects in most models and studies. Countries just like companies who offer specific and distinctive products and services, supply particular products and services and are known for exporting them (Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002; Kleppe et al., 2002; Pharr, 2005). Export promotion organizations recognize that their country's reputation constitutes a potential asset to be managed carefully (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). There are many cases that companies use the country of origin as an asset or value added a feature to promote a specific product. For example Swiss watches and chocolates, Sri Lanka tea and Persian carpets are interesting examples where companies use the country's name in promoting the product. As such many experts argue that a high level of exports indicates a strong country brand (Fetscherin 2010).

3. METHODOLOGY

The social constructionist epistemological approach is adopted here in order to interpret elements of the research by integrating human understanding and interests. Here, it is presumed there is no such thing as reality to make objective statement about Iran's country reputation, Persian products and their brand and reputation in post-sanction era. It is, however, assumed that brand and reputation is only socially and culturally constructed i.e. we look for historically situated and culturally derived interpretations. Accordingly, the interpretive methodology here assumes that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments as indicated by Myers (2008).

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A qualitative approach is used here to tell the story of a particular group's experiences in their own words by which we argue that status and reputation of Iranian products are partly constructed through interpretation of interviewees who have experiences of buying, selling, consuming and exporting these products.

Our qualitative methodology here uses questioning rather than measuring and involves analysing and interpreting text, and interviews in order to explain a particular phenomenon (Yin 2008). This is exactly what we are looking for in this study, to explore status and reputation of Iranian products in the post-sanction era. An ontological position with positivist stance would look for empirical evidence of the identity in a quantifiable and objectively measurable manner based on observed facts. Yet, we have no intention to measure and quantify the identity of the products, nor do we have possibility to design questionnaires and gauge people's opinion on such a broad subject. Therefore, we have no interest to the ontological question of 'what is reality' and if it was 'objective' and/or 'realistic' in empirical terms. We rather seek socially constructed reality based on ideas, notions, beliefs and experiences of interviewees.

Our research seeks to study the status and reputation of Iranian products in post-sanction era which is socially constructed reality happened after Iran signed agreement with 5 plus 1 powers. Here we interpret the evidences that are socially constructed by the participants. The qualitative approach enables us to explore the social views, ideas and notion that people have as a result of buying, selling and consuming Persian products. This is in line with marketing strategy where the companies try to construct a unique message, experience and reality for their consumers.

3.1 Primary Data Collection

We systematically collected primary data from face to face interviews in a semi-structured style which gives control to the interviewer to manage and guide the show based on checklist of topics to be covered and simultaneously grants flexibility for new ideas or questions to be raised based on the interviewee response. Our interviews took place in quiet and calm places, though there were minor interruptions either from the interviewee's phone or surrounding environment. The interviews recordings were transcribed and then analysed. The analysis of the data practically started during the time interviews were conducted.

We conducted one focus group including 3 people and 20 individual interviews. The interviewees were selected through our personal network with friends and counterparts who were directly involved in trading and consultancy for Persian companies as well as those who produce and consume Persian products. All interviewees were male and of ages between 40 to 60 years. The participation was voluntary and all interviews are well informed of the research purpose and the fact that their names will be anonymous, and the research is intended for academic purpose only.

The content analysis is employed here which enabled us to find codes for themes in transcripts of the interviews and identify properties and frequencies of most used



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keywords and to extract the structure in contents. It starts through rigorous data analysis process by focusing on codes and then purifying themes.

4. FINDINGS

Our interviews provided an insightful understanding of how the respondents view image and reputation of Iran as a country and its products in the post-sanction era. They further shared their personal and professional experience as for how to promote the Persian products in the global market. We captured the below four themes in sequential order during the interviews.

Theme 1) Iranian Government to facilitate trade and play more active role to promote trade and tourism

All interviewees confirmed that image of Iran as country enhanced in post-sanction era. Iran as one of the richest sources of energy in the world and attracted lots of interests and attention in media after deal made between Iran and 6 world powers. They all believed this is a unique opportunity for Persian products and there are lots of room for improving the image and reputation of the products, despite the challenges. Since the subject itself was broad with a diversified range of products, we tried to be specific during the interviews and focus on few famous Iranian products like carpet, pistachio, saffron and caviar which associate with Iran and carry a notion of luxury in their nature.

Hossein also said : *“The government must play more active role in order to facilitate trade and promote tourism and bring more tourists to the country and they can change the image for Iran. I personally know many foreigners who visited Iran and their impression was totally changed. Tourists also play a role like an ambassador to promote Persian products through word of mouth and sharing their experiences with friends and families. Most of them buy pistachio, caviar, carpet and saffron as a souvenir when traveling back. “*

Payman explained : *“ Unfortunately during the sanction time Iran was somehow isolated from the world and there was a minimum interaction between Iran and other countries in almost all field. The media also created an unfriendly image of Iran and global sanction restricted any sort of trade with Iran. “*

Mohammad said : *‘ The government took a very positive step and facilitated arrival visa at the airport for more than 100 nations. This favorably attracted lots business people and tourists to travel to Iran. I presume all these travelers will spend money on Persian products and motivate friends to consume the same. ‘*



environmental issues but we cannot see much concern on the issue among Iranian companies. “

Mohammad believed : *“SR could be a good source of competitive advantage where Iranian companies can achieve social and environmental goals without a financial sacrifice. ‘*

He agreed that CSR was not on the radar of most Iranian companies but he said that some initiatives have already started. For example in Torbat city in North East of Iran, some farmers started to develop organic Saffron.

Hossein restated the importance : *“ The benefits of using Social Responsibility in branding Persian products are endless. The most important one is that it helps to build a brand reputation and is a point of differentiation. It can also encourage consumer's trust and loyalty. “*

Michael raised another important issue and said : *“ Some consumers especially in Europe are sensitive to know the reason behind getting involved in CSR initiatives. “*

Theme 4) Only Iranian can easily know and understand values in products, therefore, a global brand must be designed for each Persian products

The respondents insisted on challenges of building solid global brands. They also raised the weak commitment from Iranian exporters during last 4 decades to build up and promote global brands in order to target specific consumers.

Mohammad addressed the same through his academic and consulting background : *“Brands were not important 40 years ago as they are today. Meanwhile, the products used to be exported and still sold to the regional importers and then distribute to wholesalers within countries where brands did not play a role . The other reason might be a lack of professional knowledge and experience to design authentic brands. “* He added : *“The value of Persian products are recognizable mainly for Iranians and those who have high exposure to Iran and that is why local branding is somehow successful. However, We need to stand up and create a sort of differentiation and unique message to communicate with global consumers.”*

Hossein raised the importance and insisted : *“We definitely know what values our products stand for but only Iranian can easily know and understand this. The only identity we have, is quality for Iranian carpet which is too general and must be defined in more details. “*

Payman also explained that the product needs a carrier to better express itself to the potential consumers. *“The message must be strong and magnetic. The more we know the consumers, the more pathway we can create to reach them. “*



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The other interesting issue raised by Mohammad was groups and tribes we belong to. He said : *“Things we buy and use during our daily life say something about us and shows our connections, affiliations and communicate the same with others for example if I drive BMW or eat Persian caviar it tells other something about us. “*

Michael confirmed the matter by bringing an example of a few of friends who eat Persian caviar during Christmas time. He said : *“Eating the caviar itself is not the case and does not matter but inviting families and friends and serving them Persian caviar forms a privilege group where everybody is proud to be part of. “*

Mohammed also insisted : *“Since we are talking about revitalizing Iranian brands, I think at the core of every great Iranian brand should be a brilliant visual story that can really grab people’s attention especially in social networks.”*

Abol illustrates the matter in a good example : *“ If we declare that we have the greatest pistachio in the world, that is marketing. By keep saying that it becomes advertising and once the consumer confirms it by saying yes you have the greatest pistachio, it becomes branding. “*

5. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

We observed that most of the Iranian exporters believed so far that they have the best products in the world and the consumer should come and buy them. The imposed sanction which intensified from 2006 till 2015 together with new competitors created a very different marketplace where Persian products lost market share to new suppliers who produced similar products at different scale and price. Therefore, Iranian companies have faced serious challenges as a result of sanctions. A customer-focused brand (outside in) which is emerged as the result of interviews is one of the a proper approaches to deal with these challenges in a post-sanction era which identifies a key type of consumers , and then obsessively delivers products that meet their needs. The approach insists on building strong brands for each product which needs to carry a great product at its heart (Keller 2013). In order to maintain the origin, we also need to create a connection and interaction between brand and Iranian culture to strengthen identity and image, focus on differentiation and justify the premium like the case of Persian carpet. Kay (2006) indicated that powerful brands are culturally significant and form deep and rich meanings. Holt (2004) proposed that the strong brands are akin to myths, powerfully interacting with identity formation. At the same time, brands will be caught flat-footed, in danger of falling behind more agile and insightful without the ability to understand emerging trends and cultural forces (Wintrob 2016).

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Carpet-weaving is undoubtedly one of the essential manifestations of Persian culture and art, and dates back to 500 B.C. The lay person, whether in Tehran, London or New York, perceives the quality of such artefact through a socially constructed lens that has been formed and absorbed for centuries through linguistic exchange about Persian art. Therefore, people have perceive hand woven carpets from Persia as the finest in the world even without having awareness and knowledge of carpet making. We can therefore easily see that people's feeling and interest here proves Persian Carpet is in quadrant (4) where it is highly associated with the name of Iran and benefit from high credibility. We can observe, however, in case of, for example Iranian tea, totally different reality because the language exchange never developed about Iranian tea throughout the world. Except neighbouring countries of Iran, very few people ever heard that Iran grows tea, let alone considering it as a high-quality and premium one. Therefore, we can see the Iranian tea has a low association and low credibility. Now we have the challenge as how to move from quadrant (1) to quadrant (4) in anti-clockwise route and the most reasonable route will from quadrant (1) i.e. to improve the credibility and then create an association. Finally, we used content analysis here which is a research technique to extract valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual material. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) indicated content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique and includes three distinct approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. All three approaches content of text data and the differences are coding schemes, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness. We preferred conventional approach to derive coding categories from the text data and reduced large amounts of unstructured content to something which is relevant and manageable and finally developed a model in last section to explain these data. We started by forming above table and tried to refine basic data into initial coding and then filter them to focused coding which we believed were important in my analysis. We finally purified and distilled them into practical recommendations in order to suggest a framework as how to promote Persian products in global market in post-sanction era.

TABLE 5 - 1) Coding process.

Theoretical Coding	Focused Coding	Initial Coding	Basic Data
Government must play more active role and promote tourism and facilitate trade	Interact with more people and promote the country throughout the world	Creating a new image and reputation for Iran.	Country needs to invest in tourism and attract as much as tourist to connect and engage with more people and build stronger awareness about

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			Iran
Products should target the right consumers or a group of consumers in selected countries	Not for everybody in all countries	Saying no to some consumers and saying yes to a few in selected countries.	To know the consumers requirements (geo, cultural, economic, admin) and decide which market to grow.
Resonate at Point of Sales and incorporate social responsibility	Communicate with end users	Reaching consumers directly and bypassing importers and wholesalers	We need to develop new models for direct selling and develop sustainable products
Global brands to be built	Values and benefits are not clear for global consumer Creating new values required based on consumer's requirements	Developing new values based on consumers' need Clearly communicating values to consumers	We need to understand consumer's requirements and meet and exceed them.

6. CONCLUSION

The foregoing findings highlight the importance of retaining reputation of Iran as a country and also the emphasis on building a strong and powerful brand for each product. While purifying themes, we see they resonate with two categories of approaches which reflect current and ideal scenario for selling Iranian in global market.

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The concepts are also referred to product-focused marketing/brand vs consumer-focused marketing/brand. A product-focused brand (inside out) identifies key requirements and then obsessively delivers the solution to any type of user that encounters that problem. That is the case with Persian products so far and reflected during interviews irrespective of sanctions. The post-sanction era provided a unique opportunity for connectivity and engagement between Persian products and global market where Persian arts, culture, and authentic tradition must be manifested into celebrated products for specific consumers with new business models. In order to address the challenges and build authentic and Iranian brands and then promote them in the global market, it is incumbent to enhance country reputation under Iranian government supervision which is taking place now by facilitating trade and attracting more tourists and it must be accelerated. We then need to develop a roadmap for building strong brands and promote them in the global market. That is certainly beyond the nature of this pilot study, however, we tried to develop a framework based on inductive reasoning and by purifying themes reflected in Fig. 6 - 1) we showed how the building block of this model extracted and crystallized from theoretical coding in the previous section.

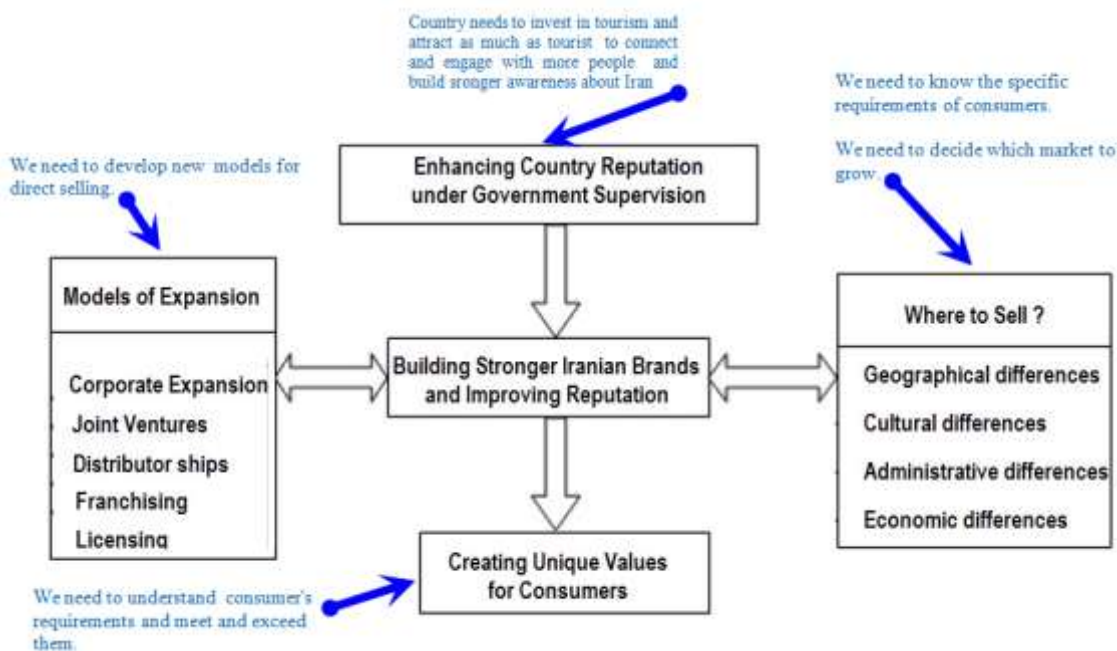


Fig. 6 - 1) Framework suggested by author to promote Iranian products in global market

According to the framework and our inductive analysis, the process for building stronger Iranian brands must be based on models of expansion and also a target market. The first question for global expansion is where to sell and the easiest answer would be the country which has the largest number of potential consumers lets say China and India. But there are other important criteria such as geographical, cultural,



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administrative and economic. The proximity between Iran and target country will provide us with a greater likelihood of succeeding. So, we can basically say it often make sense to select the target market that is the closest in all types of difference to reduce costs in terms of transportation, modification of products, etc. Once the target market is smartly selected, the Iranian companies must evaluate and select the best expansion models or mode of entry based on the nature of products. Some of these modes such as franchising and licensing are even applicable in carpet, pistachio and saffron field with the transfer of knowledge or intellectual property (patents, trademarks, copyrights, or proprietary processes) from the Iranian exporter to a local company. This ultimately emphasizes on brand identity and closer connection with consumers at the point of sales while bypassing distribution supply chain. Whereas considering and incorporating models of extension and target market as branding building imperatives, the Iranian company will be a position to build stronger brands and improve their reputation to create unique values for consumers. Since, the appeal of luxury brands has become global in scope as the distribution of wealth has broadened geographically (Nueno and Quelch 1998), it is also important to build and maintain the luxurious appeal of Persian products, though many of them such as Carpet, Pistachio and Caviar are treated in that category. Nonetheless, this needs to be enhanced by different approach including incorporating uniqueness notion that indicates that a limited supply increases consumer preference.

As a final note, it goes without saying that emotions, feelings, and even intuition all play an important role in building brand and attracting consumers. Baba Shiv (2013) argued that more 90% of our actions, behaviour, experiences and even important decisions are constantly being shaped at instinctual level and even when we believe that we are taking rational decision, it is the emotional brain that is trying to rationalize the decision. Our Iranian products together with features, however brilliant, carry no weight unless we win consumers hearts and minds. Many great brands like Volvo engage consumers in more motivating and impactful way when they organize their strategic goals into compelling stories. An amazing example is the "epic" split Jean-Claude Van Damme did in Nov. 2013 between two moving Volvo trucks. The fascinating scene went viral on YouTube with more than 68 million views, Van Damme saw a career resurgence and Volvo Truck sales rose 31% in November, according to the Wall Street Journal. The stunt is part of a series of Volvo Truck features showing off their precision steering and stability. So, we need to ask ourselves: what is the story behind our Iranian



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brand? What challenges did we set out to solve? Can we form for example a group of Persian carpet consumers to share their experience by creating an authentic story about carpet. The story we tell should not be any story; it should be a story about our motivation and passion for engaging people.

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