



UNIQUELY S'PORE: Members of defunct Japanese pop group SDN48 taking pictures in front of the iconic Merlion. Mica released a tender on Tuesday, calling for campaigns to revamp Singapore's image, enhancing external perceptions of Singapore.

TNP FILE PICTURE

Enhancing Brand Singapore

Ministry announces plan to correct misconceptions about S'pore

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WANTED: A plan to enhance Singapore's image in China, India and the United States.

The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (Mica) on Tuesday put up a tender inviting public relations companies to submit plans to "enhance external perceptions of Singapore".

The target audience?

Business leaders, investors, journalists, academics, non-government organisations and think tanks.

The plan would complement existing efforts from government agencies and profile Singapore as one of Asia's most liveable cities, highlighting Singapore's "excellence" in education, health care, urban planning, sustainability and enterprise solutions.

The tender document noted that while Singapore had gained a "reputation for being safe, clean, efficient and pro-business", and that the Republic had transformed itself in recent years, there "still exist some misconceptions and a substantial lag between reality".

It did not say what these misconceptions were.

But when asked, Mr Jorg Dietzel, CEO of Jorg Dietzel Brand Consultants, said common misconceptions of Singapore include how the country supposedly lacks freedom, and was boring and sterile.

He said: "Recent activities to counter these misconceptions by opening up, allowing, even inviting robust discussions online, investing into Singapore as a creative and design hub and celebrating grassroots-activities like Pink Dot, have not yet managed to change the perception of Brand Singapore overseas."

And that could be one reason for this public relations exercise, he said.

Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan agreed that some Singaporean "stereotypes" still exist.

"My exchange students have the impression that you could get caned for chewing gum or not flushing the toilet," he said.

"These perceptions are still being perpetuated, when in reality Singapore is not what they perceive it to be."

But why is there a need to target these three countries?

And could this latest charm offensive be in response to perceived anti-foreigner sentiment scaring away investors and talented migrants?

Institute of Southeast Asian Studies' Ian Storey, a Sino-US expert, does not think that this is the reason, as among the "elite in the US and China, the impression of Singapore is very good".

Dr Storey noted there has been some anti-foreigner bashing online here in Singapore, but he did not think such sentiments were well known in China and the US.

Mr Dietzel agreed.

While such negative comments have "not gone unnoticed by expats living here, and found their way into foreign media", these comments have stayed "mainly online and not been translated to negative behaviours (off-line), which would be more of a worry for tourists, and experts considering to relocate, or invest", he said.

World opinion

It makes sense to target these three countries as their "big populations and, at times, outspoken press, will be sounding boards for world opinion, and will be able to influence others", said Mr Dietzel.

"They are also the origin of some of the best engineers, entrepreneurs and creative thinkers – the kind of people Singapore needs to attract," he said.

Agreeing, Assistant Prof Tan said: "The campaign is going after these thought leaders who have the multiplier effect and help change the perception of Singapore."

The New Paper understands that while this campaign from Mica is new, there have been other similar branding campaigns from other agencies before.

In 2006, the Government put up a tender for a consultant to guide all government agencies in their marketing campaigns and position Singapore as one single, solid brand.

The tender, which opened on Tuesday, closes on Oct 25.