Dr. Nina Smidt
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Perceptions of Germany in the United States

How is Germany perceived in the US? What can German institutions do to influence or improve US perceptions of Germany? Does Germany even matter to most Americans anymore?

Over the past year, in the wake of Brexit, fissures in the European Union, and a new US president pushing an "America First" agenda, I set out to answer these questions on behalf of the Atlantik-Brücke "Working Group Foreign and Security Policy". The project I have undertaken as part of a research project at the European School of Management and Technology in Berlin is an analysis of US perceptions of Germany, with the goal of developing a strategy for strengthening perceptions of Germany in the US.

For a baseline assessment of perceptions, I conducted a "big data" analysis of US sentiment toward Germany as expressed through social media (primarily Twitter) and traditional news media. Simultaneously, I conducted a survey of 25 transatlantic experts asking how they believed Germany is perceived in the US on a range of issues. I then evaluated and compared the findings using the Perception Value Matrix or PVM methodology developed by Professors Torsten Oltmanns of Roland Berger Strategy Consultants and Ivo Hajnal of the University of Innsbruck. The PVM has been employed in corporate and consumer market research for marketing purposes, but had never before been used to study and evaluate a nation's "brand." The PVM Matrix evaluates a large segment of data from print and online media, social media, websites and blogs. Perception is measured based on over 200 selectors. PVM-Values are then used to measure and evaluate performance.

The findings were eye-opening. Americans perceive Germany as strong on measures of "Performance," both economic and political, but that is not necessarily a positive, as Germany's strength is often perceived as a threat. Where perception of Germany is weak is on the values of "Sympathy" and "Character" – in other words, Americans may judge Germany objectively as an economic power, but lack any emotional connection or bond with the country. And emotions tend to play a bigger role in shaping perceptions than performance.

Moreover, in comparing the big data analysis with the qualitative survey, there is a real mismatch between actual public perceptions and how experts on US-German relations believe Americans perceive Germany. The experts tend to view perceptions in terms of trade, economic relations, and political alliances. Everyday Americans, however, view Germany through the prism of Donald Trump's relationship with Angela Merkel, the spread of Islam, the rise of far-right political parties, historical Nazism, and other "hot-button" issues.

What can we conclude from these findings? It's apparent that Germany is no longer relevant to a large segment of the US population. In order to elevate perceptions of Germany in the US, we need to change the conversation. Let's stop talking about the transatlantic relationship in geopolitical terms and start forging connections with new target audiences – notably younger people – based on our shared interests and cultural affinities.

Consider, for example, the advancement of technology. Like the US, Germany has a strong start-up scene and an entrepreneurial streak. The digital realm is clearly one where we can find common ground and opportunities for collaboration that go beyond merely commercial.

Millennials tend to bond over things that transcend borders and languages, like new music, art, video and the digital culture. They hold a view that a few people with great ideas can change the world for the better. This is as true in Germany as it is in the US. How can we tap into that sentiment?

And let's not forget our mutual affinity for good food and beer! These are among the many cultural touchstones we can leverage to remind Americans of their German heritage.

The challenge is translating these ambitions into concrete steps and engaging events. The German Foreign Office launched the "Germany Year USA 2018/2019" as part of an effort to raise perceptions of Germany in the US. Why not enlist German companies with large operations in the US (and some 700,000 US employees) to put on a "Germany Day" in their eating facilities, with sponsorships from German breweries and food companies? Another idea is to bring US and German students together in a "digital hackathon" to work on solutions to today's pressing challenges – climate change, water shortages, urban planning, migration, mobility. German and American institutions could get involved to provide facilities and funding, while corporate sponsors could provide incentives for the best ideas.

The point is that elevating perceptions of Germany in the US is going to take some innovative thinking, a concerted effort, and the strategic use of modern communication channels and tools to connect with and engage new audiences. We can continue to work on relations between nations, but the connections that truly endure and flourish over time are those between people.

About the Author

Dr. Nina Smidt is President of American Friends of Bucerius, an organization that represents ZEIT-Foundation Ebelin and Gerd Bucerius, one of Germany's largest private foundations, in the United States. Nina has been leading the New York office since 2009 and has overseen the steady growth of the Bucerius network and business operations in the United States. As Director of International Planning and Development for the ZEIT-Stiftung Ebelin und Gerd Bucerius, she is also responsible for initiating programs and partnerships around the world as part of the global Bucerius activities.

Prior to joining AFB, Nina was CEO of Bucerius Education, the for-profit branch of Bucerius Law School, delivering international executive education, event management, and complex consulting services to the European and US marketplace.

A German native, she was educated in Germany, Indonesia, Israel, Australia, and the United States, and holds a PhD in literary and cultural theory as well as a Master in Business Administration.