

Building Brand Africa

TO CHANGE THE African brand to a positive one, we need to be celebrating those Africans who we aspire to be like, says Thebe Ikalafeng, the man they call Mr Brand.

"We are always quick to report the worst, because we have too much of a victim mentality," Ikalafeng says. "We need to turn that around and stop looking at the institutions to change, but rather make the change ourselves. When we as individuals start being proud of ourselves, things will start to change."

Ikalafeng was speaking on "Evolving African leadership and its impact on Brand Africa" at the WBS Distinguished Lecture Series in early 2009. Known as one of the country's leading marketers, Ikalafeng founded the Brand Leadership Group.

He is passionate about building brands that define us as a nation or a continent, and has spent much of his time repositioning African governments, South African parastatals and other organisations that "are an enduring part of what makes us who we are".

A consummate African marketer with a global perspective, operating in several African markets, Ikalafeng successfully led the political repositioning and campaign strategy that returned Ghana's ruling party to government. He re-branded the continent's largest freight

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company, Transnet; did the merger re-branding of the world's 10th biggest university, Unisa; the re-branding of the University of Botswana and the repositioning of Telecom Namibia.

Africa has been branded as a "uniform basket case", he says. South Africans don't see themselves as African – they refer to Africa as some place north of the borders, and not as something of which they are a part. In fact, he says, Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa are the only African countries in the top 40 nation brands. "Algerians, Egyptians and South Africans don't think they are African, and Nigeria thinks it is the whole continent."

The world sees Africa as the most corrupt continent, according to Ikalafeng, and when someone like Robert Mugabe commits another dastardly deed, the world doesn't see it as something happening in Zimbabwe initiated by a crackpot leader – they see it as what is happening in the whole of Africa, he observes.

"But they don't see British football hooliganism as something negative that all Europeans do, they just see it as a problem that the British have," Ikalafeng says.

Turning to personal branding and the branding of leaders, he says it is important to have a central message to portray and then to find platforms from which to broadcast this message. He cites Barak Obama as being the embodiment of how a leader should brand himself. "The message he chose – one that he wanted to build as his legacy – was change and hope, and the platform he chose was running the United States presidency," Ikalafeng says. "Then, to get his message out, he wrote a book here and there and made a speech here and there."

He also cites Nelson Mandela as an example of a South African who built a successful brand around himself. Ikalafeng quotes Wits politics professor Tom Lodge as saying that Mandela's heroic status was partly a product of his leading position in the anti-apartheid struggle, but also something that took deliberate effort to build.

Then he gave examples of other African leaders who got it wrong, like Uganda's Idi Amin, former Liberian leader Charles Taylor and Mugabe. He explains that branding is all about you as an individual and you in your position, and both of these have to be reinforced by the values you project.



Moving on to President Jacob Zuma being elected ANC president and “the short man” (Thabo Mbeki), Ikalafeng explains that Mbeki showed that he had some idea of the importance of branding when he initiated his African Renaissance project.

“If you understand and have strong values, project well and stand firm in what you believe, you will stand out,” he says. “You have got to love a guy who picks a position and sticks to it, no matter what, because the world is full of wimps.”

But, even if South Africa and Africa have some strong branded role models, they still get bad press – or what Ikalafeng refers to as the “CNN effect”. He claims that CNN is so negative about Africa that, when Africans see the stories about their own countries, they don’t recognise

them.

The only way forward, according to Ikalafeng, is to “broadcast our own story from our own perspective”. He says, “We have to change the way the world views us, because the CNNs of the world are not telling the positive stories.

“The continent supersedes the country in branding. So it is the responsibility of all Africans to change our brand, which is the

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way people see us. South Africans have to stop thinking that if it is local, the quality can’t be good.”

Ikalafeng explains that branding happens either by design or by default. If it just happens, then it is by default, in which case you don’t have control over it. Nigerians have branded themselves the heart of Africa, and they truly believe it, he says. South Africa has branded itself “alive with possibilities”. The problem with that, he explains, is that it emphasises potential possibilities – not something positive that has already been created.

Ikalafeng disagrees with the view that Africa is too far gone and can’t be changed. “That is not true – anyone can change and reinvent themselves. It is never too late to become that which we aspire to be.”