

Cool: It's the hottest thing

THEBE IKALAFENG tries to put his finger on what creates trendsetting magic
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HOW do you define "cool"? It's even difficult, as the Encyclopaedia of Brands and Branding discovered, to get a precise definition from the "gurus of cool", 13 marketers in South Africa whose lifestyles, occupations and brands qualify them to pronounce on the subject.

Cool, according to Mike Joubert of Levi's, the original cool jeans, "is the icebreaker between strangers".

Joubert says cool is always hot. Huh?

But that's precisely the point. Cool, as Romy Lee Gishen of Guess? noted, is "undefinable".

No fewer than 685 brands were proposed as cool by the 3499 people interviewed in the annual Sunday Times/Markinor Top Brands Survey.

But one thing is certain. "Cool", according to style guru Dion Chang, "is fleeting and transient: that's the allure."

Marketers are now employing "cool hunters" — young people who hang around kids and try to spot the "cool" ones who are seen to be trendsetters.

The cool ones are showered with samples in the hope of influencing the uncool's choices.

They're writing manuals such as Gene Del Vecchio's Creating Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart, to tailor their marketing campaigns to appeal to cool kids.

Advertising, once described as "the most pervasive music in the history of — er, civilisation" by Jack Kroll (Newsweek, 1975) and "the science of arresting the human intelligence just long enough to get money from it" by the English humorist Stephen Leacock, can claim its role in the birth of cool.

Without fail, across all product, service and gender categories, the brands at the top of the Sunday Times Generation Next Brand Survey are among the top advertisers.

Media, with TV chief among them, play a key part in offering role models and direction on what's cool. By observing what their celebrity role models on Channel O, MTV and Entertainment TV are doing, wearing or using and what their friends, peers and siblings have or wear, youngsters find out what's cool.

In South Africa, the complexity of children growing up in the diametrically confusing mono-cultures of their parents and the multi-culturalism of their friends, and the influence of global media, makes for an interesting definition of cool.

As one of South Africa's cool icons, Nkhensani Nkosi of Stoned Cherrie put it,

it's "the wow factor" from "the ability to encapsulate the thrilling pulse of African urban energy".

To get there takes at least the same brand-building tools as the great enduring brands — an ability to stay consistent on delivering on the brand promise, superior products and processes, a distinctive positioning, creating a memorable customer experience, and the ability to stay relevant.

And building brands is a long-term commitment. That's why among the "coolest" brands in the Generation Next Survey, only a handful, such as Polka and Gateway in Durban, are newer brands. The rest, such as Coca-Cola, BMW and Nokia, are old "cool" brands.

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