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The new Springbok identity - much ado about nothing?

So, the executive of SARU this week finally made a decision about the future identity of the Springboks. Throughout the "process", for lack of a better description of the debacle over the last few weeks, there has been a general overreaction to the concept of introducing the Protea emblem to the bokke jersey - perhaps because it was made by politicians rather than by brand and business people who understand brands and branding, or even better, the consumers - the fans.

As a nation trying to build a unified brand identity, fundamentally the argument of the politicians is right.



There is nothing novel or wrong with the idea that all national teams should have an overarching brand identity - the Protea in this instance. Anthony Swart of The Brand Union eloquently illustrated this with the case of the English "rose" and the New Zealanders' "fern." Just



as the New Zealand's "All Blacks" is a term of endearment, similarly that's what the "Springboks" means to the millions of rugby fans.

The decision reached by the SARU council - with the obvious nudge by politicians - to have the protea on "left" and the springbok on "right" is not a compromise, but a brand alignment. It's also a historical and political alignment with a changed nation.

All other teams wear a "Protea" badge. What's so special about the Springboks? The fact that a fundamental character and attribute of South Africa celebrates diversity does not mean that we cannot and should not have a central "theme" for lack of a better description.

Overarching identity

"Protea" and "green" is the overarching identity for national sporting brands of South Africa. That's how the world can recognise that we are of one without saying a word. We can and will always call them "Bokke" or "Springboks," like we call the football Protea team "Bafana Bafana" etc. There's no brand value being affected as the team's identity - or rather, meaning - has not and will not change.

Instead it's being enhanced by closely building the association with all other national teams - even if they aren't as successful. Ideally, as Swart suggested, it would be best to completely scrap the Springbok "logo" and have a complete break with the past brand associations.

A brand rests in the minds of consumers - the fans - and is built over time. The Springboks will always be Springboks by any other name. When they step onto the field and play "Bokke" type of South African rugby - that will evoke an emotional response that resonates with "Bokke," irrespective of the badge on their jerseys.

Valuable brand for sport and SA

The Springboks is a valuable brand for sport and for South Africa. All other SA properties should benefit from the overall association of Springboks as resilient and winning brand. It's a good association and perhaps, with the Protea as central identity, the "pollen" of success will blow toward the rest of SA's other less successful sporting brands, and all South Africans as a winning nation - at a stretch, albeit.

During my six-year tenure as marketing director for Nike, the jersey was responsible for over 30% of apparel sales - for which Nike as principal apparel sponsor at the time paid a handsome fee.

Sasol, in taking over the sponsorship from SAB and Nike, paid a reputed R200 million over five years.

Matches featuring Springboks around the world are always all sold out and Springbok apparel shelves are always empty, which gives you an indication of what their value is both emotionally to fans, financially to business, and to the image of SA. But the true value, [as Swart points out](#), is not the financial value of the Springboks, but the underpinning values of being a part of the new South Africa.

That Pieter de Villiers has returned the team to winning ways is a good thing to SA. Good for our resurgent Bafana Bafana - if we're not being overly optimistic. Good for any brand with Protea, and therefore, SA.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thebe Ikalafeng, founder of The Brand Leadership Group (www.brand-leadership.com), has been recognised as one of the Top 10 Thinkers in Marketing in an Ipsos Markinor survey among business decision makers. He is the founder of forum www.leadingbrands.org, a non-executive director of Mercantile Bank Holdings and Foodcorp, a member of Durban University of Technology council, Vega School of Brand Communications advisory committee, and the *Sunday Times* Marketing Excellence council. Thebe has advised many of southern Africa's leading brands, and taught, inter alia, at Wits University and UNISA School of Business Leadership, on positioning, branding, identity and related matters. Contact him on email thebe@brand-leadership.com.