

# Reinventing a vibrant and relevant UFS

By Thebe Ikalafeng

Higher Education in South Africa has experienced rapid growth and change since the March 2000 release of the National Plan for Higher Education which provided a framework for the restructuring of the higher education. The restructuring led to the emergence of new higher-education mega-brands, and the rationalisation of programme development and delivery that changed the higher-education landscape forever.

For those comprehensive university giants such as the University of the Free State (UFS), Wits and Stellenbosch, whose structure was left relatively unchanged, it is no longer business as usual. They are challenged by the “newer” and aggressive comprehensive institutions such as the University of Johannesburg, which in theory at least, are not bound by tradition and institutional legacy. In the age of the consumer – the student – these traditional giants have to work harder to offer an enhanced institutional differentiation, relevance and customer orientation.

Warren Buffet once said: “it takes 20 years to build your reputation, but 5 minutes to destroy it.” The Reitz incident has no doubt instantly compromised and threatened the 106 year reputation of the UFS brand. Another view is that it has given the university an urgent opportunity and challenge to rethink, differentiate and revitalise its brand within the context

of a transformed South Africa. Albeit spurred by unfortunate circumstances, the opportunity to reinvent itself among other traditional and new comprehensive institutions is a golden and rare opportunity for a storied institution with an impeccable and undisputed academic reputation.

In rethinking and re-inventing its brand and relevance in South Africa today, a new UFS brand must be based on a deep understanding of its stakeholder market and segments – students, alumni, parents, staff and donor, the higher education competitive set and the history of the institution. The brand vision or proposition must leverage its storied 106 year history, tell the story of a vibrant, relevant and transformed brand, and instantly signal the institution's vision of “an excellent, equitable and innovative” organisation that resonates with and engages all stakeholders, differentiates the brand, and guides and inspires institutional decisions and inspires performance.

As Tom Peters observed: “you are either distinct or extinct.” Given its rich academic and cultural legacy, choice for UFS is clear. The mark of a great brand is not how it fares in good times, but how it rises to challenging times. It is time to rethink, renew, revitalise and retell a new UFS brand story.

## The brand journey

The UFS has begun a comprehensive and consultative brand revitalisation journey which will culminate with it re-emerging as a proud and transformed South African national asset, with a respected public image.

The process will be thorough, participative and consultative, using multiple methodologies, user-oriented techniques across a three-phase brand development process encompassing brand discovery, brand distinction and brand delivery.

The project is intended to be concluded with the launch of the new brand, which will coincide with the launch of the ground-breaking International Institute for Studies in Race, Reconciliation and Social Justice at the beginning of the third quarter of 2010.

Thebe Ikalafeng is arguably Africa's foremost brand authority. He is founder of The Brand Leadership Group and the Brand Leadership Academy, and has been recognised as one of the Top 10 Thinkers in Marketing in an Ipsos Markinor survey among business decision makers. He has had a successful multi-industry brand consulting career. In higher education he has led the merger branding of UNISA (2005) and North West University (2007), the re-branding of University of Botswana (2008) and brand evolution of Wits Business School (2009).