

## **Selling the State as a consumer brand**

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Political parties jockey for position in the electoral market place, even as the state moves to define its over-arching trade mark: the national Coat of Arms

“A brand is a particular sense of meaning and direction.” Jean-Noel Kapferer couldn’t have defined the meaning of a brand more clearly if he tried.

Contrary to popular belief, the concept of brands goes beyond the borders of clothing, chain stores and motor vehicles. In these ever changing times, the private sector is not the only place where brand focus is the order of the day.

Government and the Department of Trade and Industry in particular also is on a mission to make itself known via a reputable brand.

According to the annual Markinor / *Sunday Times* Top Brands Survey only two Parastatals or state entities – Telkom and Eskom – were listed by consumers among the top 10 Most Admired Brands.

Brand specialist Thebe Ikalafeng, managing director of Brand Leadership, said Eskom and Telkom have featured in the top 10 consistently for the last several years, attesting to the strength of the bonds they have with the broader South African consumers. “No government department or political party has ever featured in the nine year history of the survey.

The Markinor / *Sunday Times* Survey, like most brand tracking studies, is the consumers’ vote of confidence in brands, products or services. A government is entrusted with delivering a range of services for its broader customers – its citizens. That relationship is similar to the relationship between consumers and brands.

“While with packaged brands and services, consumers vote with their cash, in a government / citizen relationship, the citizen relationship, the citizen express their vote of confidence or lack thereof, at the national, provincial or local elections.

“With that understanding their accountability to consumers, governments, including ours, constantly seek ways to improve the quality of service. Minister Geraldine Fraser Moleketsi’s transversal initiative – Batho Pele (Putting People First) – a commitment to service delivery, is, you could say a government’s version of customer service strategy”.

Ikalafeng points out the parallels between packaged goods and services and the critical role government plays. He says it is no wonder then that government is determined to learn from their private sector counterparts when it comes to “marketing their services”.

With South Africa about to celebrate a decade of freedom, Ikalafeng says that since 1994, three key trends have emerged in public sector marketing.

“First, there’s been a proliferation of creating distinctive corporate identities by public sector entities – led by the distinctive and well known Department of Trade and Industry (the DTI) and the ubiquitous city of Johannesburg – named the most admitted city this year in the Markinor / *Sunday Times* Survey.

“Secondly, public sector entities are now trying to establish a benchmark value for their assets – beyond the financial value of their physical assets – to establish the impact of their marketing efforts.

“In a world first, Brand Leadership senior partner and Wits academic Professor Roger Sinclair, over a period of two years calculated the value of Brand South Africa to be \$50-billion. At that value, South Africa, the brand is the fourth most valuable brand after Coca-Cola, Microsoft and IBM. Of course it may be an unfair comparison in that a country is not a fast moving consumer good. It would be fairer to compare it against other nations – whenever they’ve completed their country valuations.

“Finally, with a budget estimated at over R211-million (ACNielsen AdEx Top 100 Advertisers 2003), the government, represented by Government Communication & Information Systems (GCIS) and Minister Geraldine Fraser-Moloketi’s Batho Pele Initiatives are investing in extensive marketing campaigns to communicate what they are doing for the broader stakeholders – the public. All these efforts have resulted in several millions invested in what is now commonly termed building the brand.

He says that with that level of Investment and effort, which places the government among the top three advertisers in the country (ACNielsen AdEx), several questions are being asked in public sector circles:

- Why should government spend so much money on marketing?
- Is the classical marketing theory and practice appropriate for government?
- What, whose and which brand should be built?
- And more fundamentally, what is a brand? Can government be treated as a brand?

Speaking to him, one cannot help but notice the passion and excitement Ikalafeng exudes once he starts explaining the ins and outs of brands.

“In its simplest non-academic expression, a brand has been described as a promise made by a company to the consumer, a relationship or contract between the company and the consumer. It is, according to Marty Neumeir. “a gut feeling about a product, a service or company. It’s not what you say it is. It’s what the (target market) say it is.”

He says since the country belongs to the people, and the people want an account of the stewardship of their asset – the country – government has a contract with the broader citizens.

“Quite simply put, one can say that national, provincial or local elections are like shareholder’s meetings or a transaction, where consumers (the citizens) express their confidence in the government’s delivery of service and the value they have created for them. Much like packaged products and services, political parties, in preparation for running governments, position themselves relative to the opposition.

“Positioning, coined by Jack Trout and Al Ries in 1982, is how you differentiate yourself in the mind of your customers is how you differentiate yourself in the mind of your customers.

“Much of the branding decisions and activities of the various government departments, together or separately are an effort to position themselves among the stakeholders – the citizens. Distinctly positioned brands make choices and decision making easier for consumers.”

When the African National Congress (ANC) replaced the apartheid government, their position was and still remains: A better life for all. Apart from this well-known catch phrase, something else that sets the ANC apart is the organisation’s flag, which has stood the test of time.

While this is all well and good, Ikalafeng says it is important to understand that not all services offered by the government via its various departments are relevant to all citizens.

“No one citizen requires the services of all 28 departments. It is for this reason that each department seeks to differentiate itself – whether by its corporate identity, its environmental branding or its range of services – to stand out and appeal its target markets.

“Thus an International Marketing Council (IMC) is concerned with connecting with the international markets, the DTI with investors and entrepreneurs, the department of education with students, academics and institutions of learning, etc.”

To ensure that departments brand themselves appropriately, and that the government – visually represented by the Coat of Arms – is recognized as the over-arching deliverer of services to the brand citizens of South Africa. Brand Leadership and TwoTone Design have been tasked to draw the strategy guidelines for managing the nation’s highest trademark, the Coat of Arms.

Ikalafeng emphasized the importance of creating brand distinction. “The world’s leading brands distinguish themselves on four characteristics – clarity of their offer, consistency of delivery, leadership in their category and reach of their service. There are two key anchors for building a brand – first create awareness and second, build association of your brand with a specific service or product and target consumers. The corporate or brand identity is merely a visual interpretation of the strategy, mission and / or vision of corporate entity.

“And that truth holds, irrespective of whether you are a government or a packaged good. The job of each of the more than 1.2 million civil servants and 28 departments is similar to that of employees of any corporation – to create innovative solutions to consumers’ needs and build lasting profitable relationships between the brand/s and their consumers. It’s important to remember that perceptions and reputations are more powerful than reality.

“Because of the proliferation of products and services addressing similar needs, media clutter, globalization, and growing consumer power, a brand that makes a difference and is distinctly positioned will stand out and continue to thrive and offer value to its owners.”

As a parting shot, Ikalafeng says indignantly: “Although individually distinct in their role, in the end the primary aim of all departments is to creative meaning for the government’s commitment for “A better life for all.” Together, they add to brand South Africa, under the custodian of the ANC.

“And the vote for the most admitted brand – internally and externally – should be the government, expressed by the vote of the citizens at general elections.”

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