

## Thebe Ikalafeng - Brand spanking news

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If you want something done, give it to a busy man, they say. If true, anyone in need of getting something done had best call the very stylish, 39-year-old Thebe Ikalafeng. A busier man you will not find in South Africa.

As one of the big names in our marketing and advertising industry, Ikalafeng is kept occupied with his position as both the managing director of brand strategy consulting firm, Brand Leadership (Pty) Ltd., and non-executive director of Two Tone Strategic Design & Branding.

And, as if that weren't enough, he is also a director of both Mercantile Lisbon Bank Holdings and its subsidiary Mercantile Bank, a director of the Marketing Federation of South Africa, a board member of the Vega School of Brand Communications and a published author hard at work on his fourth book.

'It's simply called *Branding*,' he says. 'It's a personal branding book. I've taken classical marketing theory and applied it to human psychology in an attempt to describe how people themselves are brands.'

'Brands are about relationships and promises. A brand is a promise kept. When you discover a brand you like – be it clothes, food or dishwashing liquid – you always return to it, never questioning it, because you expect it to deliver every time. Brands simplify our lives and the choices we have to make.'

Growing up in Kimberley, Ikalafeng did not have a clear strategy for his future; his fascination with branding and marketing only manifested itself late into his accounting studies. 'I started accounting at Wits,' he explains, 'but I didn't like it so, at the age of 23, I started all over again in the US. But a friend of mine said I looked nothing like an accountant – "You should be in marketing," he said. So into marketing I went.'

Seems the friend knew what he was talking about.

Upon completing his marketing studies at Marquette University, a Jesuit university in Wisconsin, USA, Ikalafeng was awarded the American Marketing Association Award for Marketing Excellence in 1992 and immediately offered a job as a member of the product management team at Colgate-Palmolive in New York. Returning to South Africa in the '90s, he undertook a variety of jobs before making a huge splash as Nike's marketing director for Africa.

Though he is by no means arrogant, Ikalafeng beams as he rattles off his achievements during his six-year tenure at Nike.

'We grew our market 480 per cent,' he boasts with a mile-wide smile. 'We won over 75 local and international communication awards, including 10 Cannes Lions.'

So, with such resounding success under his belt, why did he leave?

'I had hit a plateau. There was nowhere for me to go except sideways. I considered moving back overseas with Nike but that thought lasted about a second – who wants to leave SA! So I decided to start Brand Leadership and, a few months later, partnered with a friend, graphic designer Carlo Murison, to launch Two Tone Design.'

Though barely three years old, both companies – that often work together on the same projects – have already scored some major coups, but there are three projects that Ikalafeng would particularly like to be remembered for.

'One of our first jobs was to write the guidelines for managing the country's highest identity, the coat of arms. It's the most official logo in the country. We then finished off 2004 by writing the positioning and refining the brand identity of the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage Site. And then, last month, we launched the Unisa project, arguably the biggest marketing and branding job in the country at the moment: Unisa, Vista and Technikon SA are integrating to

create the tenth largest university in the world and we're doing their market positioning, their branding, and their intellectual property management.

'We've worked on the origin of humankind; the education of humankind; and the governance of humankind.

'That's my legacy, if I were to stop working today.'

## **VITAL STATISTICS**

**First Informal Job** A gardener at age 14, in Kimberley.

**First Formal Job** Product management at Colgate-Palmolive in New York.

**First Car** A red Sentra – I didn't know how to drive a manual so I crashed the car within an hour of buying it!

**Current Cars** C32 AMG Mercedes and a Porsche 550 Spider Limited Edition.

**Favourite Music** I can't choose a specific song. I have an eclectic taste so I'm as comfortable listening to Dolly Parton as I am to Brenda Fassie.

**Favourite Clothing** Anything that looks good. I'm branded, it's my job. I'm particularly fond of the Fabiani label.

**Best Holiday** Paris or the South of France. The French people have such a strong sense of their own culture and take such pride in it. I wish South Africans would feel the same.

**Day in the Life** I've never had the same day twice. All I can say is that life is busy. I typically work around 18 hours a day. I'm not a workaholic; I just love what I do. I tell people I'm not working, I'm having fun!