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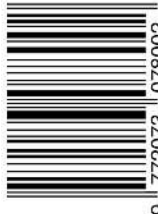
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# THE BE IKALAFENG

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# ONE-MAN BRAND

Marketing maverick Thebe Ikalafeng is a globetrotting executive who hops from one continent to another, but his passion for Africa is a force that keeps him firmly grounded

**H**e's been voted by a few publications as one of the best-dressed men in SA, yet he arrives for our interview in an understated red golf shirt, faded jeans and white sneakers. Minutes after exchanging pleasantries, brand guru and MD of the Brand Leadership Group Ikalafeng pops open the boot of his car to show us his wardrobe for the post-interview shoot: there are a few suits, a number of shirts, an assortment of ties and a dozen pairs of shoes – all high-end international and local brands.

"For me, looking your best means dressing appropriately for the occasion you're attending, respecting the people who've invited you and being comfortable. It's not about following trends or making a statement," he explains.

But there's far more to this man than his fine threads. Ikalafeng's also renowned as one of Africa's foremost brand authorities and influential thinkers in marketing. He's most notable for his six-year tenure as Executive Director of Nike Africa, during which Nike accumulated more than 75 local and international marketing and communications awards with The Jupiter Drawing Room, including 10 Cannes Lions and the IMM Organisation of the Year Roll of Honour.

You'd expect someone with such credentials to measure his words carefully, but Ikalafeng talks so fast that it's as if he's struggling to keep up with a rapid flow of ideas. Yet, while

he comes across as self-assured, he's also personable – an attribute that's contributed to his acclaim as an international speaker, academic and successful entrepreneur.

## BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Born and raised in Kimberley in the Northern Cape, Ikalafeng and his three siblings were brought up by a "very devoted" grandmother, while their mother, a professional nurse, worked in Bloemfontein. Both instilled enduring values of hard work, humility and excellence in the children.

One of his most vivid childhood memories was working at a furniture shop in order to buy a camera when he was 14. "It was a physically taxing job for one so young. One afternoon I went to take a nap in the storeroom and I only woke up after 6pm. The shop was closed! I knocked hard on the doors and the shop owner, who – luckily – was still there, opened them for me and told me never to sleep at work!"

Soon after finishing school, Ikalafeng went to Johannesburg to study a B Com in accounting at Wits University. "It was during the years of political







unrest in the country. I came from a generation of status quo challengers. That's how the country got to where it is," he says. Having failed some of his first year courses, he repeated them and passed, but then dropped out in second year to go to the USA, after winning an Institute of International Education scholarship.

"I was hoping to finish my B Com there, but when I arrived, a friend of mine who knew my character very well advised me to study marketing. So I started doing that at Marquette University, a Jesuit institution located in Milwaukee."

Ikalafeng finally graduated with a BSc Business Administration cum laude and MBA degrees and received the American Marketing Association award for being the best marketing student before cutting his teeth at Colgate in the USA.

## TAKING THE LEAD

When Ikalafeng returned to SA in 1994, the CEO of a leading recruitment agency told him that he should be working for himself, rather than looking for a job. "He told me I operated best on my own. But I thought he didn't have my best interests at heart. I wanted to drive a BMW like my friends did, have a credit card and live the good life. How was I going to do all that with the little experience I had?"

Eight years later, after having reached the highest echelons in the local marketing industry and having won almost every award, he felt he'd reached the corporate ceiling.

"I asked myself: 'Where to next?' It hit me that SA needed entrepreneurs who wouldn't recycle existing ideas, but come up with original ones. I realised that one of the biggest weaknesses in our economy is that people are offered single-digit percentages in BEE stakes and think they've arrived. I think BEE, done right, is an important vehicle to redress economic gaps and to fast track black skills development. But I wanted to create a legacy. That's why I didn't want to join an existing company, but start up on my own. So I founded the Brand Leadership Group, together with four Marketing Directors, in 2002. Many people thought I was crazy and predicted that the company would fold in three years."

The naysayers were proved spectacularly wrong. Almost a decade later, the brand consulting company is still going strong. What's more, it won the 2008 *Finweek* Marketing Services Company of the Year, as well as the 2011 Rebrand 100 Global award for effective brand transformations.

However, Ikalafeng admits it hasn't all been smooth sailing. "When we started, the first company we approached said they'd only offer us business if we were affiliated to a more established company that could handle big jobs, while we did smaller

ones. I said: 'Hell, no! We're not feeding on scraps!' I didn't want us to be a subsidiary of any company. My partners were upset, thinking I was short-sighted, but it wasn't long before things started looking up. We eventually beat an international company for the contract to do strategy for Standard Bank worldwide. That's how I wanted us to be recognised – by doing the big jobs."

One of the more serious hurdles to overcome in the company's start-up phase was in its operations: Ikalafeng realised that all the founding members had similar backgrounds and there was no skills diversity. Within 10 months of operation, the organisation's ownership was dissolved and he teamed up with two new partners from different backgrounds.

"I learnt that you should partner with people who want the same thing you want, but they need to bring a diversity of skills and ideas to the table. One of my partners was a 60-something professor at Wits University; the other was an international intellectual property lawyer. That immediately positioned us as thought leaders to be reckoned with."

To date, the Brand Leadership Group's done work throughout the continent, including Ghana, where it helped the National Democratic Congress into power in the 2009 elections. Its other clients have included SA Express Airways, Transnet, University of the Free State and Sars.

## PERSONAL BRANDING

Ikalafeng says everything he does is a "reflection and extension" of who he is.

He recalls a time in his life when he felt misunderstood and realised that the image he was projecting wasn't consistent with his brand.

"Perhaps people recognised me more for the fact that I dressed well and got invited everywhere than for my other attributes. So I took a step back and repositioned myself. The Thebe who needed to be in the forefront was a thought leader, a creator and an influencer, rather than being fashionable. Consistency and clarity are what set great brands apart. Up until this day, I've been very consistent. I'm not famous for being famous. I don't





**“Everyone’s a brand, but some of us cultivate, nurture, manage and deliver on our brands, while others don’t.”**



pursue fame – I pursue great work. I want to do great things that will outlast me.” When we do commendable deeds, he insists, the world notices.

But what about the run-of-the-mill guy? Is he also a brand? “Everyone’s a brand, but some of us cultivate, nurture, manage and deliver on our brands, while others don’t. In order to succeed, you have to be self-aware in terms of what drives you or excites you. Find out how other people perceive you and whether you make a difference in the world. If people perceive you differently from what you stand for, then it might be time for you to reposition yourself.”

Ikalafeng adds that everyone has a “default brand”, but some fortunate people’s default brands work for them automatically, so they don’t need to examine their lives. It’s crucial never to shape your life to suit other people, he cautions: just affirm yourself and make people see you as you truly want to be seen.

While his achievements in marketing speak for themselves, he’s also a sought-after international speaker and has published several books, including *Felicia: Dare to Dream* (Zebra Press, co-authored with Felicia Mabuza-Suttle), the audiobook *Personal Branding: 7 Steps to Build a Distinct Personal Brand Aligned to Your World, Work and Passions* and *Conquer the Job Market* (Waterman). His next book, he believes,

will be on Africa as the new global inspiration for culture, design and branding.

## THE AFRICA CONNECTION

Ikalafeng’s passion for Africa is evident in almost every aspect of his life – including his company, which he envisages building great brands on this continent.

What also sets the Brand Leadership Group apart is its “African inside” – a philosophy based on thinking locally and acting globally. He adds that this viewpoint is the contrary of what students are taught at business school, which is to think globally and act locally. “Current academic theory encourages people to adjust international trends to work in Africa, but we’re inspired by the local market and we want to take it to the world.”

This has also culminated in the organisation being markedly discerning in the clients it accepts. “We only focus on brands that inspire us, like MTN, Sars, Prasa and Transnet.”

It was also the desire to contribute to Africa’s growth and revival that Ikalafeng founded Brand Africa – a pan-African, brand-centric initiative for African leaders, decision-makers, citizens and influencers to converge in a single forum in 2009.

“My passions are continental and wherever I travel in the world, I want people to recognise that I’m African – not just South African. SA isn’t an island. Brand Africa is about bringing African leaders from different fields to one forum to share ideas on how to drive the image of the continent forward,” he says.

This year’s forum, held in Sandton, Johannesburg in September, featured leaders such as Dr Dambisa Moyo, author of the best-selling *How the West Was Lost: 50 Years of Economic Folly – and the Stark Choices Ahead* (Penguin), Dr Vijay Mahajan, author of *Africa Rising: How 900 Million African Consumers Offer More Than You Think* (Pearson Prentice Hall) and Rakesh Wahi, Vice-Chairman and co-founder of CNBC Africa and Forbes Africa. Ikalafeng also launched the Public Sector Excellence Awards in 2009 in order to commend and promote public and parastatal services which are on a par with the private sector.

## ON THE COOL

The world may be his oyster, but Ikalafeng considers himself an easygoing guy. “I don’t have favourite holiday destinations and restaurants, but my inclinations are usually influenced by my moods. I’m as comfortable at a restaurant in Soweto as I’d be in Sandton.”

However, he concedes that if you asked his colleagues about his personality, they’d probably say he’s a slave driver and a perfectionist who gets far too involved. “They may be right – I don’t think I’d have reached where I am if I were different,” he smiles.

He adds that he prefers to mentor people who share his drive. “For me, mentoring is about surrounding yourself with people who have the same passion as you do. When

I look at some of them, I think: 'I was exactly like you when I was younger.' It's an honour to spend my Saturdays and evenings with these people, sharing ideas and offering guidance." Although Ikalafeng doesn't have a role

model, he says his "identity's been informed" by a number of experiences and people – including history, travels, friends and employers. "I travel extensively because it widens my horizons. I also buy books constantly, although



**"I'm not famous for being famous. I don't pursue fame – I pursue great work. I want to do great things that will outlast me."**

I don't get to read all of them. Reading also helps me keep abreast with most developments in the industry, while consulting forces me to read. Everything we do starts with insights."

When he's not hard at work dissecting complex concepts, he's relaxing at home playing with his gadgets. "I have an iPod, an iPad, a Samsung Galaxy Tablet and a TV set in every room. How else are you supposed to keep up with the world? I don't know why I've got them all, because most of them do the same thing. I guess it's from thinking that some have better buttons than others!

"I don't drink, smoke or do lines, but we all have our vices and mine's my credit card!"

Ikalafeng says his personal barometer for achievement was always to see his signature on brands and their billboard ads on highways. Now that he sees them all the time, he could be said to have arrived – but he's still going strong. **DM**



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