

PROFILE: THEBE IKALAFENG

Mission: Rebranding Africa

Anver Versi meets **Thebe Ikalafeng** (right), the man behind the African brands rankings, and discovers that the chairman of Brand Africa and Brand Finance Africa is driven by the passion to completely reverse Africa's often-tarnished image.

FIRST ENCOUNTERED THEBE IKALAFENG a few years ago when we met for dinner at one of the restaurants on Nelson Mandela Square in Johannesburg ahead of my participation in his inaugural Brand Africa Forum. Between introducing ourselves, sitting down and choosing drinks, Thebe had greeted, made quips, jokes and observations with a variety of people – diners, waiters, the maitre d' and a German tourist couple. All the while he was filling me in about his Brand Africa initiative.

I met him again last month in New York where he was to present the best African brands awards to Coca-Cola (global brand in Africa) and MTN (African brand) during the African Business Awards ceremony in New York. (See page 58.)

Nothing about him had changed. If anything, he seemed to have more of the drive and energy that had so impressed me on the earlier occasion. Over the next few days, he bounced about from an array of UN and African-oriented events and talked to everybody in sight – and those out of sight, on his mobile.

The ease with which he connects with the ordinary person as well as those considered 'the elite' is perhaps what is truly remarkable about him. Despite his list of achievements, he has not lost the common touch. That is perhaps the secret of his success as a



marketer and brand architect. After all, the companies he is involved in want, above all else, to connect with the common citizen, who forms their biggest customer base.

"Thebe," I asked him, "do you ever go to sleep?"

"I'll sleep when I'm dead," he said. "Hey, my African brother!" he called out to a waiter. "You are African, right?"

"I am from Côte d'Ivoire," the waiter beamed.

"Of course. Côte d'Ivoire! What a beautiful country. But," turning to me, "that country needs serious rebranding. In fact, we need to rethink the entire African brand." and he was away.

Thebe Ikalafeng talks about brands and branding with the zeal of a convert who has seen the light on the road to Damascus. When you are with him, the brand icons, such as MTN, Apple, BMW and so on, which we tend

to take for granted, suddenly seem to wriggle to life and become huge presences. You do get the impression that brands are the most important aspect of a company, that each has a fascinating story behind it and that you can peel back layer upon layer of meaning.

"Think about it. Our entire ecosystem is driven by brands," he says. "Our entire existence is determined by brands – from the most basic to the most luxurious. Whether you are looking for baby clothes or buying a car, you are choosing between brands. When you go out to eat, or to buy food, you are picking from brands. Thirsty? Which brand of beverage are you going to spend your money on? And residential neighbourhood, countries, companies to work for – everything."

He is right, of course. Everything we do with our money is branded – from the essential to the luxury. Just a beer won't do; it has to be Tusker or Castle or Kilimanjaro. A bar of soap? No, sir, it has to be this brand. What about mobile phones? Plenty of brands to choose from; ditto for service providers – MTN, Glo, Safaricom or the dozens of other brands battling it out there. Nobody sets out just to buy just a car; they set out to buy a Toyota or a Mercedes or a Jaguar.

Studies have shown that, contrary to long-held assumptions, the African consumer does not automatically go for the cheapest but is very brand conscious and that there is high brand loyalty.

"A brand is a subjective option," Thebe says. "It is a promise made and delivered. It encapsulates all the qualities of the product or service. It says: 'When you see this icon, you see the shorthand for a particular offering, positioning or quality – a promise to deliver at a particular price. A brand is a warranty.'"

If the promise made is not delivered, the brand can very quickly lose public confidence. The industrial graveyard is full of dead brands that failed to deliver or broke the promises they had made or are expected to have.

"When I fork out my hard-earned cash to buy the latest Samsung smartphone, I am not buying just a piece of communication equipment. I am buying into the Samsung promise. I am buying into what the company stands for. I am voting for it. I am choosing it above others.

"That is the power and value of brands," Thebe says. "That is why companies are so precious about their brands. That is why counterfeit brands are their worst nightmares – because they have no control over their delivering on their inherent or purported promise."

From the inside out

Contrary to what too many emerging companies, particularly in developing markets, in his opinion believe, branding is not merely about slapping a name and an icon on a product or service, advertising it and then sitting back waiting for the sales to roll in. “You have to build a brand conscientiously and patiently, inside out,” Thebe says.

“You build it in your product, your work-force, your management, your attitude to life, your philosophy. You put yourself on the line in your brand. The words and images that go to make up your advertising campaign come last. They encapsulate what your brand promises to deliver.”

He should know. He has spent a lifetime helping to build brands in his native South Africa and travelled to over 50 countries across Africa and the world gaining invaluable expertise and experience in the craft. His peers acknowledge him as the foremost African brands authority. His provenance is immaculate: BSc and MBA degrees from Marquette University in the US, executive education at Wits Business School and Harvard Business School, and a qualified Chartered Marketer (SA). Not long after starting his career at Colgate Palmolive in New York, prior to relocating to South Africa, he got his major break when he was appointed the first African director and chief marketing officer for Nike South Africa and later the African continent. He steered the company through the very difficult transition in post-apartheid South Africa, the need to adapt to local conditions and led it to over 75 local and global awards including the 10 Cannes Lions and the Institute of Marketing Management’s Marketing Company of the Year Roll of Honour.

After unparalleled success at Nike, he established his pan-African brand consultancy, Brand Leadership Group. In its first decade, he’s won the prestigious Fin Week ‘Marketing Services Agency of the Year’ award in 2008 (South Africa) and several Rebrand 100 global awards for Effective Brand Transformations. He has been recognised as one South Africa’s Top 10 Thinkers in Marketing in a list that featured Pick n Pay founder Raymond Ackerman, Virgin founder Richard Branson and former South African President Nelson Mandela in a survey by Ipsos Markinor among business decision makers. The *Mail and Guardian* newspaper has dubbed him simply “Mr Brand”. How We Made It Africa named him one of Ten African Business Leaders And Thinkers To Follow On Twitter along

with AfDB’s Donald Kaberuka, Heirs Holding’s Tony Elumelu and Harvard academic Professor Calestous Juma.

He has led a range of branding initiatives across the continent including the successful political branding campaign for Ghana’s Presidential candidates Atta Mills in 2008 and John Mahama in 2012; the merger branding of the world’s 10th largest university, the University of South Africa with over 250,000 students; the branding and organisation of the Africa Green Revolution for over 1,200



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delegates in Tanzania, the rebranding of the University of Botswana and repositioning of Telecom Namibia; campaigns for Zambia’s Zanaco, and nation-branding assignments for Brand Ghana and Brand South Africa and the re-branding of Transnet, Africa’s largest state-owned bulk freight organisation.

“I like to see myself as a transformational brand architect,” he says. He explains that to mean the assignments that interest him are those that are catalytic to a nation, institution or person’s identity and success, and contribute to transforming Africa’s image.

He sits on the board of several organisations, is a prolific writer, commentator, and much-sought-after speaker on global African branding and reputation matters.

But Thebe Ikalafeng is still not satisfied. The image of Africa, or brand Africa, is still very much in the negative. “What happens in Somalia tarnishes the image of Africa, what happens in CAR (Central African Republic)

or Zimbabwe or even South Africa, impacts the image and reputation of Africa,” he says. What is required is a deliberate, collaborative and effective effort to build up the image of the new, vibrant, growth-oriented Africa.

Best product in the world

“As a ‘product’, Africa is unequalled. We have everything here – landscape, seascape, flora, fauna, an extraordinary diversity of peoples and cultures, wonderful cities, parks, forests – and valuable mineral resources. But we are still not in charge of our brand. We are still letting other people tell our story.

“Other regions, with less than what we have or with a more deplorable history, have found ways to reinvent their nations. We are not working together. It is unconscionable that intra-Africa trade is only about 12-15%, whereas intra-Europe is above 60%. Recently it was established that a 1% increase in intra-Africa will result in \$50bn income for Africa. That’s what we get in aid – and clearly won’t need if we work together and look to our continent for growth rather than external aid.”

He puts this down to a lack of confidence caused by colonialism and the apartheid system. “We have been consumers, not contributors, except for raw materials. But we cannot live in isolation. We have to start contributing what is a unique African brand to the world. We have to build it and market it. Everybody wants a piece of Africa – and sees the opportunity. It is worth noting that while the West has a past, Africa has a future. There’s a new Africa emerging – and we must be in charge of it,” he says with a smile.

He is delighted that the ‘best brands’ ranking his Brand Africa and partners put together shows that “Made in Africa” is gaining ground against global brands in Africa brands, not only those operating in Africa, but even worldwide, as is the case with mobile brand, MTN, which feature among the most valuable brands in all key global surveys.

“We are turning the corner as a continent,” he says with a twinkle. “Africa is beginning to flex its latent potential and muscle.” With that, he bounced out, shaking hands, connecting with other delegates gathered in New York for among others the UN General Assembly and African Business Awards. He has a huge job on his hands – he has set out to lead the charge to rebrand the continent no less. He will need all his energy and creativity – and the support of the like-minded people he is marshalling across the continent. ■