

Mr Brand

HE'S BEEN DUBBED SA'S MR BRAND, BUT BRANDING MAESTRO
THEBE IKALAFENG STILL SEES HIMSELF AS A KID FROM KIMBERLEY

WORDS CARA BOUWER

When the branded prepaid debate broke in June, Thebe Ikalafeng led comments on the matter. Speaking to eNCA's Jeremy Maggs about the DA's mobile election campaign, which was subsequently pulled by service provider MTN and the voucher distribution company Blue Label Telecoms, Thebe presented a pragmatic view of marketing and branding opportunism in South Africa. 'It's fair game; it's a democratic country,' he said, noting that the ANC had a right to defend its turf. 'The battle for 2014 has started.'

Thebe immediately homed in on the underlying implications of the incident: the political focus on the youth going into the 2014 elections. 'The battle for both the DA and ANC is the youth market, and 80 to 90% of them are on prepaid.'

It's this ability to cut out the noise that has made Thebe a sought-after authority on marketing, branding and strategic alignment. He's been singled out by Ipsos Markinor as one of South Africa's top 10 thinkers in marketing, was famously labelled 'Mr Brand' by the *Mail & Guardian*, and received an award by the Asia Brand Congress for global brand leadership in 2008.

In 2012, he was appointed as joint vice-chair of the Brand Council of South Africa alongside Interbrand Sampson's Jeremy Sampson. Brand Leadership Group, which Thebe established in 2002, was named 2008 *Finweek* Marketing Services Company of the Year, as well as the 2011 REBRAND 100 Global Winner for Effective Brand Transformations. It is no surprise that Thebe hasn't looked back since leaving

his position as executive director of marketing at Nike Africa 11 years ago.

'I had a lot of people questioning my decision to leave such a high-profile job,' he says. 'The most important thing was to pursue my passion and champion excellence in African brand-building. It wasn't about the money or the position. It was about the difference I could make.'

'I immediately set myself up for higher things. I was never going to become just a black agency – my aim was to become a world-class, respected and successful agency that just happened to be headed by a black person.'

His 1995 book, *Conquer The Job Market: 5 steps to win the job you want*, was the first book written by an African on the subject of self-marketing. 'It was a time when South Africa was transforming,' he



says. 'People across all races and creeds still stop me and say that it helped frame their career progression.'

His style and personal charm have earned him many accolades, but Thebe prefers to focus on the work. Over the years, he's built an impressive portfolio of top South African companies, such as Transnet, Kaizer Chiefs, RCS and Anglo American, and more recently has become intimately involved in political and nation-branding around Africa, most notably leading the successful Ghanaian election campaigns for John Atta Mills in 2008 and John Dramani Mahama in 2012.

In fact, he arrives for this interview at Rosebank's Hyatt having just spent the morning talking Pan-Africanism with Pedro Pires, former president of Cape Verde and the winner of the 2011 Mo Ibrahim Prize for good governance in Africa. 'The breadth of my work extends from institutions to nations,' he says. 'I am easy, whether [I am] dealing with a president, a celebrity or a mentee.'

'When people meet me, I'm always taken aback that they say I'm down-to-earth. I don't see myself any other way than as a township kid who took the opportunities available to him. But I'm also self-assured enough to hold my own in the company of top businesspeople. I think this comes from being raised in a true African environment of resilience, respect, creativity and resourcefulness.'

'I DON'T SEE MYSELF ANY OTHER WAY THAN AS A TOWNSHIP KID WHO TOOK THE OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO HIM'

This Everyman appeal is rooted in Thebe's humble but happy origins. He was raised by his mother, a nurse, and his grandmother, whom he describes as his 'supporters and nurturers'. 'I wasn't raised with a whip or carrot; I was just raised with the right values.'

Growing up in Kimberley in the 1970s, Thebe was blessed with an unshakable inner resolve. 'I've always



COVER THEBE IKALAFENG

been self-resourceful and that resolve can be traced back to my upbringing. I wasn't channelled in one direction; I did everything: gardening, piano, violin, all sports. Whatever I wanted to do, I was always encouraged. I was allowed to find myself early on, and that built confidence and conviction.'

'WHATEVER I WANTED TO DO, I WAS ALWAYS ENCOURAGED'

That self-belief saw him dropping out of Wits with a year to go on his accounting degree, taking up a scholarship to study overseas and, while in the US, shifting his focus to marketing. It also translated to a cum laude BSc (business administration) degree and an MBA from Marquette University in the US, an institution that later, in conjunction with the American Marketing Association, honoured him with an Award for Marketing Excellence.

He's addressed audiences across Africa, India, Spain, the UK, China and the United States, and has been

interviewed by global media giants such as CNN and BBC. But, at his core, he remains a pioneer and fierce supporter of the continent he calls home.



'It sounds audacious when I say I want to lead the challenge to brand Africa,' he says, 'especially for someone who doesn't have any political heritage and who doesn't come from a privileged background.' But despite this, he is doing just that.

In 2010, he founded Brand Africa, a Pan-African platform to drive African brands, growth and competitiveness. 'Making a contribution to a better South Africa and a better Africa excites me,' says Thebe, who launched the Public Sector Excellence Awards in 2009.

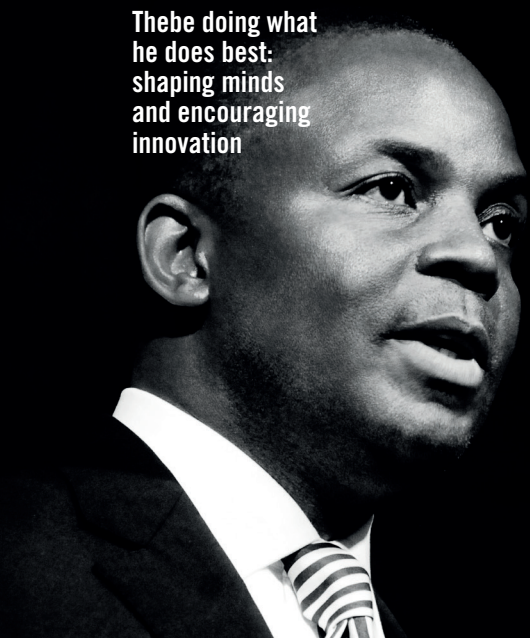
So how does a man like Thebe measure success?

'Success, for me, is happiness. It's about looking back on a day and knowing that I had and I took the opportunities to make a difference to a young man or woman, or to a brand like Unisa or Brand South Africa.'

Quietly behind the scenes, it was his Brand Leadership Group that stepped up to rescue the University of the Free State's 100-year-old legacy when the fallout from the 2008 racism scandal challenged the institution's image.

So what's next for Thebe? Well, it seems he has a new book in the works. And the topic? Branding and leadership in Africa. Obviously. **Man**

Thebe doing what he does best: shaping minds and encouraging innovation



No sleep, no balance – just passion

Talking to this high-energy man, it's hardly surprising that luxurious beach holidays don't feature in his diary. 'I'll have enough time to sleep when I'm dead,' he jokes. But the seriousness of this intent is reflected in one of his favourite quotes by American humorist Erma Bombeck: 'When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left and could say, "I used everything you gave me".'

Certainly, his passion for his craft and his continent is all-consuming. 'I don't allow my dreams to be constrained by material things or time,' he says, neatly sidestepping a question about his dream car (although rumour has it that he has a soft spot for Mercedes-Benz and Porsche). He's not a fan of the term 'balance' either. 'Balance, for me, implies compromises. All my passions support each other.'

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