

BRANDING CONFUSION

With so many agencies advertising South Africa, giving different messages, the notion of a national identity has become somewhat confused, writes **Thebe Ikalafeng**

Despite creating countless institutions; and investing billions in developing tourism, investment and citizenship initiatives; and an unmatched national enthusiasm and optimism, South Africa is still struggling to uniquely brand itself globally and inspire a unified sense of national identity locally.

The problem with Brand South Africa could be that there's too much unco-ordinated enthusiasm and a lack of focus, which leads to much confusion globally.

Speaking at the Proudly South African Homegrown Awards last year, President Thabo Mbeki posed the question: "What is different about a company that carries the Proudly South African symbol?"

The question and the answer he proposed – "it is making a statement that is at once a statement of origin, a statement of purpose and a statement of optimism ... provides the people in that company with a motivating and unifying principle that ties their work to a larger purpose – the building of our country" – is just as true about national identity, about what it means to be South African.

With apartheid and the era of former president Nelson Mandela a part of the history of brand South Africa, and the ambitious African Renaissance and Nepad initiatives championed by Mbeki still in their infancy, what we lack now, as global nation-branding guru Wally Olins put it, is a core idea that distinguishes and characterises Brand South Africa and positions us into the future.

Because we have not defined it, Olins says, we're beginning to be just like one of the scores of countries in the world, with no distinctive value proposition.

Defining the essence of Brand South Africa is complicated, but at the same time it is enriched by the diversity of a nation with a diametric history; many cultures; a diversity of symbols to represent arts, culture and sport; unequal economies; and the multiple institutions all set up to contribute to and build the national brand image, internally and externally.

We cannot fault the leadership of South Africa when it comes to enthusiasm, passion and investment in attempting to build Brand South Africa.

Mbeki, with his understanding of branding and its benefits for a nation, could give global branding gurus a run for their money.

In his January 13-19 2005 weekly ANC newsletter, the president captured his understanding of the concept of nation-branding with gravitas.

"Brand," he said, quoting branding literature – "constitutes islands of certainty in the sea of uncertainty that the future is... the most valuable real estate in the world, a corner of the consumer's mind."

In acknowledging the positioning of Brand South Africa and the challenges of building the nation brand, he cautioned: "We will, and must, continue 'advertising' democratic South Africa as a country Alive with Possibility, which is basking in a Season of Hope that communicates an

optimistic message to all humanity. However, we must take the greatest care that we do not conduct an attractive advertisement campaign, only to find that ours is 'a poor product'."

Mbeki has empowered several national institutions – South Africa Tourism; Proudly South African; the International Marketing Council (IMC); and the departments of trade and industry, foreign affairs, arts and culture, sport and recreation – and even constituted his own global advisory team, with respected brand builders to advise him on building the nation's image locally and globally to impact positively on tourism and investment success.

With so much invested, how does South Africa measure among other nation brands?

The GMI Anholt Nation Branding Index – which measures the cumulative effect of tourism, investment, governance, exports, immigration, people, culture and heritage – rated South Africa 22nd out of 25 nation brands (the only other African country evaluated, Egypt, was 11th).

Simon Anholt, creator of the GMI Anholt Nation Branding Index, says the "continental branding effect", where attributes of the least progressive or unstable country on the continent are ascribed to every country on the continent, could be hurting us.

With 69% of South Africa's tourists coming from Africa and the Middle East, according to SA Tourism figures, Africa poses both an opportunity and a possible problem.

A recent survey by Kuper Research on behalf of the IMC estimated that 49% of global respondents corroborated the proposition that Africa's instability is a concern in dealing with South Africa. This, of course, does not mean that our brand destiny is tied to that of the continent.

As Olins put it: "We have in Europe 25 countries each with a distinct identity, but they have a common membership of the European Union. They have dual loyalties. There is nothing wrong with having a multiplicity of loyalties. South Africa does not have to be overwhelmed by the rest of the continent, but can retain its distinct identity in some situations while remaining affiliated in other situations to the African continent as a whole."

Second, it is disappointing to note that, in a country with so much opportunity, we do not have almost everyone as a brand ambassador. (One of the IMC surveys by Research Surveys established that only 24% are "prepared to argue with anyone saying anything negative about South Africa".)

But the real problem may lie in co-ordination, which Olins observes is a problem with many developing nations enthusiastic about building their nation brands.

With several institutions all engaged in nation-branding, the essence of Brand South Africa is probably lost somewhere between the IMC's "alive with possibility", SA Tourism's "breaking new ground", and Proudly South African, among the many

propositions each institution is creating and promoting.

As Olins observed, the effect of these many institutions is to create marketplace confusion and present South Africa as lacking a core idea.

Furthermore, South Africa's foremost commercial brands – like Sappi, De Beers and Anglo American – which are all, potentially, flag-bearers, do not necessarily operate from a common Brand South Africa strategy within their commercial propositions. Sixty-two of the World's 100 Most Valuable Brands, according to *Interbrand/Business Week*, are American. None South African. None African.

To an extent, one can understand the presidency's frustration with public utterances of companies like Sasol in their international statements on the state of South Africa and their impact on local organisations.

The frustrations are understandable because "brands of countries", Anholt proposes, "more often than not tend to become the dominant vectors of national identity".

All the institutions representing Brand South Africa have done a commendable, albeit seemingly unco-ordinated, job.

The IMC's "alive with possibility" does capture the positive energy and can-do spirit of South Africa, while South African Tourism's four brand pillars – of humanity and freedom, fusion and beat, awesome sensory impact and real wonder – capture the diversity of South Africa, and Proudly SA attempts to build pride in our products.

Our flag, arguably one of the top five most recognised globally, is one quilt of our diversity with which we can all wrap

ourselves. This is one symbol of the nation that has been taken with enthusiasm, used in well over 100 identities of South African services, products and companies.

Having astounded the world with a 21st century miracle, and after investing much, emotionally and financially, in nation-branding initiatives, it is time to assess, refine and re-imagine our nation brand.

There's no greater opportunity for the culmination of our efforts than the global attention on South Africa for the Fifa World Cup 2010.

It is time to reflect on our achievements, and consolidate the strengths and advantages we've earned, to create a unifying brand and identity. As youth-culture icon Greg Maloka says, to "excite the world and show a single (brand) identity".

What is unquestionable is that this country belongs to everyone. Consequently, the debate of what characterises Brand South Africa is of concern to all, and not an exclusive domain of the presidency, IMC, SA Tourism, Proudly SA, the various state departments, or any one individual or

agency in South Africa.

The design industry, championed by the DesignINDABA, has just launched an initiative, "Brand, the Beloved Country". Commissioned by DesignINDABA and led by brand strategy consultancy Brand Leadership, the initiative sees leading design firms HKLM, Switch and Two Tone Design throwing up new ideas.

The design agencies were briefed to collaborate on reflecting on the nation's brand positioning over the past 10 years and, if necessary, propose a new brand value proposition and identity for South Africa.

The results were presented at DesignINDABA 9 in Cape Town and will, hopefully, kick-start debate about where we should be going as a nation brand.

The proposed brand essence is "REAL FREEDOM", which is anchored on four pillars: Diversity (a world in one nation); Unleashing Creativity (alive with possibility); Leading Progress (a great citizen of the world) and Empowering People (the can-do spirit of the rainbow people of South Africa).

The concept locates South Africa as a country with the freedom to "pursue endless opportunity"; "explore freedom of spirit, heritage, cultures and geographic spaces", and the "freedom to be who you are and achieve all you want for yourself".

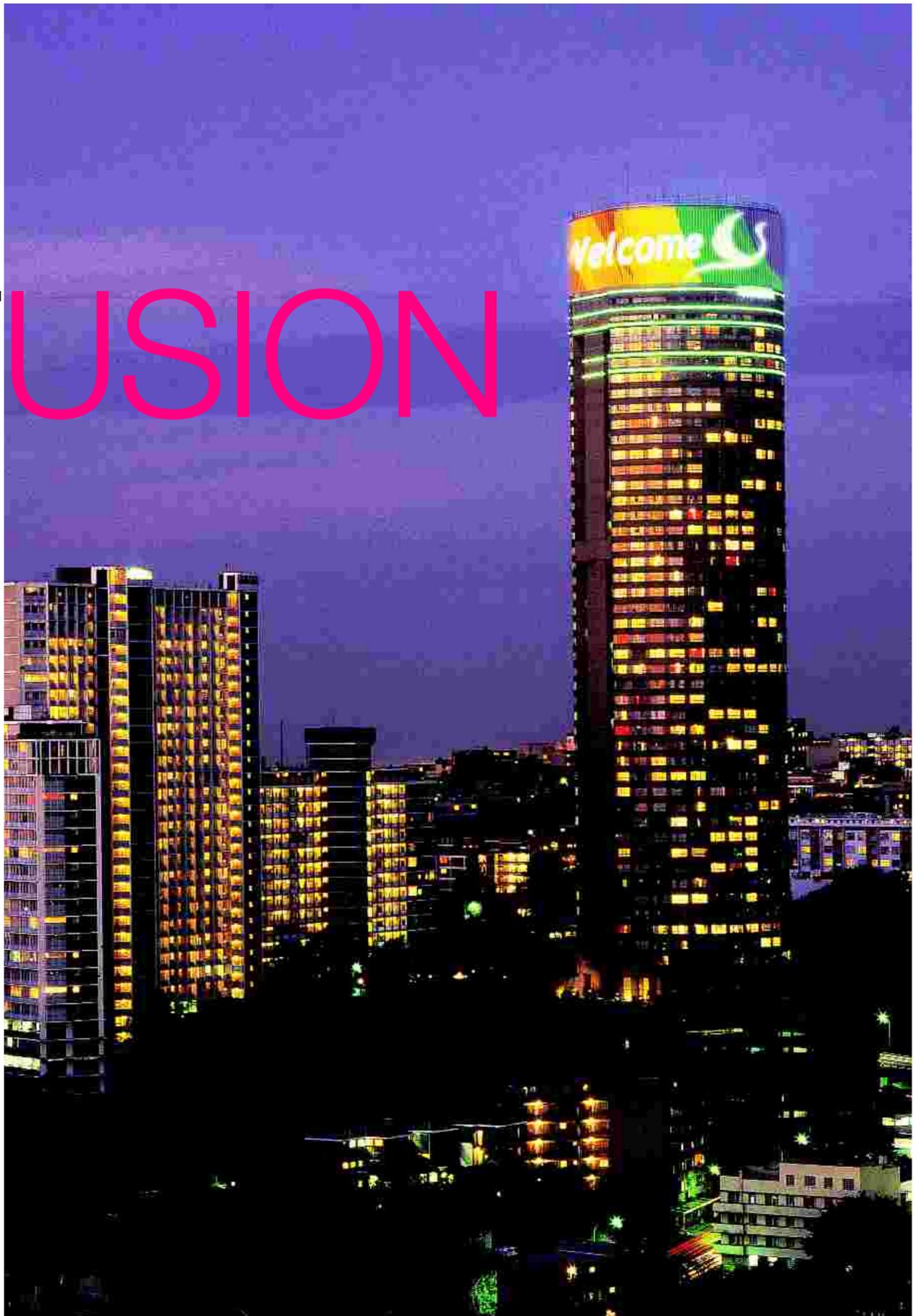
Expressing Brand South Africa visually presents one with a daunting challenge, what with the country rich in symbolism spanning the fauna and flora, institutions, 11 languages and myriad cultures. HKLM, Two Tone Design and Switch picked three distinct routes.

While Two Tone chose to focus on anchoring the brand on the national bird, the blue crane, and the vibrancy of the flag to create a new identity, Switch chose the flag as a brush with which to paint the nation, while HKLM chose the viewfinder and an authentic Madiba signature from one of his Robben Island letters as a vehicle through which to see South Africa.

These, though, are just three points of view. Similarly, for the DesignINDABA, the "Brand, the Beloved Country" initiative is a contribution to the nation, and the beginning of a debate which will continue on www.designindaba.com.

The result could be the difference between being a \$50-billion-plus brand (estimated by Professor Roger Sinclair of Wits University two years ago) and potentially the first \$100-billion brand by the time the World Cup rolls around. The journey begins today.

Thebe Ikalafeng is founder of Brand Leadership, a multidisciplinary brand consultancy, and www.leadingbrands.org, a forum for sharing ideas and insight on building brands in Africa, as well as a partner at design agency Two Tone.



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