

I'm with the brand

Brands and reputation author, advisor and authority **Thebe Ikalafeng** talks to Nikki Benatar about the brands of the future

As a Brand South Africa Trustee, how do you propose to strengthen Brand SA?

That's a big question! No one person can fix the reputation of the country. I'm a part of a large team of trustees and a member of the Brand South Africa team. Every single one of us has a role to play in terms of where SA is headed – every single one of us is an ambassador for, and an architect of, our country. To do that, we need to:

1 Be honest in our assessment of where we are and where we've come from. Without honesty, it's difficult to move forward.

2 Have a shared vision of where we want to go as a nation. All nation brands have three anchors: investment (we need to attract overseas capital and encourage locals to invest here); tourism (visitors must want to come here); and citizenship (the citizens must be proud of their country). Last year, there were eight million arrivals in SA – a 3.3% increase since 2010. However, in terms of investment, it has not been as big as we'd have liked. That said, Walmart came in and Barclays is consolidating and co-ordinating their African offering out of South Africa.

3 Walk the talk and live the brand, otherwise there will be a disconnect between what we are proposing and what we are delivering.

DON'T BE EXCITED ABOUT WHERE YOU HAVE COME FROM. BE EXCITED ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE GOING

A brand like Apple seems bulletproof. Is it? What's the key to longevity?

There is no such thing as a brand having perpetuity. Look at BlackBerry, Sony, Microsoft – they've almost been repositioned into irrelevance. The only thing you must have is the ability to renew yourself. All great brands are relevant: to the future and to the present. Even Apple was irrelevant until Steve Jobs returned to renew the brand to spectacular success. Will it stay the same? It's already lost as much as 20% of its market capitalisation since his death.

Coke, for example, has been around since 1886. What makes Coke relevant today is that it's at home in every market it enters. It knows how to communicate and do business wherever it is.

How does a brand stay relevant?

You have to keep up and constantly be in touch with, if not ahead, of where your customers are going. You have to renew yourself continually otherwise you are going to die. The only constant is change. With reference to nation brands, some of the mistakes countries make is to rest on their laurels. Perhaps SA is resting on 1994's laurels? Perhaps we're still celebrating hosting the 2010 Fifa World Cup? That's the past. All good brands are future-focused. I love Sanlam's proposition: "Start with what you hope for". If you don't think ahead, you will be tripped by your past successes.

When the co-founder of Sony, Akio Morita, commissioned the Walkman, doubters asked: "How are you going to sell this thing?" His response was something to the effect of "customers don't know what they need." In essence, carefully watch how people live, get an intuitive sense of what they might want, and then define it for them. Don't rely on market research to tell you that. In many ways, Apple today has done what Sony did then with the Walkman – they have defined where we are headed through design. That's the challenge. Don't be excited about where you have come from. Be excited about where you are going. Where you come from grounds you, but what propels you is where you are headed – your hopes, your vision.

Which brands are doing a good job?

Steve Jobs' Apple (the jury is still out as to whether his successor will keep it there), Google and Amazon. All three keep surprising us and have been able to transcend their core heritage offering: Amazon with the Kindle, Apple with the iPhone and Google with Android. They are ahead of where we are going; they are defining our future and enhancing our lives. Yes, you must stick to what brought you home, but brands must be able to adapt to change or lead that change.

Secondly, brands that are going to be relevant in the future are those that are able to be one with the planet. The Earth is battered, there's climate change and poaching. What we need are solutions that are in harmony with the Earth and that don't contribute to its degradation.

With reference to Africa, the most relevant brand I've seen of late is Safaricom's M-PESA. It's changed the culture of money transfer, allowing a previously unbanked population to transfer money via their phones. Glo (Nigeria), Airtel (Zambia) and Vodacom (South Africa) have tried to emulate them without similar traction. In South Africa it hasn't really resonated because our banking system is already quite sophisticated. That said, we should be using mobile transfers because of the huge number of mobile-phone users in this country.

In SA, BlackBerry sales outnumber iPhone sales. Is this an indication of a good brand?

Not necessarily. The reason BlackBerry outsells Apple in Africa is because Apple's more expensive. Plus, BlackBerry has done a good job their BBM service.

BlackBerry has remained relevant in Africa because it has fulfilled the economic test – it has cheaper options. But it's fast becoming irrelevant everywhere else in the world. From a sales perspective, they've done well, but not from an offerings perspective. They've struggled to recover from the Apple and Samsung challenge – and their own inability to deliver relevant and reliable products and technology timeously.

On a personal note

How do you unwind?
Because I travel so much, I've made travel my recreation.

Favourite soft drink?
Stoney Ginger Beer.
Very township.

Favourite music?
I'm very eclectic. At the moment, Zahara is on repeat. In a time when everyone is trying to appeal to the world, she's grounded herself and is experting home. You've got to love that.

Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night?
All the time; I think it's old age. I watch mindless TV – like Jerry Springer or sport. My work is intellectually demanding, so in my free time, I want brainless entertainment.

Your typical Sunday?
If I'm in the country, I'll pop into church for, say, 30 minutes. I spend the rest of the day reading the papers and chatting to friends. I don't do much; I'm very boring. And contrary to perception, I'm an introvert who's happy in my own company.

Are you where you thought you'd be today?
I'm a late starter; I only began working at 28 and went off on my own at 35. I'm not competing with anybody. I have my own destiny. I don't care about what people around me are doing. I care about my happiness and the choices I make. I'm where I ought to be.