

# Get Your House IN ORDER

Last year a local hardware supplier decided to rev up staff morale and get everyone “on message”. Accordingly, T-shirts, emblazoned with “I’m a team player”, were distributed to everyone, along with a punitive directive to be worn every Friday, without fail: a prime example of an internal branding stuff-up. How do you get your employees on board and buying into the brand?

**T**he T-shirt concept wasn’t flawed, but it was heavy-handed execution and a failure to recognise that people are the driving force behind the strategy we know as “internal branding”.

Strategist and DestinyConnect blogger Timothy Maurice Webster explains: “The story sold publicly about the company values must also be sold to its most important stakeholders. When the employees have bought into the brand values and live them daily, that’s internal branding.”

The delightful thing about business strategy is constant evolution of terms and approaches to corporate effectiveness, and internal branding is a pretty good example of an evolving concept. So while companies with red T-shirt drives might be a tad crude in terms of execution, the idea’s rooted in a growing appreciation that employee buy-in is critical to any company’s survival, growth and success.

Sean McCoy, CEO of multi-disciplinary marketing services company HKLM, explains that the notion of internal branding has been morphing over the years. “It probably goes back to the 1990s in terms of internal marketing, and it’s grown into a fully-fledged notion of brand engagement,” he says.

Possibly because it’s a relatively new concept, internal branding’s still an area of insufficient focus. “It’s something markets have failed with,” says

McCoy, pointing to the promises companies make *versus* those they keep. “When you look at consumer website HelloPeter.com and the complaints listed, well, we’re talking about a complete failure of delivery.”

Thebe “Mr Brand” Ikalafeng, stresses: “A brand is a promise made and a promise kept. Employees are central to ensuring that [this happens]. But the degree to which they successfully deliver depends on whether they firstly, know of, secondly, understand and thirdly, believe and live that promise.”

Ikalafeng stresses that internal branding, also known as “brand engagement”, is about aligning a brand’s primary stakeholders – especially employees – with the brand’s vision, mission and values.

## CRASH DIET VS LIFESTYLE CHANGE

That’s no easy task and, as McCoy points out, companies need to appreciate that achieving the brand cohesion can’t be pulled off by a once-off initiative or a rocking Christmas party. It’s like losing weight, he says: to do this effectively, you need to make permanent lifestyle changes, rather than going on a crash diet.

“It’s key not to under-estimate the complexity of internal branding,” says McCoy. “The way you reach out to [different] cultures and geographic and educational levels varies, and is complex. You have to think about all your markets. So what we do ➤

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**I'm a  
Team  
Player**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**THE ISSUE** According to South African branding expert, Thebe Ikalafeng, brands are “now more important and more valuable than ever. It’s impossible to live without them today. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the customer is king.”

**IS IT JUST A COMPANY THING?** Not at all: while brands such as Coca-Cola are legendary, people, too, can become powerful brands. Just think of David and Victoria Beckham, Tiger Woods and Brenda Fassie.

**HOW CAN YOU GET ONE?** Creating your own personal brand starts with an awareness and understanding of what you want to achieve in your life. From that launch pad, it’s simply a case of delivering your message to others.



FROM LEFT: Timothy Maurice Webster, Sean McCoy and Thebe Ikalafeng

[at HLKM] is slice and dice how to reach those targets.”

How long – or how much – an internal branding exercise will cost you is a less defined animal. “How long is a piece of string?” asks McCoy. “It’s difficult to say. You’d probably need about a six-month view to do an analysis, find an insight and design an intervention, but it’s an ongoing investment. Again, you have to make a lifestyle decision.”

#### SUCCESS STORIES

Webster highlights global coffee giant Starbucks’ bold internal branding move in 2008 as an example of not just an event, but a culture. “Many believed the ‘Starbucks culture’ no longer existed. The excellent, intimate service it was renowned for was becoming a fast-food culture of ‘grab your coffee and get out’. But CEO Howard Schultz recognised this and shut down all 7 100 of its stores for two hours to focus on the employees (all 135 000 of them). This was a major move and received a lot of press. Many cynics saw it as a publicity stunt, but it sent a strong message about how much Schultz cared for his employees. He said of the move: ‘Our unprecedented level of commitment to and investment in our people will provide them with the tools and resources they need to exceed the expectations of our customers.’”

It was an impressive idea, but not the domain of multinationals alone. In SA, “initiatives such as Deloitte’s ‘The Best Companies to Work For’ are highly regarded”, points out Ikalafeng. “Companies that have traditionally featured highly in such initiatives are those whose internal brands are aligned with their employees’ brands and, ultimately, their external brands.”

For McCoy, another fine local success story is budget airline Kulula. “Kulula’s very dynamic and has used its brand to drive a behavioural philosophy which is driven from the top by [joint CEO: Comair/Kulula.com] Gidon Novick. Edgars has also done a lot of internal investing in the retail experience. And there’s growing awareness in the banking industry too.” McCoy’s own company is currently working with Nedbank.

#### FOLLOW THE LEADER

Internationally, McCoy says Virgin stands out as a trail-blazer, although it’s important to note how the organisation’s brand and deep-seated culture are both built around Richard Branson and his “very strong leadership”. This, McCoy believes, holds the key to effective internal branding, and is borne out by HKLM’s own experience. “Leadership’s come across as very compelling,” says McCoy. “Branding isn’t a function of marketing: it’s core to the

business and everything needs to be aligned behind it.” To do this effectively, the buy-in and involvement of top leaders and managers are vital.

“Depending on the nature of the organisation, we make it an imperative that when we run a brand process, we get the line managers, as well as the informal leaders, on board. All the strong and influential leaders in an organisation need to be invested,” says McCoy.

Webster concurs that “there must be an earnest intention on behalf of leadership to believe in the full capacity of its employees. Sadly, in many cases in SA, leaders think their employees are incapable of reaching certain bars of excellence, so they pour funds into other areas to offset this built-in risk.” He also warns against weak gimmicks. “Many companies rely on get-rich-quick schemes and try to fool their employees with a pathetic roadshow, where dancing clowns try to sell the brand message.” Quite frankly, you may as well save your money, your dignity – and your credibility.

#### FULL CIRCLE

Ikalafeng brings the discussion back to the promises companies make. “Do as you say,” he stresses. “Delivering the brand internally starts at the recruitment stage. Attract the type of staff who’re aligned with your brand’s values and believe in your vision. Just as you market outside to your customers, don’t forget your internal customers – your staff, suppliers and partners. They’ll make it easy for you to tell your story to [the public].”

In addition, cautions McCoy, ensure that internal branding isn’t relegated to just another HR function. Make it the duty of the CEO or a chief branding officer to ensure that all the strands are constantly aligned. Embed internal branding – and the philosophy and promises made – in your organisation’s DNA.

And stay away from red T-shirts.

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Get key internal tips from Timothy Maurice Webster, Sean McCoy and Thebe Ikalafeng at: [www.destinyman.com](http://www.destinyman.com).

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