

A ROSE-TINTED SPECTACLE

"A rose is a rose is a rose". So said Gertrude Stein. In other words, it is what it is and needs no introduction.

Wrong! It is what it is because poets down through the centuries have made it so, from William Shakespeare when Romeo tells Juliet 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet' to Robert Burns' 'My love is like a red, red rose, That's newly sprung in spring', through all points and poets in between. Mere beauty was not enough – it took repetition to cement the reputation of the rose as a symbol of perfection and token of true love. In other words, it's been very successfully branded.

This was brought home to me the other day when I was shopping for a luncheon and found myself in two minds over which mineral water to buy. Finally opting for Valpre I was suddenly struck by the absurdity and absolute lunacy of my indecision and procrastination - that I would spend precious minutes mentally debating the merits and demerits of two identical products! Price didn't come into it. Neither did taste or quality. The difference was only in the brand and how it was presented and perceived. Somehow Metsi was just not going to make the correct impression on my guests nor deliver me the psychological satisfaction and reward that Valpre could. And the reason – feeble branding on the part of Metsi's marketers versus strong messaging from those of Valpre.

Tom Peters says "branding means nothing more and nothing less than creating a distinct personality...and telling the world about it...by hook and by crook." Brands have always been about marketing and the dominant logic has always been - build a Brand and the world will beat a path to your door.

If you want to stand out in an insanely crowded marketplace BRANDING is the only way you are going to do it. Branding is more alive today than ever. from airlines (Virgin), accounting services (PriceWaterhouseCoopers), TV stations (CNN), TV talk shows (Oprah) to individuals (Tiger Woods). All familiar household names and proof that anything can be branded, given a little thought and a lot of money.

Then there is the brand within or without a brand – think of Coke the product and Coca-Cola, the producer, Windows and Microsoft, baked beans and Heinz. Countries too have branded themselves, the most obvious example being Great Britain PLC, where the corporate analogy is anything but subtle. Not that we've lost sight of this here – just that developing it is taking forever. If memory serves me right it must have been about 2 years ago that BEDIA sent out a tender for a marketing consultancy to help brand Botswana. 24 months later we still don't have it and any progress is cloaked in secrecy or maybe there just hasn't been any? Clearly a slow brand. If we are going to stand out as a country and make our mark internationally we have got to have point up and market our unique identity and that is nothing more complicated than identifying and promoting our uniqueness which to date we haven't.

It is important, in fact critical. Once you have identified your brand it provides direction for everything else that you are doing. As a country we need to shout from the rooftops about what we have to offer and what we do best.. As Bonang Mohale says when talking about developing a southern African brand "we must optimize what we have, just like the "French wine" brand, the "Japanese quality" brand and the "German engineering" brand.

As I am not a politician, economist or strategist, my interest lies in branding in other forms. I talk endlessly to employment candidates about establishing their own unique personal brands and similarly talk to suits about employer branding – usually met with a 'duh' response? So for all of you in the 'duh' category it means marketing your company in such a way that you are perceived as a desired employer offering a stimulating and rewarding environment in which to work and consequently attracting the creative cream of the available employment crop.

Simply put, your employer brand is your organization's "trust mark" - the sum of your parts, what makes you unique, what you stand for, and your personality. It communicates your employer brand promise, what's in it for the employee in the business relationship.

A down-south example was always (it may not still be) South African Breweries – a name that widely represents future orientation, creative management and branding mastery. SAB has long been reputed to be a sought-after employer through its innovative approach towards HR Management, recruitment, remuneration, training, corporate transformation and its policy for 'no room for mediocrity.' Branding however doesn't necessarily sail smoothly across borders. Its local counterpart KBL has its own challenges and just because you were once an employer of choice doesn't necessarily mean you will always be. You have got to keep working at the brand.

One of the best branding exercises of all time and used, as a model example is New York City. In the 1970's you wouldn't have set foot in NYC except to do business that you couldn't do anywhere else. Known for crime, rape and muggings, those with sense literally flew in and flew out. Along came the re-branding exercise complete with the "I love New York" slogan, the Zero Tolerance crime control policy and mantra from a tough, local mayor about a cop on every corner. Within a few years NYC transformed itself from a dangerous and violent no-go ghetto to a city with a warm heart, a destination of choice not of necessity, a top class tourist and business destination, Incidentally I was there in January and there is indeed a cop on every corner and you can happily stroll through Central Park without fear of assault, mugging, rape or any other menace. A promise fulfilled.

For those executives who are still uncertain as to the purpose of quality corporate image building, wake up and smell the Nescafe - branding is an economic necessity. Talent will only buy into a reputable brand and a brand without talent will rapidly go downhill. Consider this; nearly half of all American workers (49 percent) indicate that their companies' brand or image played a key role in their decision to apply for a job at their respective workplace, according to a 2001 Maritz Poll. That's why you hear a lot of talk today - among executive leadership, about employer branding –it's becoming a strategic issue. So, if success depends on having talent in your organization to deliver world class solutions – doesn't it make sense that you should do whatever you need to do to ensure that the talent **wants** to work for **you**?

Trust me, when you interview as many people, as we do at HRMC, much of the job involves selling the organization to prime talent. And when corporates have poorly managed their branding/image it can be a very hard sell!

As national images go which one would be your preferred business or tourist destination - Iraq or India? Who would be your most desired celebrity dinner guest – Michael Jackson or David Beckham? And your current choice of prospective employer?

