

FOR US BY US

Thebe Ikalafeng wants the continent to be on brand and his African Brand Leadership Academy is on a mission to build a generation of Africans that will champion the brands of the continent

words rea khoabane

You cannot think of or mention branding and Africa in the same sentence without Thebe Ikalafeng's name being at the centre of the conversation. If for some reason Ikalafeng's name is unfamiliar to you, the South African-born marketer is one of the leading branding minds on the continent. Walking into his home, one can't help but notice his love for the continent. It comes through in his astonishing art collection from the iconic Serdas in Algeria to the legendary Esther Mahlangu, every space reflects his travels across every country in Africa.

Despite being at the pinnacle of African branding and creativity, Ikalafeng points out his dissatisfaction that "as Africans we don't show the same level of confidence, desire and commitment to our own made-in-Africa brands as we do in non-African anything". "Africa," he continues, "can only be made great by Africans."

Ikalafeng is the founder and CEO of the pan-African branding advisory firm, Brand Leadership, renowned for their branding transformations of headline institutions such as the University of the Free State, PRASA, UNISA and Transnet in SA as well as presidential campaigns in West Africa for the then unexpected branded campaigns and victories of Ghanaian presidents Atta Mills and John Mahama in 2008 and 2012 respectively.

After more than 25 years building global brands in his corporate roles at Colgate, Palmolive and Nike, and more than 100 seminal assignments in more than 20 countries across the continent, the branding doyen is transferring his knowledge and skills to broaden the practice African Brand Leadership Academy (ABLA).

ABLA was inspired by the challenge presented by the state of brands and branding in Africa.

"For the past 10 years, we have established that only 20% of the brands that Africans admire are "Made In Africa"," says Ikalafeng. Therefore he believes there's an 80% opportunity for "Made In Africa" brands. This scenario, he reflects, poses the questions of whether or not Africans have the capacity to build large successful brands and why Africans don't have an affinity for buying African brands? For Ikalafeng the answers are a combination of both.

"We've built the big global brands such as non-African brands [like] Coca Cola and Apple, and local brands such as Nandos and MTN — in Africa," he says. "So clearly there is some capability and when delivered to world-class standards, African brands can compete for African's wallets." ABLA will inspire and empower the ability to do just that, to build the capacity and deliver world-class "Made in Africa" brands.

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“The purpose of Brand Leadership, when it was established 20 years ago, was to help entrepreneurs and businesses build great brands informed by African needs and conditions and to use private sector lessons to inspire and transform public brands. So while Brand Leadership is analogous to ‘giving a man a fish’ where ABLA is like ‘teaching him to fish’. ABLA will help sharpen the capabilities of brand builders in Africa to build purposeful brands that will transform the continent and inspire the world,” he says.

ABLA is the first pan-African post-graduate brand leadership institute of higher and executive education that targets executives and entrepreneurs who are the creators of branded solutions and the next generation of leaders in the private and public sector.

ABLA’s flagship programmes are the Postgraduate Diploma in Brand Leadership, the Africa Executive Brand Leadership programme, the Building Great African Brands programme, and the Brand Leadership for Entrepreneurs and a range of others. What distinguishes ABLA programmes, Ikalafeng highlights, is their Africa focus and foundational African culture and societies module to inspire brand leadership that builds on African distinction.

“Our purpose is to inspire and empower business, entrepreneurs and the public service to create and shape brands that are inspired by African conditions and needs, and reflect an African distinction and insight”, Ikalafeng says.

He says this distinction can be found in our shared culture, identity, community and ways of being.

He expresses that most importantly, as Africans, we need to reconnect with our history and culture, and to champion African excellence and consumption. Ikalafeng says this doesn’t mean excluding our western heritage, but elevating our African roots equally, or as a primary point of entry.

“We have to identify with Africa to have an identity”, he adds, quoting Nigerian icon

Fela Kuti.

According to the branding guru, this can be achieved by sharpening the minds of the people who build the brands that build the continent. “If we build great ‘Made In Africa’ brands, they will become a vector of the image of the continent’s renaissance and independence.”

Like others, Ikalafeng is keen to help bolster inter-continental trade in his own ways. “The AU has created the Africa Continental Free Trade Area and it’s objective was to drive Africa trade where they said we want to move it from 18% inter-Africa to 50% by 2030. My challenge is that we’ve had that industrialisation goal to drive inter-Africa trade since 1963 yet we’ve only achieved 15%-18%. If we are going to get to 50% by 2030, then we need to change a few things drastically.”

“If we don’t have people that create and support and love African brands, then what brands are we going to move between the borders?” he asks.

With that in regard, he points out that Africa has all the resources it requires — the natural resources, distinctive cultures, innate collaborative nature, the talent and a 1.2 billion consumer base. “Thus inter-African trade is an opportunity that in theory should come natural to us,” he says.

Even though we are still faced with many challenges to build and identify Africa’s greatness through brands, Ikalafeng says there is, however, a growing number of businesses and brands who are reflecting the epitome of being African brands. He says brands are MaXhosa in SA, Motions in Rwanda and Ethnic in Nigeria, show that our culture can inspire our distinction, and brands such as Nandos, MTN, Dangote and Mpesa show our ability to build cross-border global African brands.

In short, the way Thebe Ikalafeng sees it, the future of African branding is bright and in ABLA he’s found a way to build a factory of stars. ■



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