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# CREATING THE CORE

branding, culture

and how to create a core following

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The last 10 years have seen an explosion in the African creative scene; from fashion and art, to music and cinema. With the internet broadening horizons while shrinking the world to a global village, it is important for African creatives to understand and implement effective branding techniques to create a culture around their brand and a core following that will sustain it.

In this piece, we will take a look at branding and culture, their importance, and how they can be used to grow a brand.



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# Branding

This can be defined as the perpetual process of identifying, creating and managing the cumulative assets and actions that shape perception of the brand in stakeholders' minds. It is the process of creating a strong, positive perception of your brand and its products. Branding is an active, intentional process. Positive perception of a brand does not happen by chance. Without intention, the customer is left to form their own perception of a brand, which may not be consistent or align with the message of the brand.

A few key aspects of branding include: brand identity, brand recognition and brand recall.

## Brand Identity

This, according to Kotler et al (2009, Marketing Management), can be split into 4 levels.

Level 1: Attributes associated with the company. For example; being environmentally friendly.

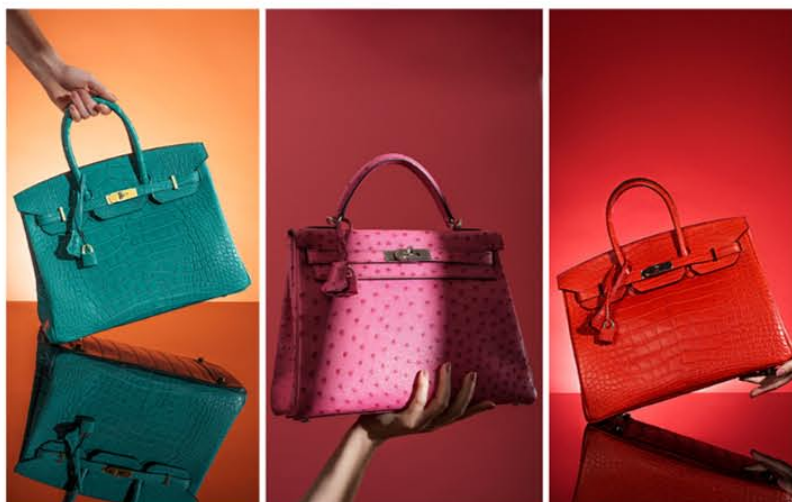
Level 2: Benefits, which are the emotional translations of the brand's attributes. An example would be the benefit a customer feels of being involved with helping the environment when buying from an environmentally friendly brand.

Level 3: Values, which are a core set of beliefs associated with the brand. These will attract customers that believe in those same values. For example, excellence.

Level 4: Brand personality, which are human traits associated with a brand that resonate with potential customers, like honesty, glamour, rebelliousness etc.

## Brand Recognition

A person's ability to correctly identify and differentiate a brand is vital for any enterprise in a competitive environment. Successful brand recognition involves an individual recognizing a brand without being exposed to the brand name, but through cues like shape, colour or sound (MacDonald et al, 2000, Journal of Business Research). A good example would be the Hermes Birkin bag.



The instantly recognizable Birkin

## Brand Recall

This differs from brand recognition in that it is the ability of an individual to recall a brand from memory when faced with a need (Percy et al, 1992, Psychology and Marketing). An example would be needing a luxury watch and thinking of a certain crown logo.



Probably the first brand that comes to mind when you think of a watch

## **Branding and Product Development**

New designers often wait until a product or collection has been designed and produced, before attempting to figure out how to brand these products. The danger here is that the products created may not fit in with the brand identity. The solution: treat both phases as interconnected and work on them simultaneously. Key questions to ask before production: what, how, and who.

On the product development side

### What are we doing?

This is an important question for designers. Too often, designers start with too broad of an idea (or no idea at all), about what products they want to create. Give customers too much choice as a new brand and they end up confused. Narrow down your product offering.

Equally important, if not more important, is the question of what NOT to do. Setting boundaries is important in creating focus.

### How are we doing it?

This involves the production process of the chosen products. Limited and exclusive vs. mass production, local vs. outsourced production, choice of fabric, etc.

### Who are we doing it for?

A vital part of product development is understanding your customer. Who are they? Where do they live? What is their socio-economic status? What are their values? What are their hobbies? Design resonates with customers when it feels personal and tailored. The answers to these questions will directly impact design and production. For example, a handbag designed for a corporate working woman has to take into consideration all what she would need during her work day: water bottle, laptop, chargers, etc. Heels designed for daily, office wear have to be comfortable and blend in with corporate clothing.

Design for lifestyles, not just for trends.

These same questions are equally important on the branding side.

### What are we doing?

Communicating our brand identity and values. This requires an understanding of the brand's personality and values, which dictate the tone of communication.

### How are we doing it?

This requires an understanding of the brand's key elements and how to use them in an efficient manner. Logos, tag lines, packaging, photography, experiences, etc.

### Who are we doing it for?

Identifying the audience for the message. In order to craft a message that resonates, one has to know who the message is for. The tone, delivery methods and language will differ depending on the target, which is why identifying your customer is important.

A designer should find answers to these questions during the process of creating their brand, as this will have an effect on almost everything they do moving forward. However, it is not the end of the world if you created your brand before knowing all this. Simply go back and analyze your brand, making note of answers to all these questions.

Having looked briefly at branding and its importance, the next section will look at culture, and how to use branding and culture to create a core following.

# Culture

In broad terms, culture can be defined as ideas, customs and behavior of a social group. Rather than being innate or inherited, culture is learned and shared over time, which makes it vital to creating community.

So why is culture important for brands? It helps shape attitudes, perception and value of a brand, and to create a core following that will sustain the brand.

Core followings (also known as cult following) consist of ultra loyal customers/fans of a brand and are extremely important for a number of reasons.

A loyal following creates a nucleus for the brand, forming what we can call "brand gravity": the ability of a brand to attract, capture and retain the attention and loyalty of customers, as the brand's core followers act as ambassadors, amplifying its message.

A core following also provides stable revenue from a base that does not shift with trends.

These followers will remain loyal and adapt changing trends to fit their love of the brand.

A good example would be fans of a specific sneaker model, who will adapt seasonal trends to fit their favorite sneaker as opposed to discarding it.

Lastly, a core following will act as content creators for the brand, infusing their energy and passion into it via the creation of visual content.

In my opinion, a brand needs to create 100 core followers in the initial stages in order to sustain itself and grow. These are 100 people who will buy from the brand's collection every time, take photos with these products, and tell others about the brand. The multiplier effect means these 100 will create more followers and loyalists for the brand over time, as long as the product quality and brand experience remains consistent.

Taking this into consideration, the focus of a designer in the initial stages should be on creating a culture around which these 100 loyalists can form.

Creating culture requires an understanding of the elements of culture. These can be split into 3 interconnected categories.

## 1: Signs and symbols

These are visual representations that transmit value and identity, including name, logos, typography, and colours. They serve as an emblem around which followers unite. In the age of social media, brand ambassadors and influencers can also serve as symbols.

## 2: Language

Language is a key vehicle for the transmission of culture, serving to create community through communicated ideas and values. Language can exist in 2 states: oral/written language, and visual language.

Oral/written language refers to how a brand communicates about itself and to others via various marketing channels (social media, print, etc. ). Think of how brands communicate via captions on social media.

Language can also be visual, existing in shape, form, colour etc. Think of how the colour black is used in luxury cars to convey class and grandeur, evoking sophistication.

### 3: Rituals

These are actions that have been repeated, and will be repeated, providing a sense of certainty and belonging around a brand. A brand releasing products on a pre-defined schedule, pop up events, end of season sales and runway shows are all forms of rituals around which loyal followers gravitate and bond, creating a sense of community.

### **Culture case study: Nike**

Nike is generally perceived to have a culture of excellence. Rather than being incidental, it is a culture that has been intentionally created and maintained by the company and equally shared and communicated by its loyal followers

#### Signs and symbols

The Nike name and logo provide a strong emblem around which followers gather. The logo is said to symbolise the wing of the Greek goddess of victory after which the brand is named. It also symbolises strong, dynamic motion and speed, alluding to athletic and physical movement. The check mark is also universally considered the symbol of approval; that something has been verified and is correct.

The athletes signed to the brand also serve as symbols, as the company is known for only signing elite athletes. Nike also offers lifetime contracts to high performing athletes, going so far as to name buildings after them. This serves to communicate the value of loyalty, which appeals to individuals who share this value.



motion and speed

## Language

Being named after the Greek goddess of victory illustrates the company's dedication to excellence, and this is further reinforced in the company's tag: "Just Do It", which pushes followers to strive for excellence and achievement. The language used on some of its clothing tags also conveys this spirit; "Engineered to the Exact Specifications of Championship Athletes". This call to action encourages customer to strive for excellence in their daily lives by giving them the impression of being professional athletes when they wear the brand's products.



language communicating values



## Rituals

The company has set release dates and various events throughout the year that followers participate in, which reinforce loyalty to the brand and create a sense of community. Examples include the exclusive products released every year in commemoration of the Chinese New Year, as well as the company's well celebrated "Air Max Day" which happens annually on the 26th March to celebrate the anniversary of its air max sneaker.



billboard in Tokyo celebrating Nike Air Max day

As we can see from the example above, culture is intentional, and is created through repeated action. It is not enough to have a one-off experience. Every aspect must be repeated and reinforced over time.

A simple exercise anyone can do as a first step to creating a culture around which potential customers can gather:

- Write a list of your key brand elements and evaluate their strengths (name, logo, tag-line or catchphrase, graphics, design language, colours, sounds, packaging, experiences etc. )
- Split these into the 3 culture categories: signs/symbols, language, rituals
- Answer the key questions of product development: what are we doing? How are we doing it? Who are we doing it for?
- Answer the key questions for branding: what are we doing? How are we doing it? Who are we doing it for?

Review this list every so often to make sure there is consistency in your product and messaging.

In an increasingly competitive global landscape, it is important for African designers (and creatives in general) to understand the fundamentals of branding and create defined cultures in order to stand out, create core followings, and grow to become sustainable, globally competitive brands.

My hope is this helps make things just a little bit easier for aspiring designers across the continent.

### About the author:

Alexander Akande is Nigerian/Cameroonian designer, photographer and creative consultant based in Yaounde, Cameroon. Holding a BA in International Business and an MSc in International Management, he has worked as a branding consultant across Africa, the U.S.A and the UK for a wide range of companies.

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