

On the Branding Edge

Branding expert Ken Cato is the man that some major companies turn to for help with overhauling their branding. His clients include Taiwan's BenQ, Germany's Siemens, Australia's Commonwealth Bank and most recently, Dubai World Central, the world's largest planned airport. He believes that building iconic brands require companies to dare to be different and have a clear idea of their corporate identity.

Australian branding and design guru Ken Cato is known for his deep-seated fondness for black-and-white monochrome minimalism. Yet he has a less than black-and-white approach to helping his clients build their own brands, advocating a focus on defining the objectives and being open-minded in achieving them.

"We'll say 'that's what we have to achieve' and we'll agree that with our clients. How we get there is totally irrelevant to me after that," says the chairman of Cato Partners.

"I just want to get there the best way with the most impact to achieve what that goal is. I think you don't need the rules then, because if you try to make the project fit the rules, you've automatically placed constraints on the potential of the outcome. For me it's always about opening up as much as we can."



This philosophy has served him well, winning him and his company numerous international and Australian design awards since he founded Cato Partners in 1970. The design firm, which has 15 offices and representative branches around the world, was recently involved in the branding exercises of consumer electronics giants BenQ and Siemens, New Zealand's Wellington Airport, and Dubai World Central, the world's largest planned airport. Its impressive portfolio also includes Australia's Commonwealth Bank, the Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games, health food manufacturer Uncle Toby's, and biscuit company Arnott's.

For companies to stand out, Cato says they have to dare to be different rather than just imitate the brand designs of others. “Different doesn’t have to be radical, different can be also very smart. But different is not copying or following others.”

Part of the challenge of brand-building comes from companies suggesting ideas that they’ve seen elsewhere around the world which are neither new nor suitably distinctive. “We deal so often with telling the same story that other companies are telling, but we have to find a better way or a different way to tell the story so it has a personality, it has a distinct characteristic, it has its own way of being identified amongst the clones,” he says.

To build brand equity effectively, companies need to know what they want to communicate. Consistency in brand communication is also vital as it’s senseless for companies to have different messages for different audiences when information is readily available online. Moreover, the delineation between audiences is blurring as people are wearing ‘multiple hats’ these days, Cato says. By that he means that a company’s customers can also be its employees, shareholders or its critics.

“It’s the consistency of those messages that builds a brand in people’s minds. So we better be pretty careful what we’re saying is consistent, knowing that everybody’s got access to all the information.”

While Cato advocates the importance of having distinctive differences in branding, he acknowledges that his recent ‘Wild at Heart’ campaign for New Zealand’s Wellington Airport was based on the city’s reputation for being the ‘Windy City.’

But shouldn’t he have steered away from the obvious to find other branding angles?

“If you’ve got a foundation of things that people know or language that people know, you’ve already got a start. There’s already an affinity,” he replies.

“Anybody that’s been to Wellington knows that the wind blows like heck down there and so you don’t get surprised when you talk about the wind and Wellington in the same breath,”

“The thing that is unusual is being able to look at it, if you like, almost poke fun at yourself and to go ‘if that’s what we’re known for, how do we bring that to life?’”

Indeed, the use of the wind as a ‘base language’ is central to the campaign’s expression of the wind’s ‘different personalities’ of fun, freedom, and celebration, Cato says.

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“So while it’s got those personality characteristics, if they are put together in the right situations, you have an even chance of delivering all sorts of messages.”

But to ensure that messages are successfully communicated, companies should be aware that the organisation of information is as important – if not more so – than the content. People nowadays tend to have very short attention spans and are good at holding conversations while simultaneously thinking about other things. For this reason, Cato says that “organising the information is critical to how much of that message actually gets through or how much of that message you get to deliver, not even what gets through”.

Interestingly, Cato believes that advertising is a short-term tool to sell products and services, and is not essential to brand-building.

“Brands are about forever. Brands are about what’s been and what’s coming,”

“What we talk about is companies using their real assets, the things they do everyday, the things they have to purchase to run their business, whatever it is, as being a meaningful part of that communication about what the brand is.”

Companies also have to be able to live up to their branding and satisfy customers’ expectations, especially when negative comments can spread easily on the internet. Also, the damage to companies from disappointing their customers could take a long time to repair, says Cato.

“I think companies underestimate the resources they have got to communicate with people and the opportunities they have everyday. And those experiences are never neutral,”

“They are really positive or they are negative. You don’t sit there and go ‘I really didn’t notice or I didn’t care’, you go ‘no, that was a nice experience’ or ‘no that was a terrible experience’. And each one of those affects how we think of the products and the brands and the things that we live with everyday.”

Ken Cato was the keynote speaker at the recent brand-building seminar, ‘Building Great Brands Congress 2008’, in Singapore. His company, Cato Partners, organised the event.

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