

There are some strong brands in the Middle East — but how many have actually originated here? Nigel Witham considers why branding is a powerful but misunderstood business tool



These days, I don't have many design meetings where the subject of branding isn't mentioned — and if my experience is typical, it seems restaurant operators in the region prefer to import casual dining and fast food brands rather than create new ones.

This is not surprising; brand development is not even taught to most business managers and it's certainly not something that can be learned by osmosis or personal intuition.

Brands as tribes

Branding is a very powerful tool, for those who can harness it. Indeed it can make even start-up restaurants instantly successful. There is no reason why, with the right knowledge and advice, you

cannot create your own powerful new brands instead of paying someone else for theirs.

The first thing to understand about branding is that a brand is not a logo. A logo is just a graphic symbol.

Having said that, just as clothes can give insight into the person wearing them, so the logo and the broader design of an outlet can give a great insight into its general professionalism; I mean, would you trust me if I showed up at your office in a scruffy, ill-fitting suit?

Logos should be expertly designed, employing subtle visual cues to convey the brand values of a business — what it is about and why it matters. A good design may not come cheap, but powerful logo that supports the

brand will soon make up for any initial outlay.

So if brands are not logos what are they? This is a complex issue to cover, so I'll try to simplify.

When people buy into a brand, they are trying to include themselves in a tribe that they feel says the right things about them. They will pay a lot to join the right tribes, which can be very profitable for the owners of top brands.

It helps to think of this out of context: do you shop at Carrefour or Planet Organic? Do you wear Ecco or Jimmy Choo? Do you eat in McDonald's or at Gordon Ramsay's? If you eat in both, would you wear the same style of clothing to each place? No, because when you want a burger you are in a different

tribe to when you want a fine dining experience.

Building a brand

Unlike logos, brands cannot be designed. Brands can only be strategised, developed, nurtured, caressed and loved (or in some cases hated).

You can plan a brand by deciding where new openings exist in the market, setting out brand values and assessing what the 'touch points' are (i.e. where your customers come into contact with your business).

Then, using carefully considered design, you can convey the core brand values precisely. If this is done well you will communicate clearly what your business does and why it matters — and consequently

rise well above the normal market clutter.

For an F&B outlet, the brand touch points are likely to include the name, the shop front, the interior, the food, the menu, the logo, the advertising, the PR and the service.

That's quite a lot to manage. It's easy if you have only one outlet, but big casual dining outlets have great difficulty providing consistent service and quality across such large chains — and this is a threat to the strength of their brands.

If you are going to buy into an international brand and licence it locally, it's worth knowing how well-managed it is elsewhere, because if its reputation declines it will affect you.

Brand development is so important that my team and I often design and model complete prototype virtual outlets before our clients even find locations. Otherwise, the desire to generate revenue can put far too much pressure on how long we have to plan everything properly.

A common misunderstanding I find is that brand planning is only required for high value products and services. Branding is not so much about delivering high quality as about consistently meeting expectations.

No one thinks a Big Mac is fine dining cuisine, but that doesn't stop it being popular as it always lives down to expectations. It's never the best choice, but it's often the most reliable and that

is as strong a brand value as high quality.

Members of the tribe

People like to communicate to others what brand tribes they are members of — this is why nowadays most of the labels on our clothes are on the outside.

This is a type of infectious social one-upmanship that we all engage in. It goes to show just how important belonging to tribes and advertising our personal status is to us.

What this may mean to you is that if your brand creates the right impression, word of mouth will travel fast and help you grow rapidly. The internet has made it easy for one person to write an on-line comment about you and for countless thousands to read it. This is important, especially for restaurants and hotels — even the best-managed typically incur relatively high complaint rates compared with other business categories.

The good news for developing markets is that new brands can be launched quite inexpensively, because the cost of word-of-mouth transmission is tiny in comparison to traditional broadcast advertising.

So what I'd like to see in the Middle East is fewer tired old imported brands and more well-designed, forward-looking local brands. The opportunity is greater than anywhere else I can think of, but it's up to you to grasp it — and designers like me to help out.

ABOUT NIGEL WITHAM



Nigel Witham is a chartered designer who has run his own design practice for twenty years. He is a member of the Chartered Society of Designers in both interior and graphic design. He designed his first restaurant in 1990 and has worked for hundreds of independent retailers and restaurateurs. He has offices in London, India, New Zealand and Australia.

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