

Walking tightrope between fresh and familiar

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THE BRANDING of a fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) product has the potential to make or break it, and this science often lies squarely with advertising agencies.

Durban-based Assegai & Javelin directors Raymond Pillay and Selvan Moodley learned this at the start of their career, with their first major client, Pakco.

Pillay recalls a conversation with Pat Moodley, CEO of the multimillion-rand business in the early nineties.

"We told Pat we would like to change the labels on the vegetable curry cans and maybe spruce up the design. He said, 'Sure, no problem, but remember this particular product rakes in millions a year and if I lose a single cent I will take it off you guys. But no pressure'." They decided not to touch the brand.

So the two learned early on the impact of branding and market sensitivity, having just started out in business with freshly minted diplomas in graphic design from the then ML Sultan Technikon (now part of Durban University of Technology).

"The job situation was tight, especially before democracy in what was then considered a white-dominated industry. So while I battled it out by freelancing, Selvan also coached tennis to help pay the bills," Pillay says.

To illustrate just how sensitive and driven by habit the market is, Pillay says sales of Hinds Spices dropped when the sachets were rebranded to appeal to more affluent shoppers.

"Again, even though it was the same product and price, the once-loyal market thought this was a product for the upper LSMs and that they couldn't afford it."

Pillay and Moodley operated from a flat in Glenwood with a hand-me-down Apple Macintosh initially and later secured office space at Lupin House in Asherville. "We shared a surgery with a doctor and finally took over the surgery as we began to grow."

The business outgrew the building and the two took up offices on La Lucia Ridge.

After Assegai & Javelin parted company with Pakco their business began to expand rapidly.



Assegai & Javelin directors Raymond Pillay and Selvan Moodley... sometimes they promote one product with another, to the benefit of both.

"It was a case of referrals and before long we had started taking on some really serious work," Pillay says.

Today Dube TradePort Corporation, Plascon Paint, Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, Al Baraka Bank and Lafarge are among their portfolio of blue-chip clients. Assegai & Javelin has emerged as a company capable of representing big business.

The two have learned that brand sensitivity is something one needs to consider care-

fully, especially in SA. "Generally, more colourful packaging appeals to lower LSMs, while the higher end is drawn to simpler, uncluttered designs."

The first things many businesses slash in a tough economy is the advertising budget.

"The irony is that businesses should be spending more on advertising when times are difficult, but this seldom happens."

Pillay says the term FMCG has become a bit of a misnomer. "Of our blue-chip clients to-

day, the closest we have to an FMCG client is Plascon."

To remain successful in a money-tight industry, Pillay says they occasionally use one product to complement another, benefiting the customers of both.

"If, for instance, we create a campaign for Plascon, we could use Tourism KwaZulu-Natal to generate a prize in exchange for critical brand awareness, so punting both."

Such "synergistic thinking" ensures survival and ultimately business success, he says.

There is a step-by-step approach to branding and positioning a product in the market that Assegai & Javelin engages, but often individual tweaking is still required.

"First we look at the target LSM and where the product will be sold. This is essential since this will determine where to advertise it and the way in which to do so."

Analysing the competition is also crucial and Pillay will weigh his options and how the company can give the product an edge with appearance, quality or both.

According to him, placing the product in the right stores is crucial, along with ensuring access to heavyweights such as Pick n Pay and Woolworths.

Pillay does everything in-house, except for printing, with a full team of 30 staff, including a creative team, account executives, proofreaders, client liaison staff and production coordinators.

The company's studio manager, Thobisi Mthembu, has been with the company since its inception 15 years ago, starting as a refreshment attendant.

"Our general manager, Michael Phillip, has vast communications experience and, as a former journalist, understands the business very well. A dedicated team in this industry is crucial and at Assegai & Javelin we have some of the best in the game."

To keep up with a dynamic, often volatile market, Pillay believes one must embrace the use of social media like Facebook and Twitter.

"It's low cost and you have the ability to monitor thousands on your database at the click of a button."