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NEWS ANALYSIS: THE SINGAPORE BRAND

Singapore brand has cachet, but what values should it embody?

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Singapore has birthed several international brands - shoe and fashion accessories brand Charles & Keith, and coffee brand Super, among them. But their success has not necessarily contributed to the Singapore label. PHOTO: ST FILE

Singapore

WHAT does the Singapore brand stand for, and can it carry all industries who wear this label?

There is undoubtedly cachet in it. Businesses looking to gain a foothold and expand overseas often talk about leveraging the qualities associated with the Singapore brand - the hardworking people, adherence to and promotion of standards, protection of intellectual property rights and trustworthiness, among others.

But is this cachet a catch-all?

The question arises from Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing's Monday announcement about introducing a Singapore brand for consumer lifestyle products, starting with F&B, beauty and wellness, fashion and accessories and the home ware and decor sectors.

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But what is Singapore known for? This is the fundamental question that needs to be answered before a blanket rolling out of "Singapore-branded" logos across all sectors.

Nigel Smith, chief executive and executive creative director at DIA Group, a branding consultancy, said: "The issue with any brand is that it has to represent a supportable offer and story that can be delivered to the consumer through product, service or emotional appeal in a believable way. So any brand initiative needs to start with a clear definition of the offer, and why it matters to the customer."

Is Singapore particularly known for consumer lifestyle products? Or agricultural products for that matter?

Earlier this year, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA) rolled out the "SG Fresh Produce" logo to help shoppers identify local produce.

The initiative was aimed at supporting Singapore's "30 by 30" goal - to be able to meet 30 per cent of the country's nutritional needs locally by 2030.

Farmers have been keen supporters of the SFA move, but have reported mixed results from getting on board the campaign.

Jurong Frog Farm (JFF) has not yet adopted the logo, but had taken part in an earlier programme entailing the use of a "Love Homegrown Produce" logo. It has yet to see results in sales.

Chew's Agriculture, one of the biggest local egg producers, took part in that campaign and observed only a minor uptick in sales from road shows or community events.

Only egg farm N&N Agriculture, which is now rolling out the new logo, has reported receiving more enquiries.

Such campaigns are no doubt useful to raise awareness of local produce, but consumers are a price-sensitive lot.

Dirk Eichelberger, the chief financial officer at sustainable aquaculture, nutrition and healthcare company Wintershine, said tactful communication is needed - also because Singapore still imports a large proportion of its food.

He said: "My perception is that this needs time and a lot of explanation to create awareness and convince consumers why local produce could be, say, 10 to 15 per cent more expensive than imported foods."

Covid-19 and the resulting concern over food security have boosted consumer awareness of the advantages of local produce. How can these price-sensitive consumers be persuaded to pay a premium for the advantages of freshness, traceability, transparency?

Chelsea Wan of Jurong Frog Farm, suggested that a more holistic approach might be needed - one that includes greater policy support for local industry.

She said: "Food-export countries have a food system entrenched in their culture and education. Children are brought to farms to see how food is grown and how farmers work. They see the value in the food they consume and this affects their purchasing decisions.

"I know of farmers in Australia who own farms as big as Sentosa, which have been passed down for four generations. This is not the case in Singapore."

Leon Hay of Hay Dairies seconded this view. The company is investing almost S\$30 million in a multi-storey farm in Neo Tiew Crescent that will incorporate, among other things, automated feeding systems, solar panels, and rainwater harvesting systems.

But he pointed out that it is hard to recoup the investment on a 20-year land lease. In many overseas markets, he said, farmers can more easily justify spending on technology because they are making investments on "generational" land.

Andrew Thomas, managing partner at Equus Design, said farmers face an uphill task.

"Everybody knows Singapore is a tiny place, so people are going to think vegetables from Singapore must be expensive. And if the price difference to vegetables from Malaysia is not high, the assumption then is they must have compromised on quality."

He added: "There's a logo and there's the real brand. Unless the logo represents the fundamental brand essence, it's not going to work. And the fundamental branding of Singapore's food (meaning unprocessed foods) is not strong."

What then are Singapore's credentials in consumer lifestyle products?

Mr Thomas said: "You have to look at what Singapore is famous for in people's minds, and then look at the product and see if that will make a difference to its sale proposition ... So they have to be discriminating about what products they decide to brand in that way."

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The Design Business Chamber Singapore (DBCS), however, has had some success with its Singapore Good Design Awards (SG Mark).

DBCS president Andrew Pang said: "We launched it in 2013, and had to be very intentional in communicating the value of the SG Mark right from the beginning."

DBCS recorded a 26 per cent increase in overall submissions for the Mark this year, and past SG Mark winners have reported a rise in sales.

Age Gracefully, which received the Mark for designing a smart walking stick, tripled its sales figures between the time of the award to just before Covid-19 struck. Another example is Hegen, which produces baby-feeding products. An overseas supplier who saw its winning project at an SG Mark Winners' exhibition at Changi Airport, kickstarted the company's ventures into overseas markets.

Mr Pang said: "Simply putting a logo on any product is insufficient. The 'mark' must ascribe a known value. Otherwise, it becomes nothing more than a 'Made in China' or 'Made in EU' stamp on the product.

"The SG Brand cannot merely come in the form of a logo to be printed on any locally produced project, product or service. The Singapore brand must reflect the traits that are associated with Singapore."

DIA's Mr Smith suggested using Singapore's melting pot as a starting point.

"We are an entrepot, a meeting place for the world, with a rich mix of cultures - Asian, Chinese, Malay, Indian, western, colonial, contemporary, progressive - hard to define, rojak, an ice kacang of a culture. It's so hard to put your finger on, but maybe that's the point, and it's an opportunity to put a label on the SG-ness of Singapore lifestyle in all its diversity."

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