

# Branded! - by choice or by chance?

By Felicia Mbeledogu



## The brand idea

There are tons of definitions that we ascribe to the subject of brand. In the most common parlance, we think of brand with regards to organisations and the marketing of their products and services. At this level, to most people, the word brand simply conveys a matter-of-fact information that is usually localized and mostly of utilitarian implication. We speak up our preferred brands of consumables or football club, for instance. Every now and then, we may also cast aspersions, even if in subtle ways, on those other brands we care very little about.

Is it the case then that the idea of brand is all about what we can get “from out there?” This is far from the case. There is much more to branding that is worthy of both our individual and national attention. But before we dig deeper into the subject, let us start by dispelling one common misconception. ***A name does not make a brand.***

## So what makes a brand?

What is it about a brand that makes it stand out one way or another? To get to the core of a brand, we must peel beyond the name. We must traverse the trend line of what the name has consistently offered in terms of value and standing. A very simple way to consider this is to approach it in much the same way that we make something of an onion, by peeling into its essence.



## Setting the premise

This article attempts take us past the common notion that the word brand is only relevant to what we prefer to own or consume. The idea is to make the case that there is more to brand beyond the realm of the appetite. Brand standing is what defines a person as effective and fulfilled or as ineffective and drifting. You will also come face to face with how much brand standing either makes a nation strong and growing or keeps it poor and underdeveloped.

To help us wrap our arms around the subject, here is a little mind poker to get us going. What are the images that form in your mind when you think of such brand labels as **BMW**, **By Chinua Achebe**, **Made in Japan**, or **Harvard-trained**? If our collective vote of confidence on these labels is anything to go by, all the four mentioned converge under one compound umbrella of well-earned acceptance – **uniqueness and quality**.

## Brand speaks a language

Think of it this way. Is it not likely that the person who “just bought a Mercedes Benz car” makes a socially more resounding statement than the one who “just bought a nice car,” all things considered? Sure there is always the risk that first guy may come across a snob, especially if he does not wear his good fortune well, but most people are sure to give the “BMW man” (*Blessed Man Walking?*) a second peep, even if a stolen glance. In the same vein, that electronic gadget with a “made in Japan” label speaks instantly of high quality.

When our concept of brands starts and ends with products and services we accept, criticize or reject, things that are external to us, we may see ourselves as passive judges telling the stories of other people’s good or poor showings. Thankfully, there is more to the story. Indeed, were the idea of brands and branding start and end as something we only have to observe from the detached position of consumers and value judgement “outsiders,” life would be great. But alas, this is far from the case. There is so much more about brands and branding that have sweeping implications for the average person’s quality of life.

## Setting the premise

So what is it about the subject of brand that makes it easily the most socially and economically impactful human subject? Here is what! Our brand speaks of something deeper, something I will make bold to refer to as the soul of our presence in the here and now. Viewed from the standpoint of the business-customer contract, here is how Jay Ehret, marketing consultant and entrepreneur sees things, *“Your brand will be the blueprint of your customer experience design, it will flavour all conversation about you.”*

It turns out that as people, businesses and nations, we are all branded, whether by our overt choices or by the collateral implications of our “being here and now.” We all carry brand labels. We as people, countries, businesses, government offices, etc, all carry brand labels that either convey quality and integrity, or signal the lack thereof. The question of our brand standing follows us from cradle to grave, creates the energy and information contexts in which we engage society, and determines whether we are viewed as first-class value drivers or mediocre.

## Opportunity as brand currency

To attempt to demystify the subject of brand, as well as cast the brand net to cover every aspect of society, let me boil down the question of brand standing to one basic statement. **Brand standing is a question of what a person or an entity consistently does with opportunity.** What do you consistently do with the constant spates of opportunity that are available to you? What do your peers do with the same opportunity? What reputation have you built from the building blocks of opportunity? Have you ended up a winner or a victim in your market? As a business or a government agency with your name behind its product or service, are you first class or mediocre? Why do you have the outcome you have?

What do country brands do with opportunity? Before we answer, let us first define an opportunity simply as a favourable occasion or resource that puts us in a position to make a decision or pursue a course of action that will have a positive impact on lives (ours and others). With this clarification, the answer will then depend on whether the brand is a

smart and consciously positioned and defended brand or a disabling brand with no pride of value and service behind it.

National Opportunity	Smart Brand Response 	Disabling Brand Response 
Diversity of Cultures and Belief Systems	Create a robustly empowered and mobile human capital	Treat as license for civil anxiety and religious intolerance
Natural Resource Endowment	Drive accelerated economic growth and increasing quality of life for citizens	Corruption, conflict and declining quality of life
Leadership Positions	Pockets of opportunity for the most motivated and committed people to win for the citizenry in focused and measurable ways	Compensation for the “winners,” which unconsciously feeds a culture self-indulgence, lack of focus and waste
Different Viewpoints	The source of collective strength and enlightenment	Reason for lingering fears and suspicions
Challenges and Difficulties	Dialogue and caucus for enlightenment so as to solve big problems	Point fingers, “fight to finish,” and create bigger problems
Education and National Orientation	Open up the national space for new ideas and an enterprising populace.	Reinforce archaic ideas and make important matters “undiscussable,” thus fueling illiteracy and creating future opportunities for frustration and resentment.

## It's all about value

A smart brand is one that is striving to be a top-tier value provider in its domain or sector. Its premise for excellence is total, and its yardstick for measurement is always global. With

this mindset, a winning brand consistently turns each opportunity into an engine of progress, either in terms of immediate quantifiable value or as a learning opportunity. On the other hand, an ineffective brand unconsciously reacts to each opportunity as if an obstacle.

.....to be continued.