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Preparing Malaysians to take hold of global brand ownership

WALKING into the office of Tan Sri Lim Kok Wing is an experience in itself.

From the onset, one is greeted by the hushed silence of a sanctuary reminiscent of swirling conceptual thoughts, an ideas shrine as you were.

Subdued lighting embraces the man who is known as one of the finest advertising minds and strategists in the country.

He had just finished a few high-powered meetings in his office which looks more like a place you'll love to meditate in. Ushering guest after guest, in his calm stride, he packs his schedule to the brim. But when my time came, he looked as fresh as a new day.

A brand man through and through, he recently orchestrated a branding seminar in the city which invoked a lot of rethinking by many entrepreneurs on how they approach the issue of branding, especially in the context of an open marketplace.

Having been a veteran of advertising and marketing, he served as president of many industry associations playing a pivotal role in developing critical communications skills for next generation of advertising professionals. This week Sledgehammer talks to Tan Sri.

S: You seem to have taken the lead in conducting a true Asia-wide branding seminar right here in Malaysia. Tell us why?

LKW: You can't stop an idea whose time has come. When you are an agent of change there'll always be stumbling blocks and people falling over one another just to maintain the status quo. We felt the time was ripe for us to take stock of what was happening around us.

A brand is more than a symbol, label or signature of a product or service. It is the whole persona that comes with the offering. Malaysia as a brand can be exported, but you can't export the land, the peoples and its cultures. From this perspective alone, you can see the power of branding.

Going forward, brand ownership is key to our longer term success.

Our SMIs must now relearn to be prepared for the next phase - global brand ownership.

S: With the advent of Afta and WTO legislation, what is your take on where Malaysia will stand in this new borderless marketplace?

LKW: I would say that we are almost ready to compete in a global marketplace, let alone the regional scene. As I said before, having three or four world-class brands is not going to cut it; we need to have dozens and then hundreds of high-quality brands if we are to compete. The implementation of Afta will test our capabilities to compete with the rest of Asean. China is also opening its doors, its entry into WTO allows Chinese products to compete freely worldwide.

Our products will be put to very severe tests. Consumers will have a much wider choice of products and services. The challenge will be in creating quality products that will become the brands of choice.

Malaysia, as a whole, must become more competitive. Corporate Malaysia must recharge for the next charge. Our SMIs must be prepared and supported to face the challenge that a more globalised environment will bring about.

S: Your opinion and insight has been sought by many of the top leaders of our nation with regards to positioning, image and brand-building. Can you share some of your thinking about Malaysia as a brand?

LKW: Where does Malaysia stand in the Brand Index of nations? We are in

pretty good shape, I would say. We are known to have an educated workforce, hardworking, disciplined people, and technology-intensive industries. Malaysians work hard and learn fast. We are not seen as sloppy, ill-mannered or lazy - I hope that's true!

Leaders in many parts of the world have great respect for what we have achieved, despite our being a very young nation. Much of that credit must go to the Prime Minister who has worked tirelessly to promote Malaysia's best qualities to the world. Initiatives such as Malaysia Inc, Vision 2020, and investment-friendly policies have brought many international companies to Malaysia. The production of Proton, explorations by Petronas, the world-renowned Twin Towers, KLIA, FI racing circuit, have all added to Malaysia's reputation and image as a high-quality brand, and high-achieving people.

The real test, however, is in our ability to establish a culture for quality - in all that we do. What Dr Mahathir has created will serve well as starters and inspirations. The real test is in our ability to perform - as a country brand.

S: I am told you will be relocating to Cyberjaya soon and with the establishment of the Malaysian Design Technology Centre (MDTC) which you'll be helming. Can you tell our readers more about this initiative?

LKW: MDTC is a world first in the effort of bringing the global design fraternity together in an environment that promotes, activates and incubates creative solutions while enabling a new generation to acquire knowledge and skills. The centre serves as a vital link providing premises for the activities of the various product design centres, content developers, technopreneurs and anyone who has a creative idea - in promoting locally-designed products, services and innovative business models. The centre will facilitate product and design R&D, assisting new enterprises by providing incubation services.

The Limkokwing University, an integral component of the MDTC, will move to its new campus later this year which will be fully-equipped to play a central role in developing creative skills and knowledge needed by the world as countries transform into knowledge-driven economies.

S: Your earlier career in advertising was a long and fruitful one with you heading the industry association for two terms and involving yourself with education. Do you miss all this now?

LKW: To be honest, I'm more busy now than I have ever been. I'm creating more than I have ever created before. Creativity is a way of life. Advertising is only one of the many facets of the communications process, a key one too. Do I miss mainstream advertising? Well, being involved in nurturing the next generation of creatives is a more meaningful role for me these days.

I'm also saddened by the state of the ad industry in general. We don't seem to have enough world-class icons, personalities or brands as you were, that allow Malaysia to entrench itself as a regional creative powerhouse. We need more Yasmin Ahmads, Edmund Choes, Edwin Leongs, Thomas Lows, even Sonal Dabrals to power the next generation. We must work hard to build talents.

Once we've done that, I would have succeeded in my focus for the marketing communications industry, not just the ad business. We need more global recognition, more Clio winners, D&AD victories and Cannes Lions, we need to create a global impact.

The regional awards and even our own local shows are good for our own motivation, but it doesn't put us on the map. We need to reach out and make that leap.

We should want to be among the best in the world. We have that capacity. In any case, we don't have a choice.

