

**By BRR senior writer Mike Hodge – 9 November 2009**

# Branding Deep

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# Branding Deep:

## UNDERPINNING BRANDS WITH INTEGRITY

Like many other aspects of life, you get out of branding what you put into it. If you simply polish the surface of your business with a new logo and some marketing collateral you'll get a warm feeling for a little while but the fundamentals of your business won't change.

To do that, you need to dig deeper and make a longer-term investment. Naturally, the product or service being offered needs to be differentiated and fulfill a perceived need. But more often it's the way you actually do business that impacts most strongly on the reputation of your company i.e. your brand. Usually this boils down to the ethics, attitudes and behaviours of your own people and those along the length of your value chain to market.

The necessity of underpinning brands with integrity has been a key factor in BRR's recent work with Cook Islands black pearls. BRR's initial brief was to come up with a brand/marketing strategy and some collateral to lift the price points for pearl farmers in particular. However, it was quickly apparent that the industry's largely commodity mindset, ad hoc channels to market and general absence of core benchmarks made for an unsteady brand platform on which to base marketing initiatives.

**Getting primary sector producers to see the possibilities of the marketplace is always a challenge and the Cook Islands was no exception. In their case, Manihiki, where most of the pearls are produced, is one of the remotest places on earth. So it did require a stretch of the imagination on the farmers' part to see the real potential of their pearls in an elite jewellers on Paris's rue Saint-Honoré, for instance. But gradually, most came to appreciate that the economic returns to their industry would be largely determined by the price points and brand backstories attainable in such high-end display cases around the world.**

BRR expended considerable effort in demonstrating other BRR primary producer clients that had made the mental leap from commodity to added-value and reaped the rewards. These were producers who had seen the wisdom of orderly free enterprise, with agreed thresholds of belonging and value chain integrity.

BRR and its client, the Cook Islands Pearl Authority (CIPA), then embarked on a concerted programme to gain agreement and then implement a set of key benchmarks. A common grading system was developed by CIPA and a Lagoon Management Plan adopted to ensure the on-going environmental viability of their farming resource. Following a series of industry workshops, these and other initiatives were enshrined by BRR into a comprehensive industry reform document and an operating charter for all the participants in the value chain.

With guidance from BRR, the industry is now in the process of setting up networks underpinned by exemplary behaviour to take the pearls to market. To encourage compliance, BRR recommended a strategy that ring-fenced the top grades of pearls only, created the new Avaiki brand and back-story, underpinned by a set of standards and a more structured pathway to market. This included the need to appoint wholesale marketers who could access the high-end jewellers and retailers internationally where the best prospects of a price premium lay.

**From a branding perspective, what Cook Islands pearls did have going for them was a rich storyline. The pearls are mostly farmed in the deep, 9 kilometre wide lagoon of Manihiki, a remote necklace of islets 1200 kilometres north of Rarotonga. Manihiki's heritage captures feats of Polynesian navigation, the narrow margins of small island survival, Peruvian slave traders, lovelorn mariners and the hazardous early practices of pearl diving.**

These elements and the qualities of this very special, remote community were drawn on by BRR to develop the new Avaiki brand and its emotive back story ('Avaiki' means spiritual homeland). A range of collateral reflecting the 'rare depth' brand positioning was then developed for CIPA, including a website (avaikipearls.com), a looped audio-visual, promotional brochure and a range of engaging display and point-of-sale material.

Having just successfully launched the brand in Rarotonga, the client recognises that the hard work is by no means over. Despite attaining some important milestones, there's considerable effort still required in brand and market development before we can extract the price premium we want from the marketplace.