

**By BRR Principal, Brian Richards - 10 October 2006**

# Pacific Uniqueness

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# Pacific Uniqueness:

## THE NEW BRAND FRONTIER

**For centuries people in the northern hemisphere have held a fascination with all things Pacific.** As a place far away, it somehow represents a sense of space, freedom and slow calm. Ingredients increasingly removed from modern daily lives.

Never has the counterpoint between country and city life been more pronounced or the yearning for a glimmer of nature and freedom amongst urban jungles been so strong. Consequently, the ability to provide both virtual and real escape to city dwellers and to protect those areas of the world with special natural and cultural significance has never been more opportune. Think, for example, that within twenty years it is predicted that 85% of the world's population will live in cities, thus increasing the rarity and pull of the natural world.

Daily lives in the world's cities reveal the lengths people will go to fulfill this need for nature. Take fresh herbs in New York or London; seemingly outrageous in price yet people in these vast cities happily pay significant premiums to connect themselves to nature through food. Similarly in travel and lifestyle-related products, even the thought of something natural, be it an image on fabric, evocative music and movies, have strong emotional pull.

It is imperative that as a Pacific nation we act to package and promote our unique heritage and culture through branded products and experiences. Rather than being an exploitation of our culture, when done sensitively and intelligently, Pacific influenced brands will allow our uniqueness to continue to be built on in the modern world and preserved rather than being lost or stolen by other markets.

Consider for a moment the potential opportunities. Why is there no Pacific-style hotel here in New Zealand? Why is there no Pacific-inspired cosmetic range in the department stores of North America and Europe? **Why is it that we fail to romance the Pacific region in modern products and services overseas at a level to provide significant commercial and cultural returns?**

It is my view that the intellectual property held by the people of the Pacific has yet to be realised to achieve the premium returns I believe possible. Now is the time for us to drive this unique opportunity for a Pacific voice in a global world.

Maori and Pacific Island cultures provide a fascination which the greater world is yet to experience. Whilst the origins are deeply rooted in the villages and on the Marae, additional references need to go well beyond these areas in the promotion of something new. The overlay of European cultures and modernity is a critical part of the way our culture has evolved and therefore in the creation of highly desirable products,

services and experiences pertinent to today's and future markets. We must continue to evolve and build on our cultural traditions in order to survive and remain relevant and attractive to a modern audience.

**A 'Pacific Story' for the world waits in the wings. We see fantastic glimpses of modern Pacific inspiration in fashion cat walk shows, in the sounds of Pacific music, in local contemporary art forms.** Converting these local creative endeavours into first-world high-end luxury goods and services that reach high price points and provide significant returns to local people is entirely possible. It is also entirely necessary. It requires good business sense, cultural sensitivity, design imagination and a strong, clear story that speaks to a crowded global audience.

Endless opportunities for growth exist - in the fabric industry there is no Pacific-inspired product range operating on a commercial scale, in hospitality there are very few clearly Pacific restaurants, in architecture there are few great Pacific buildings and public spaces.

Even in food, branding something as simple as ice cream offers the opportunity to draw reference to Pacific identity and the opportunity to develop a suite of products and services around a brand. For example, rather than experiencing the Swiss Alps on a hot day in Mission Bay's Mövenpick store, chilling with a Pacific-inspired ice block sold in a beach-side, bach-style store sounds good to me! The development of Pacific inspired sweet ice products with flavours such as hibiscus and watermelon would surely prove a popular new-world twist on the globally popular Italian gelato tradition.

At present many of our attempts result in tokenism, the Maori and Pacific Island replica artifacts in souvenir shops of European inspired hotel foyers is a sad common example of lost opportunity. The world hankers for the incredibly rich cultural traditions of the Pacific but when it comes to packaging this in our products and services, we seem to be missing the mark, providing obvious cultural expressions frozen in time rather than progressive inspiring brands that speak to modern life.

We are all Pacific people. As our Englishness shrinks, what do we replace it with? The development of ideas and opportunities comes from educated, inspired eyes and minds. Pushing ahead in architecture, design, product development and marketing means new learning for all of us.

We must increase the focus in our schools of business, design, architecture and engineering. These are the crucibles of change where such big ideas take root. From here we then enter the boardrooms of business and commercialise these opportunities. If we are to take on

global economies and succeed in the international marketplace, what's the point of difference in naming a wine "Montana" when you're trying to sell a fresh New Zealand wine on a stinking hot night in New York.

Pacific values and attributes are new exciting ingredients for positioning goods and services. It is important we don't abuse our intellectual property by associating it with commodities rather than brands. After all, the Chinese already design and make Hawaiian shirts.

The development of Pacific inspired, well-branded products and services is the new frontier for our companies. The potential to capture the world's imagination, and its wallet, awaits us.