

By BRR Senior Writer, Mike Hodge – 08 August 2007

Virgin Territory

BRIAN R RICHARDS LTD LEVEL 2, 6 LEEK STREET
NEWMARKET, AUCKLAND 1023, NEW ZEALAND

PHN +64 9 520 0014 **EML** brand@brrltd.com

FAX +64 9 522 2709 **WEB** www.brrltd.com

Virgin Territory:

CARVING OUT AND DEFENDING YOUR OWN BRAND REAL ESTATE

I'm old enough to remember those westerns where the pioneers, having survived every obstacle that extreme weather, mountainous terrain, epidemics or rampaging Indians could biff at them, finally emerge into a verdant, stream-fed valley and promptly lay claim to their slice of virgin territory.

It may seem a stretch from this idealistic notion to the birth of a great brand but there are some parallels. **For a start, the sheer magnitude of brands and scale of competition means there's no shortage of challenges to locating this stand-alone piece of real estate.** Even a cursory look at great brands shows a very deliberate pioneering instinct to capture a place in people's minds that they can, with consistent promotion over time, outrightly own and occupy. The route is invariably an arduous one, with many fallen by the wayside, but the rewards for those who complete the journey are considerable.

On a more pragmatic level, we are not just talking here about the multinationals. When Orca's Scott Unsworth was peddling his 'Performance Wetsuits' from the back of his battered Cortina, he had a vision of producing the world's preferred triathlon wetsuit. This was a stretch by any standards. But with a clear vision embodied in the Orca whale metaphor, some early brand advice from BRR, determination and constant product innovation driven by the athletes themselves, Orca is now the pinnacle brand in its category.

Icebreaker's Jeremy Moon is another business owner we have been fortunate to work alongside who has set out to own a piece of mental real estate for his Merino garments. The story Icebreaker tells is distinctive, edgy and visually challenging, Jeremy resists the temptation to stray off the Merino garment path, and instead keeps building cleverness into his garments. Through continual innovation, Icebreaker puts as much distance as possible between itself and its competitors. Jeremy's rewards are premium price points and an ever-expanding world market.

It's about this point in the conversation that someone raises the issue of the considerably less sexy 'widget' maker or service provider. How do these people realistically differentiate themselves and their brand? **In my experience there is always at least one unique or very different aspect to every business or to the philosophy of the people behind it.** It may not always be earth-shattering in proportion but it is invariably something that can be accentuated in the brand story to advantage.

Every brand positioning should have its roots in truth. To do otherwise in today's candid 'blogging' environment is to invite brand damage. Having said that, there are brands where the distinctive positioning of the brand is built more around a perceived, rather than actual,

difference. This tends to be accentuated where the purchase decision has a stronger emotional content to it.

Determining the distinct positioning for your brand should be a process of self discovery. By all means get a brand specialist in to assist you to winkle it out and make the most out of it, but don't make the mistake of hiring someone to tell you who you should be. The same goes for research. Don't ask customers or other stakeholders what your brand should be all about. Quite frankly, if the owners or senior executives don't understand the key qualities of themselves, their competitors and their business, albeit with a little prompting for clarity, the future prognosis isn't very bright. **Once you've decided who you are and how you want to tell your story, that's the time to do some testing if you're in any doubt.**

Customer orientation is critical in branding but if you listen to your audience too much, instead of leaping ahead, you'll end up making little jumps which are quickly matched by your competitors. Getting out in front and staying there requires a very clear and distinctive vision, consistent articulation of the business's qualities in engaging ways, constant product and service improvement and confidently taking your staff and stakeholders along with you on this rewarding journey.