

# What makes a South African brand iconic?

By [Simone Rossum](#), issued by [Joe Public](#)

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A number of South African brands can claim to be intrinsically South African. Lion matches, All Gold tomato sauce, Hulett's Sugar, Koo Baked Beans and Ouma Rusks come to mind. But truly iconic brand status is usually reserved for international brands like Apple, Mercedes and TagHeuer. They're embedded in our culture and our consciousness as true icons.



We at Shift Joe Public were recently faced with the challenge of rebranding Cobra, a proudly South African brand that has become a feature of our lives. During our strategy sessions we found ourselves asking, "What defines an iconic brand?"

To go forward, we needed to go back - Cobra products have literally been fitted to South African homes for generations whether it's in classy and expensive hotels or modest dwellings, from Cape Town to Durban, from Sandton to Soweto. Most of us grew up with Cobra taps - even if we didn't know it at the time. I remember thinking as a child that the little red and blue emblem on top of all the taps at home simply differentiated 'hot' from 'cold' water. To me, this is simply what taps looked like. I never realised the emblem was related to a brand.

Timelessness is a feature of iconic brands, which is a tricky attribute as the quality of timelessness takes years to develop - even decades. You cannot just decree that your brand is 'timeless'; it needs to come to stand for something in the eyes of the world.

Iconic brands also marry form and function, a concept associated with modern architecture and industrial design in the 20th century. Its principles dictate that the shape of a building or an object be informed by its intended function or purpose.

In the case of Cobra, it's the marriage of form and function that has given the brand its impeccable track record. Cobra is tried and tested. It's about reliability. With 60 years of market leadership, the brand can boast a proud and unique heritage, knowledge and craft of its products.

Over time, iconic brands demonstrate performance and live up to their values and promises. They create and confirm expectations about their future behaviour to their audience thereby accumulating credibility and trust. Coca-Cola has delivered on the same trusted taste for over a century and to this day still leverages its brand history beautifully.

History and Pride become an influential part of how iconic brands operate - so much so that an iconic brand's 'history' defines its identity and these brands in turn acknowledge their history with pride, which influences how they behave - now and in the future.

Furthermore, iconic brands are influenced by their core values. It defines their strategy.

The late Steve Jobs once said that Apple's core value is not about making boxes for people to get their jobs done. "We believe people with passion can change the world for the better..." and that "those people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who actually do". We see this ethos reflected in the Apple line of products, the Apple retail stores, and in all aspects of the company's branding and marketing communications.

Is the reason that South African brands don't enjoy international or true iconic status because they don't behave like iconic brands? How can a plumbing brand like Cobra be elevated in the mind of consumers to a lifestyle brand - and a South African icon?

Iconic brands leverage their symbols. These emblems not only achieve an identity of their own, they start to represent the

brand. Great examples are the five rings of the Olympics, the Mercedes Star and MontBlanc's Ice Cap.

Iconic brands glamorise their products and maximize their individual look and feel. They also exude quality. Watch manufacturers like TagHeuer do this especially well by showcasing and highlighting the quality and level of craftsmanship in the detail of their products.

Brands that are seen as iconic are unique in how they express themselves. Through its 'Absolut Vodka' ad campaign, Absolut Vodka has created a smashable and unique brand.

Every position, environment and execution for top brands has been carefully crafted to give stature to a message of greatness - especially through the use of their chosen media platforms. Mini Cooper's famous Yo-Yo billboard set a benchmark when it placed a real MINI on the side of a building which moved up and down. Another example is the MINI Box Packaging execution where empty packaging was left on the street in Amsterdam after Christmas to make it look like someone received an actual boxed and wrapped MINI.

True iconic brands create experiences. Heineken beer's brewery in Amsterdam is called the Heineken Experience, and is designed to not only educate the public on the process of beer-making and the history of Heineken but to bring the product to life by allowing visitors to see it, touch it and taste it.

An inherent passion and pride for their products also needs to be present in this top echelon. For example, Christian Louboutin's signature adorns the bottom of each and every one of his signature red bottomed high heel shoes.

Ultimately, to be perceived as an iconic brand, you need to express yourself as an iconic brand - from your product, to your logo, to packaging, to all marketing and communication material. Only through expressing ourselves with pride and excellence can we expect consumers to do the same.

We believe that the recent launch of Cobra's new identity, devised and executed by the team at Shift Joe Public speaks to the level of pride, heritage and craftsmanship of the Cobra products and signals its own shift - not only in the company's outlook, embracing its core values of excellence, credibility, initiative and responsibility; but also in how Cobra will be perceived by consumers. We've progressed Cobra from the plumbing genre to a lifestyle brand as it moves towards being able to compete with international brands in its field.

There are many ways to define international icons and we believe that many South African brands have the potential to reach this status. Brands that are timeless, marry form and function, have strong values, history, pride, passion, performance, that leverage their symbols, express themselves differently, create experiences for markets, show quality and most of all behave like Iconic brands will find the natural progression to this status smoother than initially anticipated.

For more information on Shift Joe Public, visit [shiftjoepublic.co.za](https://shiftjoepublic.co.za).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simone Rossum is the Creative Director at Joe Public Shift which recently won a Loeries Grand Prix for OFM within its first 12 months of business.

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