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Brand awareness

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BRAND AWARENESS

HKDI's "Successful Brand Journey" seminars in Spring 2014 provided a number of insights into the creation of successful brands. Naturally, a number of differing perspectives were evident from the brand gurus; but SUMMER CAO heard that there are common themes, too.



Successful branding doesn't always lead to making money," says Michael Young, as he remembers one of his first lessons after setting up his studio in the fast-moving metropolis of Hong Kong. "In 2006, we designed some of the first Bluetooth rechargeable speakers in the world. We used a Hong Kong company who created a beautiful branding campaign for the product and had the best agencies do the marketing, with PR contacts all over the world. Then, within two years, everyone copied our design and it became really cheap."

However, despite the early setbacks, he quickly established a name in the product and industrial design world in Hong Kong and Asia at large. He has been involved in a range of product design including furniture, lighting, glassware, bags, bicycles and high-tech gadgets, earning three Red Dot awards since 2009. Both brands and manufacturers keenly sought his expertise, and in 2012 Young helped establish a new brand, 'EOQ'. With this came an open invitation to use manufacturing facilities to create anything he wanted.

On March 14, Young was one of the first two speakers to share their insights on how to develop a business and build up a brand in "Successful Brand Journey", a series of seminars held by the HKDI. Born in England in 1966, he was pushed into the design industry because he "had failed at everything else", he jokingly explained to the avid listeners. However, shortly after he graduated from Kingston University in 1992, the design guru quickly made his name. He opened his own studio in 1994, which operated in England, Iceland and Taiwan before finally settling in Hong Kong in 2006.

"When I arrived, I received plenty of press coverage



quite easily and many people asked me to work with them," Young says. However, he was not convinced that leaving Europe, where he had enjoyed 10 years of success, was a sensible choice. "It was stressful. I didn't know how to succeed. Although Hong Kong had plenty of manufacturing facilities, there was not much industrial design. It was a big risk. Fortunately, Hong Kong welcomed me and my design."

After some initial business hiccups, including the failure of his Bluetooth rechargeable speakers, Young realised he should focus on designing products that were functional and offer long-term use. "To be too innovative can be dangerous in business," he says. "The people who discover things first are not normally the ones who make the money." One of his key strategic moves was setting up EOQ, his furniture company. Today, it sells products worldwide and has become one of Hong Kong's most successful international brand stories.

To begin with, Young was not sure how best to use marketing communications and express EOQ's unique DNA to enhance the brand image. "We spent a fortune on photography, as well as the manufacturing environment," he says. "We actually created a brand new universe for the furniture to live in. It would have



ABOVE: YI CHAR AND BRAMAH PENDANT LAMP SHADE BY MICHAEL YOUNG FOR EOQ. OPPOSITE: MICHAEL YOUNG AND HIS BRAMAH PENDANT LAMP SHADE DESIGN

been very difficult for anyone else to have done this; it is our brand, our story, our DNA." EOQ's website is a story-telling platform with a contemporary chic, user-friendly design, which takes potential customers on virtual journey into this separate universe. Travelers can explore the finished products in a modern, stylish setting; yet they can also see videos on how each design is created by craftsmen, using the latest hi-tech equipment.

Young believes that the ultimate key to success is good ideas, something that cannot be achieved by branding and marketing. "I pray that I have good ideas because, for me, marketing isn't enough," Young

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LULU CHEUNG



ABOVE AND
OPPOSITE
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FROM LULU
CHEUNG'S
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COLLECTION
BELOW LULU
CHEUNG

says. "You have to have a product which is genuine and speaks to people. If you work with authentic things, it helps good design and authentic branding. Real things help. I always work with business partners who invest in good ideas, so this helps me succeed."

LuLu Cheung, the second speaker in the "Successful Brand Journey" seminar series, shares many of Young's beliefs: "Today, everybody is focused on the market," she says. "But I think what people should think about is whether your heart and ideas can be felt by others through your design, whether it moves them."

Known for her slick and discreet feminine collections, the Indonesian-born Chinese fashion designer is one of the best known of today's Hong Kong talents. Her clothes are avidly sought after by socialites and celebrities and she has become an established favourite of Hong Kong's wealthy circle, not just because of her design flair but also for her business acumen.

Cheung fell in love with fashion at childhood, and first tried her hand with her mother's scissors. She obtained a diploma at the Hong Kong Institute of Fashion Design before working at her uncle's boutiques. In 1992, she opened her first boutique in Hong Kong before launching her personal label LuLu Cheung in 1996. Having worked hard to establish her place in fashion, she exudes qualities frequently found in other successful professional women.

It is the qualities Cheung recognised in herself and other women that inspired her to create her subdued and clean silhouettes. "From the very beginning, I have been designing for professional women," she says. "They possess good fashion sense, sophisticated taste and radiate confidence. I hope my designs help them express these characteristics."

With more than 30 years of experience in the fashion industry, Cheung has seen first-hand how fast this world and the people in it have changed. One thing that has endured, however, is that good designs always last. "Coco Chanel injected her personality, perception of art, life experiences and philosophy into her designs; these all blended together to become her iconic work," she says. "Nowadays, fashion designers use branding and marketing campaigns to differentiate their work

from the competition. Although the branding methods people use today are different, at the end of the day the most successful brand is the one that is remembered."

Cheung believes that many designers can be deceived by the concept of success, which can be viewed from numerous perspectives. "Success in terms of the market doesn't necessarily mean the success of the brand," she says. "It's hard to strike the right balance between the different requirements of building a good brand." To address this, she offers two basic principles.

The first is passion, which Cheung believes is the prerequisite for fashion designers who want their designs to resonate with their audience. The second is to step away from the fashion design world and work with other team members in order to send out consistent brand messages.

"It's important to create synergy to move a brand forward," she says. "In this circle, nobody talks about 'my design' any more – they talk about 'my brand'. Branding is now an integral part of the whole fashion industry. The question is now whether you can communicate your unique style. That's why brand consistency and integrity are so important."

"For example, my brand style is discreet beauty; I brief the sales team to provide marketing services that reinforce this kind of feeling. I want to build a team who can communicate the same message to the customers. If you have a low advertising profile, you have to pay a great deal of attention to detail. High quality service and attractive boutiques are powerful tools for conveying brand stories to customers."

Like the seminar series' name suggests, building a successful brand is a journey that requires constant commitment and effort. Cheung's words sum up this spirit, "To build up a brand, first you have to have passion; then let yourself be guided by vision, think about how to maintain your energy and to never let it die. There are challenges in each phase and you have to cope with them one by one." 

