

TASMANIAN

BE TASMANIAN PODCAST

Episode Four: What do we talk about when we talk about brand?

(Be Tasmanian Podcast Theme Music)

Welcome to Be Tasmanian, a podcast about an impossible mission in a small state at the bottom of the world. It's about uncovering a hidden story that unites people and using that story to inspire community action.

It's about place-branding, destination marketing, and economic development, but it's really about culture. It's about who we are, why we live where we live, what all that means and what we ought to do about it.

This is episode 4.

(Be Tasmanian Podcast Theme Music)

In early July, an image showed up in the Australian media. It was the letters AU, in the middle of a circle of gold dots representing wattle. This was, according to news stories and social media, the new brand for Australia.

People were horrified, exasperated! Politicians were furious. Graphic designers and those who pretend to be experts in graphic design, denounced it on Twitter. Professors of marketing said professorial things.

Not only did it cost ten million dollars. They were replacing the kangaroo!

Here's Sky News host Chris Kenney, breaking it down.

1:00 "The Kangaroo is for the chop..." to 1:27 "coronavirus under the microscope."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qimg3T_uZiU

"The kangaroo is for the chop, the great Australian roo is not hip enough, or woke enough, or something, but wait 'til you see what the marketing gurus have come up with to replace it. This horrible golden blob is supposed to represent the Golden Wattle, our national floral emblem, Acacia Pycnantha. A wonderful plant, a bit of a favourite of mine, but really, this logo makes it look like a coronavirus under the microscope."

Of course, this image was not, and was never meant to be, the brand of Australia. It's a logo! No graphic design work in human history cost ten million dollars. And no one wanted to replace the kangaroo, which is an entirely different thing, a place-of-origin mark representing Australian Made products.

The wattle logo was a small piece of the Australia Nation Brand work, and when it popped in the media—without context—the commentary was unfair: Many of the reports were factually incorrect.

But in their outrage, Australians were expressing emotional truth: the kangaroo feels like something, and the notion—false or not—of replacing it with another image that did not yet feel like anything, seemed crazy. And this craziness was rooted in Australian and global cynicism about branding and marketing.

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I have never worked on a place-brand project that didn't have some element of this, and it's especially bad when the whole purpose is to invent a new logo and launch an advertising campaign. A logo isn't the brand. But, it is a representation of the brand, and isn't that where the word brand comes from? A metal stick twisted into a unique design, dipped in fire, and placed on a cow's backside so a thief can't take it.

My cow.

And if you didn't spend the ten million dollars on a fancy coronavirus-looking brand that isn't a brand, what did you spend it on? You know what you should have spent it on? Lowering my taxes! Fixing my potholes! Fixing health care and education and climate change and the economy. Or a monorail. If anything needs a rebrand, it's the word brand.

In my private sector life, I helped organisations and places use narrative to build their brands. It took me a long time—years—to realise our potential clients didn't understand what we were selling. Looking back: I can't believe we had any work. It was like selling orange juice to people who didn't know whether to drink it, water their azaleas with it, or use it to wash their hair.

Mid-way through some of our pitch sessions, knowing we were competing with advertising agencies, CEOs and City Managers and Mayors would stop us and ask: "Wait, wait, wait—I thought you were here to give us a brand."

They wanted a new logo. Something they could launch, a literal or metaphorical ribbon to cut and a glossy plan to file away on a dusty bookshelf.

But we were a strategy company. We wanted to give them A REASON TO EXIST.

It's hard enough to brand bread companies and banks and barbers. The notion of "place-branding" adds a new layer of complexity.

Here in Tasmania, we have legislation that guides our efforts: it sets out our functions, our objectives, our reason to exist. Our job is to translate our 'Brand'—the unifying cultural expression I've spoken about in earlier episodes—into a strategy to bind trade, tourism, workforce attraction, investment attraction, and student attraction—all while creating a public asset all Tasmanians feel they own and can use: something they helped build, an expression of truth and hope that reflects themselves at their best.

The word brand is right in our name, Brand Tasmania, which is—unfortunately—a brand risk. Because we don't have godlike power over the definition of the word brand. Some people, powerful people, people who control budgets and make important decisions—when they hear the word brand—think of creative types, who wear head to toe black, ideally turtlenecks, and with fancy glasses and sticky notes and crayons and possibly finger puppets who talk nonsense about ideation and waste money on stuff that isn't important.

And I don't blame them! I built brands for a living and when people say the word I'm never sure what they mean either.

Often, the people who mistrust the word brand most are businesspeople. Which is mysterious to me. Apple, arguably the world's most valuable company, is worth \$1.3 trillion. Its brand value is \$206 billion, and it all started with a story.

What's the brand value of Austin, of New York, of Iceland, of Australia, of India? Am I moved to spend money to visit these places? To buy their products? To invest in these places, to live in them, to send my children to be educated there? Sure, I can look at data. But most of the decisions we make are emotional decisions: based on feelings.

I am saying this into Apple products because I have an emotional attachment to Apple. I spend more for it, perhaps illogically, because I have a relationship with Apple.

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I would not have packed up my life in Canada and moved my family across the world, if I did not believe the Tasmanian story I had helped to uncover. My wife gave up a job she loved. My poor kids, whom I have dragged all over the place, had to enter their ninth school.

But I was convinced. And because I knew the story, I was able to convince my family.

A brand, any brand, at its core, needs simple answers to simple questions. Like: What are we selling and who is our customer? What is the problem we solve for that customer? And how can we do it in a consistent and powerful way? It's difficult to think this way when you're in the business of uplifting and encouraging 520,000 people, but if we don't have sharp and compelling answers to those questions, and if everyone on our team doesn't have more-or-less the same answer... we have a lot of work to do.

Friends: we have a lot of work to do.

By the end of our interviews with Tasmanians, we had hundreds of thousands of words. But these words were eerily consistent, and powerful. We distilled it down to a half-page story that was easy to understand. Then we reduced it further to a paragraph, which we called our mission. Then we got it down to six words, as we discussed in episode three: the quiet pursuit of the extraordinary.

Then we used examples people had given us, of Tasmania at its best. All of these specific stories of struggle and hardship, determination, hard work, ingenuity, obsession and courage. We realised that our interviewees knew exactly what the brand was about, although they didn't use the word brand. We had to draw it out of them, but they had a sophisticated understanding of this island place and its culture, and what we might uniquely offer to the world.

What was it? And how could we make it simple and powerful?

In every city, state, or nation, one group has the big marketing megaphone: the tourism organisation. Often, they operate at some distance from the rest of the economic development efforts. They do their own thing. While they tend to have massive budgets, it isn't obvious how their work connects with trade, investment, and workforce and student attraction.

Even though—when you step back and look—it's crushingly, blindingly obvious!

Luckily, we finished our research and our work on the Tasmanian story just as Tourism Tasmania was looking at the destination brand. That is, our tourism pitch. They read the story and said: "You know, that sounds like us."

We did some more interviews, with tourism folks, and then we tested what we had learned in workshops across the state. Tourism Tasmania's advertising agency used culture, Tasmanian culture, to bring the story to life.

Their campaign, called 'Come Down for Air', carries the quiet and the special. I'll play you one of the commercials. Now, imagine this showing up on television, in between scenes of American bloodshed and loud advertisements for mattresses and theme parks.

The scene is dark and that sound you'll hear in the background is rain. The camera moves slowly in on a couple in a VW camper van close to the beach. In the distance, a mythic natural rock feature jutting into the sea, called The Nut.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFTwGyUGQS4>

"The scallop, often reserved for restaurant advertisers and fancy dinner parties, but down here, it's best served takeaway, in thick, shortcrust pastry. The kind that finds its way into every nook and cranny."

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The sun does shine in Tasmania, as it does in the Australian mainland. There are marsupials, and parties, and people do wear bikinis and board shorts on hot summer days. You can walk in the bush here, hike up mountains, overlook grand vistas. Drones can take pictures of you all alone overlooking these vistas, sometimes with your arms up in triumph, as you can in New Zealand, in Canada, in Norway, in the Alps.

But, there's something else here, something you can't find in other places: Tasmanian-ness. Why we live here. What we do here and why we do it.

We know Tasmania is not for everyone.

But we see you there in the exhausted and polluted big cities of the world, with your stressful commutes. We can tell, from afar, that the hunt for easy money and power and prestige is leaving you feeling empty. There is another way.

You can buy a bit of it: a bottle of our wine or cheese or seafood, or a boat, a very sharp knife with a Huon Pine handle and experience it at home. You can come visit it for a weekend or two weeks, 'Come Down for Air', and let it rest in your memory. You can invest in it, in this growing artisanal economy. You can bring your medical career down here, or your augmented reality start-up, and go mountain biking every afternoon. You can educate yourself or your children in a place where it's normal to turn your passion into your business.

Brand Tasmania, has a tiny budget compared to a similar organisation in a larger city or state, so we have to be clever. We can't waste a dollar. In the early days, our team, and our board, understood immediately that we had to be on-story, on-brand ourselves.

Because we understood our brand, we knew we could not boast. We could not ask for millions of dollars to run an ad campaign based in boasting.

But we had to start somewhere.

When we saw Tourism Tasmania's campaign, based on the story we had uncovered, we knew we had the start of something. There's a really clever and snotty television show, here in Australia, called Gruen. It's about advertising—and part of the joy of the show is when they hate something, they're really clever and snotty about it.

But, they liked this. Here's Gruen guest, creative director Karen Ferry:

Gruen: Series 11, Episode 6

5:09 "I just think it's brilliant... to 5:32 "... make them feel human."

<https://iview.abc.net.au/video/LE1927H006S00>

"I just think it's brilliant, right? Like the language they use is just so ugly, like knickers, walks, rogue, but there is something so beautifully poetic about it because it's really Australian and it's how we sound as a culture, I mean, unfortunately we've got to this point where we're all latte sipping, cellphone owning yuppies and it's really stressing us out, especially millennials who are overworked, underpaid, and all they want is a holiday that makes them feel human".

Karen was saying exactly what we wanted her to say. And she wasn't alone. This is ad agency managing director Carolyn Miller.

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7:21 “These guys have been...” to 7:28 “... escape from modern life.”

8:31 “No other state...” to “...well done Tassie.” 8:58

“These guys have been really smart by looking at an attitude, so what they’re going after is people who want escape from modern life. No other state is really that quiet and that simple and that beautiful, like it actually really rings true. And the fact that they’ve done this all in a single shot is genius, so we see so many ads which are essentially vignettes’ of a whole load of scenes kind of rammed together to try and fit into thirty seconds or fifteen seconds and this just gives you the space to breathe. It really speaks to what they’re trying to do. So, I don’t find it dark at all. I find it really beautiful. I don’t see any negativity about it whatsoever, so well done Tassie.”

Here was a start. And it was focused on particular audiences, well-researched segments of the population: exhausted people who live in the globalised and therefore increasingly bland mega-cities who want to feel human. And those who are after experiences steeped in culture. Not another performance of Hamilton, or a Taylor Swift concert, but something different: a different way to think, to express ourselves, even to live.

Now we had to do the same sort of work across our partner agencies and organisations, and most importantly to entice everyone else to do it too.

We needed all of this to look and feel like something. There was a logo for Tasmania, and Tasmanian things, but it never connected with Tasmanians the way the kangaroo logo had, for Australian made products.

The local agency that won the contract to help us with the look and feel of our brand came up with a really wild idea: a logo that shifted according to where you were on your journey, your version of the Tasmanian story. Like this podcast it was a call-to-action, to Be Tasmanian.

It sounded really cool, but complicated. Not that complication is bad. But we were after something simple and moving, reduced to its essence, a way to mainline the story into the hearts of Tasmanians and those who want to be Tasmanian.

We wanted everyone to feel close to it. And... we wanted our work to reinforce what our friends in Tourism were doing.

Leigh Carmichael is one of the most successful brand thinkers and place-makers in Australasia. He was an independent graphic designer from the Huon Valley who was about to move to the mainland and get a real job in 2005 when he pitched on some work for a brewery owned by a man named David Walsh. I mentioned David Walsh in episode one, though if you’re listening to this you likely know who he is. And you know who Leigh Carmichael is. Why? He got that work, for Moo Brew, and it led to other projects with David Walsh: like MONA and a fiery winter festival called Dark Mofo that changed winter in Tasmania—and Australia. He made the traditionally quiet and chilly month of June fun, fiery, naked, naughty, cosy, and wrapped it in the colour red.

Leigh on a logo, a wordmark, on creating a look and feel, and a brand, that people “want to be close to.”

“Brand for me is about, emotion, feelings, actions in particular, you know often it’s the action that companies make that say more about their brand than any logo or mark, or ad. I think ads are not believed like they used to be once upon a time, so I think actions are incredibly important, but a brand encompasses all that an organisation is. You know, we’ve been fortunate through MONA and MONA FOMA and Dark Mofo that we’ve been in a position, and kind of led by David, certainly in the early years where we would do it, rather than say it. You know, saying it seemed like a waste of energy, so David was kind of dead against an advertising campaign leading into the opening of MONA, and the action that we took was create a festival to give it proper brand experience as opposed to putting up billboards all around Australia telling people that we were coming.”

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What we learned, early on, is when we go back to the story Tasmanians told us, when we're true to the brand... we tend to get it right. We're not here to borrow cute tactics from other places, to be creative for the sake of being creative. We'll leave that to the artists.

And, we can't tell people how great we are. As Leigh says, we have to show it through action.

Our job is to build a strategy that brings the brand to life, through action across all sectors, but this work has to include as many Tasmanians as possible, and it has to move our audiences on the Australian mainland and around the world. How?

In episode one I talked about Austin, Texas and its powerful on/off switch: does this keep us weird or not?

Here, it's even more specific. People have a brand filter in their minds, based on the history of this place, on where they are today, on where they want to go together. The question here is: "Is it Tasmanian or not?"

Rather than create a new logo, we took the simple and elegant wordmark Tourism Tasmania had created. And we put an N on it. TASMANIAN, white on black. Tasmania is the place. Tasmanian represents the people and what they do. Tasmania is the noun, TASMANIAN is the adjective.

Our agency, The20, mourned the loss of their cool logo idea and rose to the challenge of bringing this simple and powerful word to life. They created something we call a story-pairing, a split down the word TASMANIAN between the final A and the N. There are two images, one on each side of the split: one of a Tasmanian, or Tasmanians in the pursuit of something and the other of a product—the extraordinary thing they've achieved. You can see it on our website.

On websites.

We met a Hobart school teacher who owned the URL tasmanian.com.au He was saving it up for his retirement and he was going to turn it into a photography business. We approached him, almost begged him, to help us out.

Could we buy it off him?

We spoke to him, we bought him a drink and we told him what we wanted to do with TASMANIAN. How we wanted to uplift and inspire and encourage Tasmanians to do the wonderful things he'd done with his career.

He thought about it a little while and he sold us the url tasmanian.com.au for 10% of its market value, because that was all we could spend.

We see this as typically Tasmanian. It's the sort of thing we see all the time. How connected people are to one another, how they want to help one another, and how they want to do it quietly. I asked him to use his name on this podcast. He didn't respond—that's Tasmanian!

Rather than launch TASMANIAN with a press release and a splashy party we didn't launch it at all. A quiet pursuit should reflect a quiet pursuit.

We hit the go button on 20 December 2019, when everyone was in the middle of their Christmas shopping and end of year lunches.

We went out and slowly presented it to our partners and potential partners, and helped them work on their own brand stories. A newspaper columnist who admitted he didn't even look at the material we had put together wrote the usual "don't change anything!" rant in the local newspaper, and accidentally agreed with us in his conclusion.

But other than that, it went well.

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Tasmania has a fraction of the population of other states and territories, even mid-sized cities in Asia, but 520,000 people is still a lot of people. We couldn't run workshops for all of them.

TASMANIAN is a good brand. For me, and my family, there was a call to action embedded in it. I'm not yet Tasmanian, but I aspire to be.

Our team at Brand Tasmania was gathering a group of early-adopters in and out of government, who felt the story we had uncovered was THEIR story, and they understood immediately how to use it. But, they were far less than one percent of the population of Tasmania.

The world is a graveyard of good brands mismanaged by dumb, and expensive, strategies, and while we didn't know it yet, the country was about to be ravaged by some of the worst bushfires in history. And Tasmanians we were about to get a new Premier, a pandemic, and a tremendous hit to the state's economy.

In Episode 5 of Be Tasmanian, we look at the whole point of place-branding: to turn a compelling story into a unifying and enduring strategy that inspires community action and ultimately brings more value to everything Tasmanian.

Or, at least, how to try really damn hard and fail as beautifully as possible.

(Be Tasmanian Podcast Theme Music)

Hey, if you have questions about what you heard today about me, or the team, or Brand Tasmania, send us an email at podcast@brandtasmania.com.au.