

# The tension of opposites

Brian Richards

## Positioning forestry industry brands from the outside in

Without question, the forestry industry is credible – the challenge now is how to become incredible. Research into brand consumer perceptions of the industry (mainly in Sweden, Austria and Finland) shows that this is possible. The Austrian public regard forests as a national symbol of identification. The people of Finland, Norway and Sweden are very much concerned about the industry's contribution to their economy, and most German people believe the main purpose of forests is to increase their quality of life.

But what do we as New Zealanders think about the forestry industry? Trucks that clog up the roads, a dangerous industry for our children to join, wood price volatility and 'the wall of wood heading your way'? From my reading, I don't think you are explaining yourself well enough. So why, as a New Zealander, should I support your industry?

## Tango dancing with your stakeholders

Don't worry – you are not alone in this. Farmers complain about being misunderstood by city people, fishermen feel boxed in by bureaucracy, and kiwifruit growers are currently suing the industry over biosecurity issues. Operating environmentally sensitive industries is like tango dancing; you have to keep in step with the music and ensure you have a full dance card of stakeholders well charmed. Communications strategies have to be adept going forward, and sticking vision statements on walls and reviewing them every five years simply won't do it. You have to move with every industry interaction looking to maximise your message. A forestry brand has to move every day with its moments of achievement, both real and digitally. And it's possible now.

## Tree fellers versus storytellers

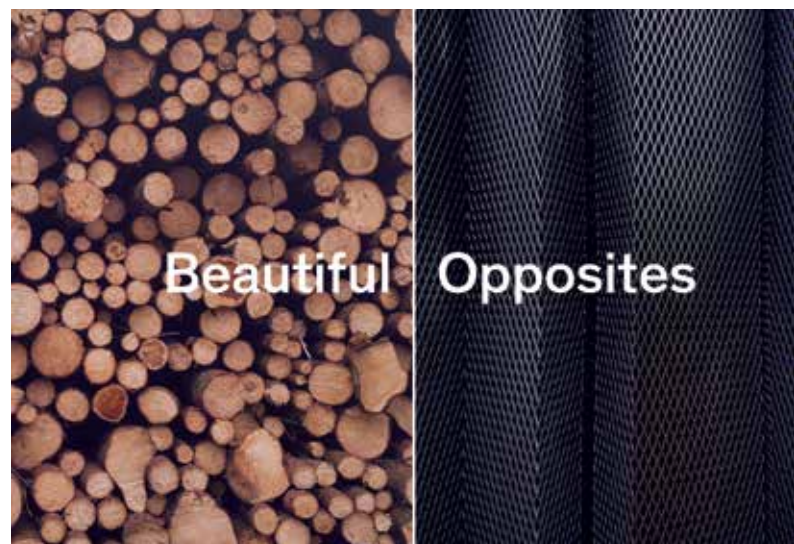
You are the tree fellers here and I am the storyteller, yet you need to become both to build a sustainable future. These are two opposites, and to be good at both there will undoubtedly be tension. Can woodsmen be poets? After a few beers, I expect so. But on a serious note, why invest in storytelling when you could buy another truck – something more tangible, something you're familiar with?

Creative storytellers and those working on the frontlines in the primary industries are typically miles apart from understanding and appreciating the skills of the other, so there will always be a natural tension between what we both do. Forestry is more of a doing industry – not a dreaming industry.

## The tension of opposites

Even looking within the industry, there are many tensions of opposites – logs versus furniture, big versus small, Māori versus Pakeha, bulk versus boutique. I put it to you that there are parallels in these very simple home truths within this forestry industry. Observing your communications, your governance and your blurred visions of this industry, it is difficult to see a collective certainty in a bright future. Yet, as a significant industry to New Zealand's future economy, I ask myself why does this adversarial unhappiness prevail?

The answer could be found in considering another human story – one of a dying professor and his star student reconnecting on a deathbed. *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom is a wonderful true story of wisdom and a lesson in seeking individual ambitions at any cost. One line in the movie, delivered so beautifully by the actor Jack Lemmon, is about culture but applies to this industry and many others in the primary sector: 'The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it.'





From the outside, I sense a disconnected industry from government, a culture of doing one's own thing, a lack of industry-wide planning for the future and too few sparks of innovation. The forestry industry seems to have its head down – doing more of the same and dining out on China's growth economy in the main. While you live under one roof, it doesn't read like a happy household with a shared vision. But you are not alone.

## Selling less for more

Every major primary industry sector (be it farming, forestry, fishing or dairy) suffers the same tensions. Their governance systems were designed for a previous era of commodity production and they are challenged to reinvent themselves. We have all heard enough about these industries that struggle to add value, so how might we turn a corner and change an industry psyche that seems hell bent on doing more for less. Our entire land-based economy is now poised at a crossroads and we must learn across all these industries how to sell less for more. It is a complete mindset change, and more of the same simply won't get us there.

Selling less for more, as opposed to selling more for less, is the ultimate tension of opposites. And this industry, like others, has been standing at these crossroads for some time now. Why the hesitation?

## You know when you know

Let's come back to the individual self. You know when you just know something? And it doesn't matter what other people's opinions are? You can angst over something for a very long while – waffling back and forth, weighing pros and cons ad nauseam – but it just keeps creeping back in like a stray cat that won't go away. The tension of feeling undecided and ambivalent – for no good rational reason – just eats away at the core of you. Your mind becomes even more argumentative, and it could be that you are no longer a pleasant person to be around.

If you reflect on the times in your life when you have done this, you realise that one day the clouds just cleared and you knew what you had to do. What happened? I think it is very valuable to understand that this is a common process in decision-making. It is about holding this tension of opposites where the choices feel diametrically opposed to one another in some way.

Many in the primary sectors of our economy have a tendency to shove this struggle underground and deny its existence. This only causes further suffering. Rather, we need to embrace the opposites and hold the tension until our way becomes clear. Don't move away from it – move towards it.

## It's a long game

It's a long game that most of you need to play in this industry and it requires intergenerational thinking. In my research, I came across only a very small amount of references to future communities and the contribution the industry will make to the national economy. The macho icons in your industry belittle the value you add, in particular the contribution you make to many communities, especially rural ones. This is a significant part of your story, yet untold.

With the exception of the Lake Taupo Forest Trust led by CEO John Bishara, all of the websites reviewed made virtually no reference to the longer term. The Trust's mission is to 'realise the dreams of those who have gone before us by fulfilling their expectations to build a competitive business, respect their customary values, and protect their lands and assets in order to deliver real benefits to their descendants.' It is a commendable vision and purpose, and I know many others would feel the same way across your industry, but you seem to fail to express it and live these values.

## Industry tensions

With forests nearing maturity, you are going to face many tensions, and your individual messages and brands which communicate these changes will be vital in both working together and to argue your corner. In my limited reading, I see the tensions between industry players and the wider business of government and regions coming at you. The lack of collaborative energy in the industry and your fierce independence will make the way ahead twice as difficult.

There are many things you could do together – harvesting cooperatives, joint R&D programmes, collaborative international marketing, joint labour programmes, to name a few. Attracting and retaining safe and skilled workers means presenting an industry future to us as New Zealanders. Rationalisation of timber assets will be inevitable as volume demands come upon the industry. An ostrich mentality kept the wine industry back until wise financial heads got involved on their boards. A certainty of underdeveloped infrastructure, ports, roads and the impact of technology across the whole industry are only some implications for the sector.





# Ethics Aesthetics Functionality

## Finding a sense of rightness within

I sometimes joke that it might be easier if ‘they’ all wanted the same thing of you – but of course they don’t. My advice to successive political parties who over the years have approached me about their brands has always been: ‘A third of the people are going to love you no matter what. A third of the people are going to hate you no matter what. And the other third simply don’t care. So, you might as well just be yourself.’ Of course, they never take my advice and so often head into elections with a bland brand.

However, it is actually very freeing to think in this way. If we are not to base decision-making on what others want of us, then we have to find that sense of ‘rightness’ within – within this industry, within yourselves. And this is the key to your brand expression – what do you believe in, which part of the market do you serve, who are your customers and why?

## Where to begin?

First, understanding your brand is less about who you are and more about how others wish to perceive you. These days, it is less about crisp logos and more

about consistent regular interactions and the unsolicited extras you never knew you were going to get when you went out to deal with a particular company. Put very simply, for brands today to deliver bottom-line results they must contain these three things:

- *Ethics* for this industry would include sustainability, work safety, cultural diversity and respect, paying your taxes, fairness and so on.
- *Aesthetics* is about presentation, your story, your vehicles, your buildings, your websites and collateral.
- *Functionality* is essentially how easy you are to deal with, making sure your services are well understood, you have correctly trained people to help your customers, things work well, and you recover well from errors and challenges. It involves everything from clear compelling messages to the way a customer navigates your website.

## Tell your story from the outside in

From observation, most of the forestry industry material is written in what we call ‘we’ language. It is essentially about you (‘we’ do this and ‘we’ do that), as



# Cold vs Warm



opposed to adopting a true brand voice that should be in the language of the customer – focused on ‘you’ (them). Your stories don’t begin early enough – generally in the nurseries, or before in the alternative land uses, and the communities of interest you operate in.

Also they don’t go far enough into your customer’s world, covering the end uses of your wood. Virtually no companies we found described a value chain of activities, so we as outsiders really struggled to understand the contribution you make as individual businesses to the whole industry. There is a lack of an overarching compelling story that can be shared by the industry and consistently used as a common backdrop.

### Learning to play together

Over the years I have taken a great interest personally in industry collaborations. I was in the room with Don Brash and others in the early stages of the development of New Zealand’s kiwifruit industry and argued strongly for the establishment of a registered international brand, which subsequently became Zespri. I am also the author of Cervena, a high-end venison cuisine brand in the New Zealand deer industry, in an attempt to reposition farm-raised venison well above where the meat industry wanted to take it.

Probably the biggest success was my role on behalf of government to bring the wine industry together some 20 years ago, forming an international marketing guild, which is still alive. These all came from humble beginnings, but are now billion dollar industries as a result of strong collaboration, both onshore and offshore.

We as Kiwis are not good at collaboration and there are many lessons we can learn from around the world. My hope is that you will be an industry that will work better together as in these and other examples. Unless you realise and romance the value you add, no-one else will (nor will they want to as it is not in their interests).

### Do we truly understand where the world is going?

I believe that you have an industry that could become incredible. But do we truly understand where the world is going and how we can contribute to a better one? The more the world urbanises, the more we will become disconnected from nature. It is a well-known fact that the more you are removed from nature, the more you are prepared to pay for it. Whether it is an item of food grown organically or a beautiful wooden house, there is a psychic premium for things that are natural.



As an industry, we are only just beginning to realise that people are prepared to pay for it. This is provided on the basis that it is delivered in the right way, accompanied by the right story and brand. Just watch how large successful brands across the globe like Red Bull, Coca Cola and McDonald's are already in desperate tail spins correcting their journeys in the direction of natural health, hydration and nutrition. You are already there contributing to the bio-economy, but many of you don't know it yet.

### Being inspired by wood

For me, wood is an inspiring material. So much so my wife Brigitte and I have built a beautiful award-winning home using the same material on the inside and the outside, which we love. There is something special about our weekend retreat to the country from the concrete and glass of the city we work in. There are a handful of brilliant architects around the world who have made incredible contemporary buildings designed in wood, and now with new laminate technologies we are seeing a completely new future. Take, for example, Michael Green's ground-breaking architectural work in the US.

### Good design, like nature, is timeless – Abodo Wood Case Study

At Richards Partners we are strategists and designers with a great passion for New Zealand and its values as a place to live, work and play. We believe there are many products and services that are grossly undervalued on the world stage coming from New Zealand that should be repositioned. Radiata wood, in particular, is of special interest to us and we asked the question: could this product be repositioned in terms of its design values?

We recently undertook a wood project for a company some will know. Abodo Wood came to us for brand strategy and design with the specific request that they wished to be repositioned. This work was only just completed in late 2017. The project is ongoing and has been selected as a finalist in this year's New Zealand Design Institute Best Awards. This is an example of a company in the primary sector that had the courage to go this far. For this, we congratulate Daniel Gudsell and his team.



This was an exercise in the simplification of complex information and telling a story of the virtues of radiata. Minimalism is more challenging than maximalism. These days, digital tools are considerable, and platforms can be built and used as an ongoing marketing tool to reach out with new developments and information on a frequent basis.

The online digital essay 'Abodo: Carefully Crafted Timber' is very much a value-added story. This successful company has made a significant investment in its marketing tools, and beyond its recognition by the New Zealand Design Institute what matters to us most is that the client is very happy with the result.

### Tree fellers and storytellers

Turning yourselves into storytellers, as much as tree fellers, is my challenge to you. You have a marvellous story to tell: first, to all us New Zealanders whose support and interest you need, and secondly, to stand on the global stage with a story which will galvanise you, and your brands, with a renewed sense of purpose and vision.

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