

# What T-shirts say about their owners

In the '60s, the T-shirt came to the fore as a political and personal statement and, since then, the wave has simply gained momentum. Nowadays, the T-shirt is what the bumper sticker was to the '80s.



Whether you choose to sport a Tee bearing Madiba's face, a tongue-in-cheek slogan, an instantly recognisable brand logo or a graphic image depicting an interest or sports team, your T-shirt choice is your personal and portable bumper sticker - saying what you want to say about yourself without having to open your mouth.

Two of South Africa's most prolific designers of Tees, Holmes Brothers and Big Blue discuss what t-shirts say about their wearers.

The 27-year-old fashion brand, Big Blue, started small selling its handmade wares at the Market Theatre flea market in Johannesburg and has morphed into one of the country's most recognisable fashion labels and conduits for saying what you want to say. Known for its tongue-in-cheek slogans that often reference the South African zeitgeist, the iconic graphic emblems - from Zambuk tins to Madiba - are big news on the SA casual fashion scene.

Another company that is all too aware of the power of the T-shirt as a talking point is Holmes Bros. This Durban-based company has been working with Big Blue for 20-odd years, collaborating with it on some of its iconic designs. More recently, it branched out on its own and, with three stand-alone stores, it is equally tapped into what is happening on the T-shirt scene.



Says co-owner Laurie Holmes, "Whereas Big Blue T-shirts are very much about seeing the humour in the South African context, often with a dose of reference to our Afrikaans and African heritages, our designs tend to be a little more serious, more design driven and most importantly for us, with our brand name very prominent. The Big Blue brand stays away from this but we tend to make sure our brand name is prominent."

Both approaches work well - Big Blue has around 18,000 T-shirts on its shop shelves at any one time, with around 50 top T-shirt sellers in the range. Another 200 are repeat designs and a further 200 are in trial phase.

## Staying relevant

The challenge in a world dominated by click-and-share instantaneousness is staying relevant, says Big Blue co-owner James Robertson. When it comes to T-shirts, he is passionate about the subject.



"The real zeitgeist is what people are feeling simultaneously and spontaneously, rather than what is being fed to them. Our customers are intelligent; they all have Pinterest and well-meaning friends, so they decide the most flattering colour, style, fabric or garment for themselves. We try to make sure what they want is available to them. Also, I think that South Africans are not afraid of colour, so we can look at brighter colours than whatever a forecaster in dreary Europe is telling us to wear."

Allergic to the official international fashion trend forecasts that are released seasonally, he prefers to keep his ear to the ground and his eyes peeled. He and the team mine the valuable feedback from the brand's 2500 daily customers and hone the information they receive from what's happening in the fashion world to fit the Big Blue sensibility. "At the moment, the colour that we're being told is 'now' is neon coral but it's not a flattering colour for all skin tones and it's ugly. So it's not going to happen," says Robertson.

Holmes on the other hand, says Holmes Bros designs are definitely influenced by international trends, "But we prefer to give whatever's happening on the international scene our own South African twist and after five years, we're still trawling the '80s for inspiration." The result is two players who are helping to provide South African consumers with options as to how they choose to express themselves through the T-shirts they wear.

## Top sellers



The popular sellers at Big Blue indicate that as a nation, we are proud to be African. "The continent of Africa is a good seller and, even though it has now been done by so many other retailers, people still come to us for it. It is a good strong graphic," says Robertson. "Other popular designs include those that feature Nelson Mandela's face, although copyright issues are a minefield so we're steering clear of that nowadays, and T-shirts with a 'feel good factor', something that may have an amusing graphic or slogan that makes people feel good about themselves." It seems South Africans like to portray an air of positivity through the T-shirts they wear - rather than being outwardly provocative and political, saying something in a subtle way seems to be the SA way.

## Local is lekker



One the subject of keeping things local from start to finish, both T-shirt gurus insist that they will always work with local suppliers. "There's no denying that working with Chinese manufacturers would make things easier but we just feel that it is our way of ensuring that we support local industry as much as possible," says Holmes.

It is clear that Robertson agrees with this notion, "Our focus is on sustainable jobs by only producing our clothing here. We support design schools, new designers, artisan dye houses, block printers and small business screen printers - we like working with owners who are as passionate about their product as we are about ours."

Staying current is obviously a challenge in the fickle fashion world and one has to accept the successes with the not-so-successful designs. "We used to do some extreme shock value T-shirts, to push the boundaries and get noticed as a store," says Robertson but things are a lot more pared down and more sophisticated nowadays. "We try to employ younger designers to try to stay relevant and we love working with the start-up brands that approach us. If need be, we offer assistance by producing for them, financing their production, or offering attractive payment terms.



'Often a brilliant and fresh concept will come from someone who is not in the clothing business at all but wishes to be, or just want to see his or her idea 'out there'. Big Blue also offers an annual T-shirt design competition with more than 1200 designs entered in 2013."

For Holmes, moving some of its retail focus to the online space is critical to expansion, and a new development is an introduction of a kiddies range. "We did our research and there really seemed to be a gap for cheeky Tees for kids - if the parents are loving our T-shirts, it stands to good reason that they'll want their kids in them too."

While international 'bling name brands' are certainly gaining foothold in South Africa, it seems the desire to keep things real by referencing our roots, unique sense of humour and turns of phrase remains a constant and thousands of South Africans are able to do this on a daily basis, simply by slipping a T-shirt over their heads.

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