When technology alone is not enough

Singapore firms need to focus more on design and branding issues: US expert

DENYSE YEO

When it comes to technology, Singapore firms are up there with the best. But when the issue is about successful marketing, local companies seem to face two main challenges — design concerns and branding problems.

That's the opinion of one eminent American marketing academic seeing it "from the outside".

"Singapore firms have the technology but... it looks like sometimes there's a design issue," said Dr Thomas S Robertson, 62, professor of marketing at Emory University's Goizueta Business School, referring to local products which compete somewhat unsuccessfully with the iPod, Apple's iconic digital music player.

The second issue Singapore firms need to tackle, Dr Robertson said, is that of branding.

"Singapore hasn't invested enough to create world brands and so, if you think about Singapore brands, you think about Singapore Airlines, which is a brilliant brand, and Tiger Beer.

"But you can't really think of many other (Singapore) brands that have world recognition," said Dr Robertson, who was in town last week to deliver a lecture as part of the Singapore Management University's (SMU) Presidential Distinguished Lecturer Series.

Dr Robertson, who is also responsible for the American university's international strategy, told TODAY that the three local universities' business schools are, in fact, "on the right path" in developing their brand names "on a worldwide basis".

International recognition, he said, is a "major challenge and opportunity and I think this is what (the three schools) are doing".

"The challenge would be: Can you put these schools on the world stage?" he said, pointing also to how world-renowned players such as the University of Chicago's Wharton Business School and France's Insead are now competing with the local universities on their home turf.

"It takes a lot of investment and you have to think internationally. It's about realising (you need to) compete in a very, very elite and expensive international game. There are thousands of business schools in the world but only a hundred that really matter, and you want to be one of that hundred."

The acceptance of innovation is particularly important with the Singapore economy, which is "very much tied to" innovation, new products and leading-edge technologies, such as biotechnology and new digital media.

Most new products in the marketplace fail, even though there is usually nothing wrong with the technology. That's because "when it comes to marketing, you're never going to succeed in innovation if you're just chasing other companies or benchmarking yourself", Dr Robertson said.

In his lecture, he recommended several strategies for companies to speed up the launch of new products and services, including pursuing early mover advantages, engaging in alliances, understanding who the most influential players in the market are, and successfully managing the market penetration process.

Using the example of legendary football player Pele, Dr Robertson said: "You have to be on the offensive and you have to be out in front.

"Most innovations are going to fail, and you have to be ready for that. You have to learn from failure, move to alternative technologies or learn how to change that technology."

The writer is a freelance journalist.