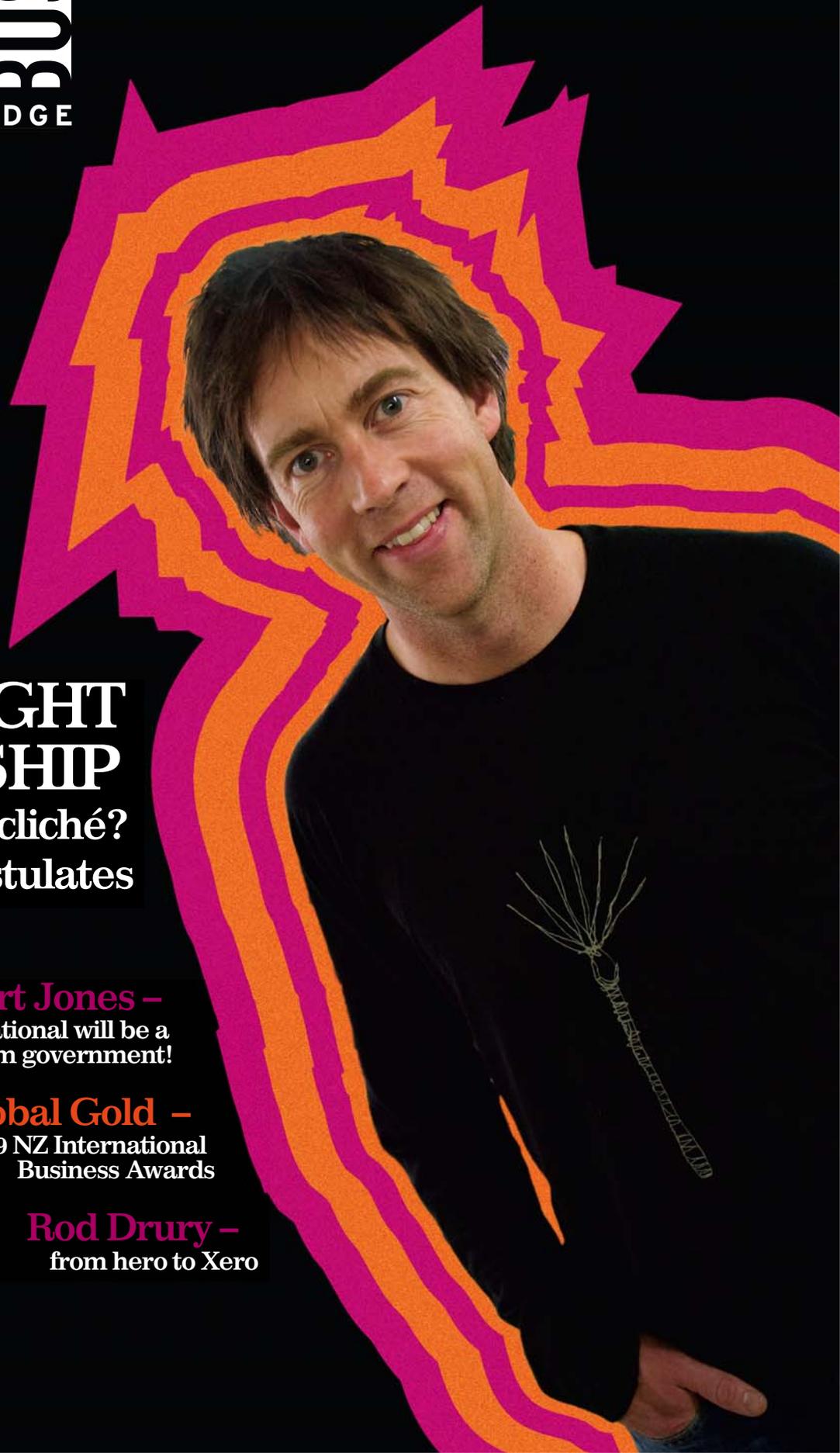


IN BUSINESS

INTERNATIONAL EDGE



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The world's local bank



**THOUGHTS
FROM THE
ICE CHAIR**

IN-BUSINESS WANTED TO EXAMINE THE IDEA OF 'THOUGHT LEADERSHIP': THOSE PEOPLE IN BUSINESS WHO HAVE THE IDEA FIRST AND THEN PUT THEIR NECKS ON THE LINE TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.

THE TERM HAS BEEN GAINING TRACTION IN BUSINESS CIRCLES, BUT IS IT BONA-FIDE OR BUZZWORD?

KATIE FOLEY ASKED **JEREMY MOON**, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF OUTDOOR CLOTHING COMPANY ICEBREAKER, FOR HIS DEFINITION.



Photos: Jessica Moorhead

two former ministers of finance, a corporate strategist, an economist and a CEO walk into a boardroom.

Jeremy Moon says to Don Brash, "Don, I hope you realise what you are doing, I don't know anything about this stuff."

And Don goes, "Yeah well that's why we want you, because you might be able to bring some fresh ideas."

Fresh Ideas. For something that sounds reasonably straight forward they seem to be increasingly rare, so much of modern day business strategy is regurgitated, rehashed or reworked.

Icebreaker CEO Jeremy Moon was chosen by Brash as one of the five member 2025 taskforce and then charged with the task of recommending ways to close the productivity and pay gap between New Zealand and Australia.

Despite being unsure if he was quite the right man for the job, his track record with Kiwi success story Icebreaker says otherwise.

In 1994 as a 24 year old marketing graduate, he met Brian and Fiona Brakenridge, merino farmers who had a small niche outdoor clothing company called Icebreakers.

They sold their merino outdoor clothing out of a Blenheim store and through their Pohuenui lodge.

The product had won the favour of Peter Blake who, as legend has it, wore the same pair of Icebreakers underwear for 40 days on the Jules Verne round the world race.

Moon recalls that first meeting with the Brakenridges with a rush of adjectives.

"I met a merino farmer and he gave me a top that I fell in love with because it felt so beautiful and it worked so well and it didn't hold odour and it was warmer than synthetics and it breathed better and it was natural and it was made from merino wool.

"And I thought if other people can love this experience like I am then I've got the beginnings of a business."

Inspired, he bought half the company and in the intervening 15 years, with the help of a team who are thought leaders in their own right, grew a business which this year will do over \$120 million in sales.

As the brand identity was refined they dropped the 's' off the end of Icebreakers. The brand acquired a slick

logo and clever positioning.

Moon understands every facet, every nuance of that brand as if it was a family member.

He has never dubbed himself a 'thought leader' but all logical interpretations of the phrase say he is.

The term itself isn't used enough to be cliché but it's easy to put it under the 'buzzword' umbrella but as Moon says, it is not having lots of thoughts which gets you places in the business world, that merely makes you a "dreamer".

The textbooks will tell you that thought leaders are individuals in business who lead their fields through a combination of innovative ideas, hard work and sheer force of will.

But what does thought leadership mean in real terms? When applied to the leaders the expression strives to define, the meaning is liquid and malleable.

With Jeremy Moon we get a true insight into what it means to have your head above of the crowd.

I have heard Moon described as "wide eyed and tousle haired" and his business as having the feel of a "gigantic student party", but the reality is somewhat different.

On a nondescript Monday afternoon the airy open plan office is quietly productive. Moon shares a smile and an in-joke with the staff that wander in while we talk.

He has been in back to back meetings all afternoon and is taking lingering glances out the window.

He tells me that at morning tea that day he gathered together 80 staff and talked for 40 minutes about what is possible for Icebreaker in 2012.

"You can go to any person on any of these three floors and ask them what is possible and what Icebreaker is doing and they will tell you.

"I say 'this is possible' and I ask them how they are going to contribute to it."

This is Jeremy Moon: entrepreneur, strategist, thought leader.

His style is open and frank. There is no place for false modesty for the man who built that small start up into a multinational giant.

He worked 70 and 80 hour weeks for those first five years but can't recollect on ever missing out on a social life.

"When I started my work was my whole life, I remember driving home one night and looking at a full



“I don’t care if they are designers or accountants, every human being is creative, and when you unlock creativity in the business that is what propels the business forward and creates energy and defines the culture of the business.”



moon and thinking ‘wow I’ve just done a 20 hour day.’”

His life echoed the passion of the outdoor enthusiasts he made clothes for.

“My challenge was almost to see how far I could push myself and I was like people that run ultra marathons,” he says.

To Moon thought leadership is an everyday occurrence, he has just never stopped to reflect and put that particular name on it. Icebreaker lives it, breathes it.

“I am a thought leader, I didn’t know I was but that is part of the identity of icebreaker.

“I’ve never used the term before but you know my job as CEO is to create a future for the business and then find the people to make that possible, so it [thought leadership] is my job.”

To Moon thought leadership is both a personal attribute and a job description.

A great CEO has to be a thought leader and in addition they need to be able to find the people that can build plans to shift the business from A to B, he says.

“If you’ve got lots of thoughts well that’s called being a dreamer so there is nothing wrong with being a dreamer but if you want to be successful you need to find people that can execute and support you.”

In those early days Moon describes his management style as fire fighting. It has evolved, thankfully into something more refined.

“My style was to frantically do everything myself, it was just me and then secondly I learnt how to chaotically get people to do stuff for me.

“But now my style of leadership is to create a shared future and ask people to contribute to that.”

As individuals in the organisation learn the ropes of their crafts, thought leadership progresses, becomes a shared responsibility.

moon knows thought leadership is not the exclusive territory of the CEO.

He is not bashful about poaching the best minds in the industry. His team is tight, more like family than colleagues.

Finding the “fun, cool, onto it, passionate” people that join icebreaker is a massive undertaking.

“My job within icebreaker over the last two years has been to find the strongest leaders I can find within or outside the business to run the business and my job is just to coordinate and direct that leadership,” he says.

“It is totally the biggest challenge. The Biggest.”

Moons team includes ex high ranking executives from some of the company’s biggest competitors: Adidas, Nike and The North Face.

Tony Balfour had held the general managers position at Nike’s Asia Pacific, Indian, Southeast Asian, New Zealand and Australian operations.

He left in early January to fulfil the position of General Manager of markets at Icebreaker.

The team also includes people like New Zealand Market General Manager Lisa Thompson, a mum who works three days a week.

Moon doesn’t care the hours they work, he trusts their judgment.

“Someone like Lisa who I trust and know, who is more like a sister or someone like Tony who has achieved incredible things in his career and can bring so much experience, you get those people together and it’s incredible what you can achieve.”

With all this talent in house, Icebreaker helps to extend the definition of thought leadership to include both the individual and the company.

Icebreaker are leaders in their industry, it is those fresh ideas and the way they brand them which gives

them their competitive advantage.

Understandably, Moon is extremely fussy about who comes into the business.

"I deeply trust not just the judgement but the integrity of the people that I work with," he says.

"I feel that way about every single person otherwise they leave, they have to."

Every one of Icebreaker's 12 strong core leadership team are handpicked to help recreate the company's culture and values in all of their offices, both in New Zealand and overseas.

The next challenge for Icebreaker and one that has stymied many others along the way is how to retain their identity as the company grows.

Moon expects the company to do \$200 million worth of sales in 2012, but worries about how the company will look when it gets there.

"The thing that scares me is getting big for the sake of getting big and compromising what is special about icebreaker, he says."

"The Icebreaker culture is what happens when you get large group of likeminded and creative people together in one space. That's 'creative' in the broader sense of the word.

"I don't care if they are designers or accountants, every human being is creative and when you unlock creativity in the business that is what propels the business forward and creates energy and defines the culture of the business," Moon says.

the recession has officially replaced the weather as the prime small talk conversation starter, but Moon doesn't play ball.

He won't be drawn into a conversation lamenting the state of the economy, other than to say that Icebreaker just isn't interested.

That kind of wallowing goes against the grain of the culture at this company.

"No, no I am not interested in the economy, we don't do any stuff about the economy, we try to influence things not be influenced by things."

In the midst of an economic crisis only those in the know saw coming, Icebreaker has long been positioned to take advantage of the pendulum shift in consumer attitudes to the environment and selective spending based on environmental criteria.

It shows thought leadership involves the art of being proactive, or as Moon puts it "actively creating the future".

"Not thinking about what might happen, not wondering about it but making decisions about the future and making it real by putting resources and strategy and people behind it."

It also helps that Moon is skilled in the art of telling it like it is.

"The recession is a crisis in consumption, people want less shit and fewer things that do more and that is what our product is designed to do."

The company has been steered into an enviable market position, their model of sustainability and transparency was in place when most other businesses were just waking up to the green revival.

Their business model balances ecology and economy,



“If you've got lots of thoughts, well that's called being a dreamer. So there is nothing wrong with being a dreamer, but if you want to be successful you need to find people that can execute and support you.”

“I don’t see evidence of that. I think it’s all bullshit, that tall poppy thing.”



or resources and the need to build profitable business.

But it isn’t just a marketing strategy, it is genuine.

“Our objective is to have profitable sustainability, we’re not profitable if the business dies and if we are not sustainable or approaching or heading in a more and more sustainable way then we are not making the improvements we need to make within the business to be true leaders.”

you know you have made it when Harvard Business School comes knocking – they have done two case studies on Icebreaker.

Moon’s interaction with students at Harvard and at Otago University, where he is on the board of the business school, tells him that thought leadership is not only an innate skill, but can be taught.

However, a deeply enquiring mind and an agitation around what is currently happening are prerequisites.

“I mean if you are happy with the status quo then you stop thinking cos it is about actively craving the future,” he says.

In addition to his work with students, Moon chairs the better by design group, run through New Zealand Trade and Enterprise.

They work with 130 businesses which cumulatively contribute \$4 billion to the NZ economy.

Moon uses it as an outlet to use what he has learnt about innovation, creativity and design when building international brands out of New Zealand.

Icebreaker is committed to a three year innovation plan which launches one to two major innovations every season twice a year.

Next year they will enter the running market, which is distinct from the outdoor market.

Moon is in his element overseeing the creation of products within that niche which are consistent with the brand identity.

“Thought leadership is about continuing innovation and you do that through keeping your brand identity fresh and relevant, and finding new market measures to develop,” he says.

some nameless, faceless academic has coined the term ‘thought leadership’ in their mahogany office. It’s the kind of phrase popular with professors of management and motivational speakers.

But it is important to look past the narrow definition of a thought leader being only a business person at the top of their game.

You can extend its breadth and scope to include individuals of both high and low status, those at the top of their game and those picking themselves up again, people in all facets of their work and personal lives, not just in business.

Moon cites a variety of international business and political figures as thought leaders he admires.

“Steve Jobs from Apple, Richard Branson because he finds new niches and finds new ways to develop businesses around them and finds people to do it.

“Barack Obama, he is a thought leader about what is possible for the United States and is redefining the identity of that nation in terms of what that country means internationally.”

Thought leadership transcends the boundaries of business and moves into life, the sciences, and humanities. “Scientists, mothers, someone that makes a stand for what is possible in the future and finds a new way to do it,” Moon says.

He doesn’t subscribe to the widely held opinion that New Zealanders will knock thought leaders and tall poppies down.

“I don’t see evidence of that. I think it’s all bullshit, that tall poppy thing, I guess people are talking from 20 years ago so I don’t see it.”

Moon says seeing a company like Icebreaker in every New Zealand industry isn’t a matter of time, but of inspiration.

“There will be an Icebreaker in every New Zealand industry if there is someone inspired to build an entrepreneurial company.

“They can do what we have done with Icebreaker with food, or wine, or bed linen, breakfast cereal or whatever.”