

MĀORI BRANDING IN NEW ZEALAND'S FOOD AND FIBRE INDUSTRY

This article looks into indigenous branding in New Zealand's food and fibre industry, which plays a crucial role in the nation's economy, providing a wealth of opportunities for rural practitioners. However, in an increasingly globalised marketplace, the need for unique identity and differentiation has never been more important.

Indigenous branding

Indigenous branding, particularly the integration of Māori culture and values, is emerging as a key strategy for enhancing the market appeal of New Zealand products. By incorporating narratives, symbols and traditional practices, growers and producers not only tap into the deep cultural heritage of Aotearoa but also cater to a growing international demand for ethically produced and culturally authentic goods.

Māori concepts such as kaitiakitanga (guardianship of the land) and whakapapa (genealogy and connection to the land) resonate strongly with consumers who value sustainability, authenticity and traceability in the products they buy.

For rural practitioners, leveraging indigenous branding is more than just a marketing strategy – it's a means of preserving cultural identity, promoting environmental stewardship and adding value to their produce. As global markets shift toward greater demand for authenticity and sustainability, embracing indigenous branding offers a competitive advantage that aligns with both Māori values and consumer expectations. Yet this alignment represents a challenging task.

Branding is an increasingly important part of horticultural marketing in Aotearoa, with the likes of Zespri and various other licensed varieties leading the charge. Māori branding of horticultural products, on the other hand, remains a relatively new concept. Marketing is about long-term relationships, satisfying consumer needs and wants, and offering a unique product through a strong brand.

However, incorporating indigenous elements into a brand without proper thought and cultural appropriation is a step in the wrong direction.

Carving from pātaka kai – a traditional Māori food pantry



Figure 1: Benefits to a brand respectfully integrating Māori cultural elements

Māori cultural elements, with their rich heritage and profound symbolism, provide a distinctive aesthetic and cultural depth that can benefit a brand's identity. For horticultural and other food products, the connection to core Māori values like kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga (hospitality) is particularly strong.

Incorporating unique indigenous elements into your horticultural brand may allow you to build a strong connection with your target audience and strengthen your brand identity. However, a deep respect for Māori culture is vital to doing this well, as is the alignment between organisational culture, brand mission and values.

The Treaty of Waitangi (Article II) stipulates protection for Māori cultural rights by stating: 'The Crown guarantees Māori the unrestricted exercise of their chieftainship over their lands, villages, and all their property and treasures.'

It should be noted that using Māori cultural elements (including Māori words and designs, native flora and fauna, and Māori music and dance) in branding and marketing without proper context or consultation can result in cultural appropriation and offence to Māori and Māori communities. From a marketing perspective, the misuse of these taonga (treasures) may lead to significant brand damage, which has already been observed in other sectors.

Respectful integration of Māori cultural elements into branding

Māori symbolism is deeply connected to the land, people and stories of Aotearoa. This includes arts like carving (whakairo), weaving (raranga) and tattoo (tā moko), each with its own symbols and meanings intertwined with nature, spirituality and community. When understood and integrated respectfully, both the brand *and* Māori people benefit (see Figure 1).

The storytelling aspect adds layers of meaning and history to your brand, fostering a deeper connection and level of community engagement with your audience.

Māori branding of horticultural products remains a relatively new concept.

Table 1: Best practice advice

Using a Māori geographical or cultural element	Consultation with local Māori is key. Depending on the geographical location, it is important to hold discussions with iwi, marae or hapū. The internet and other government databases can provide a starting point. However, building relationships kanohi-ki-te-kanohi (face-to-face) is the best approach when it comes to creating and maintaining authentic long-term relationships. Whakapapa (or genealogy) should also be considered and appreciated when using cultural elements, which varies between iwi.
Recognising inappropriate association	Caution is required to ensure that Māori elements are not associated with products or services that devalue the culture (e.g. the use of rangatira (Māori chiefs) on alcohol products). Be careful to respect and uphold mauri (the relationships amongst all beings) and tapu (sacredness) in branding.
Translating English words into Te Reo Māori	Translation also requires caution. Some Māori words and concepts cannot be directly translated into other languages as they lose a layer of meaning, and some words are too sacred to be used. As above, the use of rangatira names is a no-go for Māori, particularly (but not exclusively) on food and beverage products. Even when words are not deemed to be offensive to Māori, they still may not be registrable as trade marks, which has the potential to cause harm to your brand.
Registering with the Intellectual Property Office	The Intellectual Property Office – Māori Trade Marks Advisory Committee is part of the intellectual property registration process and provides advice on whether the proposed use of a trade mark application is offensive to Māori. However, approval at this stage doesn't guarantee public and social acceptance, so this should be undertaken in parallel.

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**Indigenous branding
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Taha Beverage's
 kawakawa, manuka and
 ginger sparkling tonic



Māori design elements can set your brand apart with their distinctive pattern. Combined, these elements can be incorporated into various aspects of your brand, from logos and packaging to website design and promotional materials. But they must be done in a way that makes sense to your business and uplifts Māori culture.

Best practice advice

Some best practices to integrate indigenous elements into your brand are outlined in **Table 1**.

Consulting iwi

Rural practitioners who are considering consulting iwi need to think about the following key steps to build meaningful and long-term relationships with them:

- First, regarding iwi consultation, as Māori culture is deeply tied to land and place (whenua) cultural elements must be used with care. Identifying the relevant iwi connected to the land where your product is grown, and using resources like Māori Maps or local government contacts, is the first step
- Second, if you are reaching out, do so early and clearly express your intentions for incorporating Māori cultural elements into your brand. In-person meetings (kanohi-ki-te-kanohi) are ideal for building trust. Engaging with kaumātua (elders) is helpful for the consultation process and to ensure protocols are followed correctly

- Third, respect for traditional customs and being open to feedback from iwi on how their culture is represented is the key to success. Consultation is not a one-off situation – maintaining ongoing relationships and providing updates fosters mutual respect
- Fourth, you may want to offer benefits or support to the iwi, such as collaborating on local initiatives, to demonstrate your commitment to building an authentic long-term partnership. This approach will ensure your brand aligns with Māori values and enhances cultural integrity.

Successful indigenous branding examples

The following are some successful indigenous branding examples in the food and fibre sector:

Taha Beverages

Taha is a Māori and Fijian-owned beverage enterprise, which was created as an inter-generational business. Taha produces a non-alcoholic beverage that is infused with a mix of traditional Māori and Asian ingredients, such as, mānuka honey, kawakawa and ginger. Taha's brand highlights Māori cultural values and New Zealand's unique natural resources by incorporating native botanicals that have been traditionally used by Māori as rongoā (healing practices). The kawakawa is hand harvested by the owners from the native forests of New Zealand.

A brand can go beyond aesthetics by aligning with Māori principles like kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga.

Taha emphasises Māori concepts like kaitiakitanga by sustainably sourcing ingredients and focusing on environmental care. The company name, Taha, reflects the idea of balance, health and natural strength – key components of Māori wellness philosophies.

The use of mānuka honey and kawakawa also connects the product to Māori heritage, offering a unique story and strong cultural resonance to both local and international consumers. This helps the brand stand out in the competitive beverage market while authentically representing Māori culture.

By aligning their branding with Māori traditions and philosophies, Taha Beverages demonstrates how indigenous branding can add value, build strong consumer connections and promote sustainability in New Zealand's food and fibre industry.

Kai Ora Honey

Kai Ora Honey is an example of the successful integration of indigenous branding and product authenticity is part of the brand's success. As a mānuka honey product, it is marketed in the health and wellness segment. The brand name and brand story are well aligned with Māori culture and values: 'Kai Ora' translates as food for our wellbeing – an appropriate name for product with health benefits.

As a brand value, Kai Ora stands for kaitiakitanga and whenua, while being economically successful. The Kai Ora brand demonstrates how land and people flourish together, a core Te Ao Māori concept, as well as family values that have been passed down through generations.

Māori Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated

Another successful horticultural example is Māori Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated (MKGI) and its collaborative marketing partnership with Zespri. Through the kiwifruit regulations, MKGI gained approval to export trays of kiwifruit to Hawaii, a culturally significant market due to ancestral and migration ties.

Its brand logo, takarangi (intersecting double spiral), recognises the whakapapa of Māori kiwifruit growers and the continued drive to innovate into the future. For the market launch in Hawaii earlier this year, MKGI integrated the story of the amokura (red-tailed tropic bird) into their branding and communication. The connection built through shared whakapapa and stories is key to the success of this Māori brand and organisation.



Māori Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated's instore promotion in Hawaii

Conclusion

Beyond the visual aspects of branding, collaboration with Māori communities in meaningful ways, such as fostering relationships, respecting tikanga (customs) and promoting Māori-led initiatives, creates deeper and long-lasting connections.

A brand can go beyond aesthetics by aligning with Māori principles like kaitiakitanga and manaakitanga, demonstrating your commitment to environmental sustainability and community wellbeing. True engagement with Māori culture means trying to understand and honour the significance of these elements, not just for marketing purposes but to support the wider Māori community and preserve their heritage.

Māori cultural elements are one way that your brand may seek to engage with the rich tapestry of Māori stories and traditions, but it is not the only way. Respectfully incorporating Māori cultural elements can showcase your brand's commitment to cultural appreciation and inclusivity, while also strengthening ties with and upholding the values of Māori. Waiho i te toipoto, kau i te toiroa. Let us keep close together, not wide apart.

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