aza group
brand
identity

Rebranding the largest non-bank currency provider in Africa

by Wunderdogs
African Tech Boom

Described as the “Backbone of the Tech Ecosystem” Africa’s Tech Hubs are on the rise, growing 40% in 2019 alone. Nairobi’s “Silicon Savannah” is home to more than 200 start-ups as well as tech stalwarts IBM, Intel, and Microsoft.

Africa’s tech development has been boosted by venture funds, development finance, corporate involvement, as well as ever-growing innovative communities. In the context of this rapid expansion the question becomes: how do you build modern African tech brands that showcase local and pan-African culture whilst appealing to Western counterparts?
Our client BitPesa, now called — Aza — was one of the early tech startups in Silicon Savannah, founded in 2013. An international fintech company with a strong African heritage — the company made facilitating the flow of currency into Africa its mission from the outset. Simply put, it helps foreign businesses transfer money into Africa: and African businesses transfer money out of the continent, bypassing the US Dollar intermediary currency.
How do you create a brand that honours its sub-Saharan roots, appeals to all countries in the continent and resonates with global clients and investors?

We were on-boarded to redevelop Bitpesa’s Brand Architecture, Positioning, Name and Visual Identity in preparation for their expansion into new sectors.

Originally founded as a Blockchain company in 2013 the business had expanded its offering since, diversifying their product portfolio in order to leverage the opportunities within frontier markets. A name and logo that conveyed Blockchain exclusivity was restricting the Fintech’s ability to promote their more recent non-crypto offerings.

The business operated within a unique pan-African context, paying close attention to its on-the-ground presence within each country where they operate. As a local and global enterprise the question we sought to answer was:
As a global business with roots in Africa BitPesa was deeply committed to elevating and enhancing the geographies in which it operates. With a policy for hiring locals over expats and the majority of business done within the continent it was important the new identity was adopted by employees, understood by partners and appreciated by customers across Africa.

With this in mind the identity had to be geographically agnostic. An agnostic brand was just as important in attracting a third set of stakeholders: global investors and partners. We wanted to create an identity that reflected and celebrated the wide-reaching impact technology had on the continent, enticing those in Europe and the US to realise and leverage potential within the region.

The Complexity
As a remote but US-centric agency we prioritised local research, knowing on the ground findings would be invaluable before creating a new mother brand for Bitpesa.

Our trusted research arm in Lagos provided extensive local, regional and continental insights which formed the foundational framework for our strategic and creative efforts.
Our brief was to create a global brand that celebrates Africa as a continent of digital natives, a brand removed from the overhyped world of crypto.

We began by looking for a common thread to form the basis of our strategic platform. What could we identify as a key theme between business, product and audience? Following extensive research in Lagos, San Francisco and London we arrived at growth as the common denominator.

Creative Process
The architecture, positioning, brand name and identity were revisited with the company’s mission front and centre: providing access to and accelerating growth in the frontier markets.

From this repositioning a single mother-brand emerged acting as an ecosystem within which individual products – BitPesa, Transfer Zero and BFX – are separated by function but linked through values and goals.
Following multiple workshops and semantic exploration we arrived at a name for the new mother brand: Aza, confirming its suitability by testing with employees across multiple regions before signing off.

Aza was selected as an embodiment of the business and the continent in which it is based. Aza is a female name used across Africa. A subtle yet powerful nod to the leadership team within the business and the matriarchal power structures of Africa. It’s meaning varies across languages, yet from Yoruba to Swahili it represents power, strength and honesty.

The length and lettering of the name allow it to be easily pronounced across the world. The A-Z-A structure is a representation of the variety and depth of services the business offers, they literally and metaphorically go from A to Z and back again. The simple structure and pronunciation allow the business to easily expand into new markets (such as Asia) without having to localise the brand.
As a simplistic and global representation of a nation the flag in Aza’s logo amplifies their mission. It is used as a vehicle to emphasise the brand’s commitment to providing access to new markets. In developing the logo we were attempting to answer a question: “What would a flag for these markets look like?” By combining the patterns and colors found on flags across the continent we arrived at a symbol of accessibility, unity and collaboration.

A flag was also chosen to honour African heritage. A nod to the famous and widely admired textiles which have been used as a major form of African expression for centuries.

The theme of growth is further explored in the graphic language of the identity. With arrows and dynamic elements used to emphasise commerce and opportunities.
Selecting distinctly African colors whilst avoiding an obvious similarity with one of the 56 national flags on the continent meant palette choice was one of our biggest challenges. To overcome this hurdle we turned to African textiles and Aza’s industry for visual inspiration.

After experimenting with a number of color combinations we arrived at a palette that showcases Africa’s heritage as well as its techno-centric future. Blue was chosen as a widely accepted representation of the fintech space, with greens and orange an obvious tie to the continent as a whole.
To further emphasise local heritage we employed additional graphic treatments:

- **Patterns**: developed from various logo sections these reinforce associations with African textiles and local industry.
- **“Aza” repetition**: repetitive typography creates a unique yet local ‘texture’, adding to the decorative look & feel.
- **Imagery**: curated and retouched the imagery used to represent local landscapes. Techy colorful textures have been sourced to reflect Aza’s authentic nature and innovative character.
Individual product logos were developed for each of Aza’s offerings (TransferZero, BitPesa, BFX) by extracting and amplifying geometric sections of the mother-brand – a visual representation of versatility.
Brand Applications

The identity is proudly displayed across Aza and its sub-brands: the landing page, microsites, advertisements, printed materials, billboards, conference booths, merchandise, internal and external collateral.
How Aza Works

Sending payments in and out of Africa has always been a difficult process. Traditional financial processes involve converting local currency into US dollars, passing it through multiple banks, and then converting it back into its destination currency.

Aza accepts money from your bank account and moves it directly to your destination account. It cuts out all the middlemen, saves on conversion and transfer fees, and can be done in just a few clicks.
Africa is rarely mentioned among the largest markets for cryptocurrencies and blockchain, but this is set to change in the near future.
Mission
To develop innovative financial infrastructure to scale businesses in frontier markets by removing friction, improving efficiency, and supporting digital interoperability.

Vision
To accelerate the growth of businesses in frontier markets.
Armed with an updated brand architecture, strategic and visual tool kit BitPesa evolved into Aza, successfully securing **$15M from Development Bank of Southern Africa to aid its global expansion.**

We recently caught up with Aza’s CEO Elizabeth on her return from speaking at Davos World Economic Forum. Aza brand’s longevity and reach was confirmed when she mentioned how well the brand has been received on recent trips to Asia, as well as by the company’s investors and partners in Europe.

The key learning from the Aza rebranding was authenticity triumphs trend. There is little to be gained from an African-tech company mimicking Western brand standards, and everything to be won by developing a brand that truly embodies the culture within which it operates. Whether in the B2B or B2C space genuine authenticity will be felt and appreciated across all geographies. It’s time for us as Creatives to turn to brand heritage to answer the all important question: what makes us truly unique?