

If you want to succeed, get into the trenches. Now!

In the army, there is a saying: "you must earn your stripes", which refers to the fact that you will not simply be promoted. You have to demonstrate that you are deserving of a higher rank.

 By [Rolf Akermann](#) 11 Jun 2015

A General in the military has his left chest covered with colorful stripes and medals. This shows how many battles/tours of duty he has done, amongst others. You need to have been in the "trenches" where you were shot at, ate and sh*t, to understand the playing field. Without this first-hand knowledge, you would be handicapped in leading others into battle. The same principle applies to marketing/advertising.

Do you really know the market?

A number of years ago, a Marketing Director of a FMCG group briefed their incumbent agency to come up with a proposal for launching one of their SA brands into Botswana. The agency came with all the bells and whistles, and the heavyweight: MD, Creative Director, Art Director, Copy Writer and Client Service.

After an enthusiastic presentation, the Marketing Director only asked them one question: "Will those who have actually been to Botswana please put up your hand". The "General" asked the question as he had been in the "trenches" in Botswana many times and therefore knew what would work and what would not. Not one of the team had ever been to Botswana. He requested them to go and experience the retail environment, then come back and re-look what they had presented. He even said his company will pay for their trip. They went, they saw, they changed their presentation and launched the product successfully.

Google is not the solution

With the abundance of information and insights available on the internet, it is easy to get stuck behind a computer in an air conditioned office with a great view. Unfortunately, reading up on what a Shebeen, Tavern, Shisa Nyama and Spaza shop will not give you the insights you require. You need to get out there! This does not mean a visit to your nearby township Soweto, Alex or Gugs.

There are many different types of these truly African establishments. A Spaza shop in Boghom in the far north, is vastly different to those found in townships in cities. The same goes for the other establishments. Even a Spar in the most northern part of KZN is vastly different to what we experience in the cities. I can already hear the cry "we do not have the time". In experience, make the time. Accompany a sales person of your client to the outlying areas and learn. This also shows the client that you are their ally in this "battle".

Who should go into the trenches?

Essentially, all those involved in creating something for a client. Client Service, Strategist, Creative Director, ATL and BTL Creatives. I have found the investment in their time is well worth it. Having first hand experience makes their tasks so much easier, and saves the company in the long run as they get it right so much quicker. Most importantly, you have a happier client. Good luck in the "trenches"!

If you need a "General" with lots of colourful stripes on his chest (gathered over many years in the "trenches") to assist you in developing the right strategy, give me a call.

ABOUT ROLF AKERMANN

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