

Unearthing the true 'kasi truths'

 By Leigh Andrews

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If you're targeting a generic 'black middle class' without properly interpreting the meaning behind the insights you're using in your brand communication, you'll fall just as far short of actually resonating with your intended audience as those who use the 'Africa as a country' mindset. Here's why.

“A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work like it used to before, because a guy from Soweto has different needs to a guy in Khayelitsha.” That's the wisdom of Thando Makhathini (MD) and Thato Tshabalala (ECD) from township-born advertising agency Monkey Concepts Advertising. They form part of Joe Public United's youth enterprise development programme, which is a formal agreement where Joe Public gives the agency room to grow and be groomed by them, to learn at Joe Public by accessing their work and bounce ideas off of Joe Public's resources, but best of all, to work off and with their clients.



Makhathini and Tshabalala

That's because Monkey Concepts Advertising has pinned down the identity of the 'black middle class' in South Africa – but don't expect a one-pager with clear demographics. Instead, Makhathini explains it's a tricky concept as it's changing so quickly. In fact, it reminds him of the Chinese proverb: “If you understand everything, you must be misinformed.”

That said, they do have insights into the upwardly mobile, which has a growing number of entrants, but in South Africa that's uniquely dynamic as subsections suddenly pop up and then disappear. Many marketers and brands simply don't take the time to track what's really going on in the market, often with disastrous consequences by adopting a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, much like the 'Africa as a country' mindset.

Who is 'the black consumer?'

Those disastrous results speak for themselves, as the marketers that simply reach out to 'the black consumer' quickly see a lack of success. Creatives need to learn from this, says Makhathini – there are so many examples of when this didn't go right, but he says it's largely down to misinterpreting the insight and the demographic it represents, but the blame spreads across to the creative team and how they work various insights into the work they create. Taken together, this is why creatives and strategists need to work together to better interpret insights as well as how to talk to specific markets. Limit client chatter and focus on actual benefit to and values of the market.

This is why multinational corporations fail to make a splash in the South African market. They devise a strategy that gains traction in another African market, like Nigeria or Kenya, and then try to cut-and-paste the concept onto SA. Our country needs to be seen as a unique being, as it's a different landscape entirely. So repeating a tried-and-tested-in-other-markets message here will fail even if there's a proper business model behind it, as the insights are incorrect. Brands definitely need to be more sensitive to localisation, says Makhathini.

Taking this further, he says this ties into the most important aspect of building brand loyalty – genuine connection. We're all emotional beings on a personal level, and are no different in our business lives. Emotion is driven by communication, but before we can tap into certain emotions as brands to connect with our consumers, we need to remember that people usually have to love your brand before they buy your brand (grudge purchases aside). And brands are loved for various reasons. Nando's is loved for its humorous approach to situations while Nedbank is loved for tapping into the true aspirations of South Africans.

These are the fine lines of connection that get threaded into specific communication. Times have changed and features no longer sell products – today, it's all about resonance and staying top of mind with your audience can make or break your brand, especially as there's already so much 'clutter communication' for consumers to filter through.

The importance of proper insight application

Speaking of Joe Public's '[18+: Be the Mentor](#)' campaign for SAB, Makhathini says this approach again proved effective. Through proper insight application of the 'kasi truths' made clear in the research process, the campaign was able to better gain traction with its intended black market. Makhathini's careful to point out that the insight itself was pretty generic – the need to stop underage drinking. It's a persistent problem across the market, specifically targeted in the brief. In speaking to the specific subcategories, they took that general insight and brought across the concept in terms of how to communicate it with context. This boils down to the specific language used, the art direction and the imagery. It all ties together to generate a strong connection, which helped the creative team add context when [bringing the campaign to life](#):

Simple as that. There's no 'magic formula' to Monkey Concepts' research approach. They host focus groups and field studies that have proven effective for others – the difference lies in the specific insights gleaned from the research, and in taking these back to the creative teams, making sure the actual meaning isn't lost in translation.

At the end of the day it's not about the data, it's about the meaning associated with it, explains Makhathini.

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