

Transformation: a matter of trust

Significant milestones have been achieved in the past 10 years of working to transform the advertising profession and these should be celebrated. However, it is agreed that South Africans now understand that transformation is a multidimensional process. This is true not only for the advertising sector but for business in South Africa, generally.

 By Wayne Naidoo: @WNaidoo 9 Mar 2012

Getting the 'numbers' right in terms of equity is only but one step - nevertheless, it is one at which the advertising profession has done exceptionally well. Among the targets set out for the sector was a target for black management of 30% by 2009 and 50% by 2016. Employment equity for black employees was to reach 30% by 2009 and 60% by 2016.

Industry charter

This is according to the [Marketing, Advertising and Communication South Africa Charter](#) (MAC SA), that was gazetted on August 2008, under a section 12 application, meaning that the charter is recognised as best practice for the measurement of transformation in the sector.

The charter sets out targets for transformation in areas such as: ownership, management control, employment equity, skill development, preferential procurement, enterprise development and socio-economic development initiatives. These targets are, incidentally, more stringent than the generic scorecard set by the SA government.

The profession felt that the targets, albeit exceeding the expectations of government, were realistic and achievable, as well as a demonstration of how seriously it viewed transformation.

Current measurements

And this is how the advertising industry has measured up to those goals:

- The percentage of black employees in the profession has escalated from 23.3% in 1998 to 42.7% in 2010 - well on track to achieving our 2016 goal.
- The target for black management is already at 58.1 in 2010, surpassing our goals.
- Many of the biggest agencies in the country are headed up by black executives and there is a burgeoning of small agencies started by black entrepreneurs.

So, indeed, as a sector we have done exceptionally well. The advertising sector employs approximately 3500 people and contributes roughly R42billion to GDP annually.

The achievement of targets means that the profession is acting on its good intentions and policies to transform and continue to ensure that transformation is fully achieved.

But the numbers don't tell the whole story.

Social/political context

There is a social/political context to transformation and this is where many black professionals feel disenfranchised. It is an issue that requires attention and new, fresh solutions.

We recognise the power that this sector wields because it creates communication received by 47 million South Africans every second of every day. It is therefore imperative that the ideas conveyed to the people of SA through the work of advertising are relevant to and reflective of SA.

The advertising sector is unique in what we expect our professionals to bring to the table. It isn't just skill but also hearts, souls, imagination, culture, a sense of identity and a sense of social context. This is what creates great advertising. Divers should be a boon to the sector - something that all players embrace naturally.

Continue to feel alien

Yet it is acknowledged that black professionals continue to feel alien in what should be their 'homes'. Black talent and the creative perspective that they bring are sometimes undervalued while the eternal SA problem of companies offering up senior positions without parallel authority remains true for the advertising sector, as for many other economic sectors.

The role of multinational agencies that have major stakes in local advertising companies has also been raised as an issue some players.

Multinational companies - in any sector - by definition work all over the world and therefore abide by the laws of the country in which they operate. Therefore, they are expected to and do meet our BEE requirements.

SA back on the global map

Further, their investment does mean that the SA advertising community is back on the global map - especially with SA being a gateway into Africa. We must be clear that, in global terms, SA is not a big market - therefore multinationals are establishing a presence in SA because they are taking a long-term view on their investment.

Negotiating an equitable relationship between the demands of multinationals and the nurturing of the local advertising industry is a core challenge. However, this has more to do with meeting the standard of skills and talent demanded by multinationals as well as their business imperatives, rather than simply dismissing their role as being anti-transformation.

Moving forward, if we work from the premise that transformation is about people, then we must now recognise that this should include bridging demographics, cultures and - expectations.

Must win trust and commitment

We must win the trust of black professionals and the commitment of white-owned and multi-national agencies to implement change beyond the numbers reflected on scorecards. Forums - that allow for dialogue, that force the difficult conversation and that benchmark transformation in a multidimensional way, including engendering cultural shifts, attracting and retaining talent, educating the market and mutually committing to resolve the discomfort of black professionals, alongside accommodating the driving business imperatives of agencies - are imperative.

There is an inherent risk in change. However, the rewards for the advertising profession will be enormous, if we are able to get to the bottom of the stumbling blocks and to develop a new SA identity and a new core of advertising heroes - the kind that can keep SA in the awards. All of this can only be achieved through negotiation.

It could only be good for the future of the advertising sector in SA - a sector that is under significant pressure to be competitive internationally.

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Wayne Naidoo founded DUKE after leaving his CMO position at AFB (now JUMO), one of Africa's fastest growing consumer finance groups. Currently chairman of the ACA (Association of Communication and Advertising SA) and voted as 2019's runner up for 'Most Respected Agency Leader in Cape Town' by MarkLives. Former CEO of Lowe & Partners SA, former chairman of YPO (Young Presidents Organisation), previous chairman of the ACA and former director of the AAA School of Advertising. View my profile and articles...