

Sithembile Ntombela from Brand SA

 By [Beverley Klein](#)

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What kind of brand strategy do you need to market a country? Sithembile Ntombela is the general manager of marketing at Brand SA, an organisation committed to promoting patriotism and the beauty of South Africa to the rest of the world.



Ntombela lets us into her business world.

■ ***Explain your specific management strategy. How does it tie into your company's overall marketing/corporate communications?***

Ntombela: Our strategy seeks to deliver on a two-prong mandate 1) to market SA internationally as an investment destination 2) to contribute to social cohesion by promoting pride and patriotism. Both these strategic imperatives highly depend on telling an integrated brand story that will build brand image and reputation. In fulfilling this mandate Brand SA has to work with and through various stakeholders across business, government, civil society, general public and media. Our strategy focuses on the 20% scope of messaging that will deliver 80% perceptual impact taking into account the broad mandate that is supported by limited resources.

The need to craft a clear domestic programme that builds the characteristics and virtues of the South African country brand solidly at home in order to export it successfully internationally. Our strategy has to be responsive to changes in the environment, and to adapt rapidly to new realities with innovative solutions. In implementing the strategy we foster relationships with a range of stakeholders in order to identify synergies, coordinate the efforts of all and get the most impact from them.

Unlike entities making capital investments, for which detailed long-term plans can be made, Brand South Africa functions in

a dynamic context and must deal with a continuous flow of novel demands.

■ ***Is your brand using content as part of your marketing strategy?***

Ntombela: Marketing a country is quite complex as it's intangible, so yes content is king. I believe in an integrated approach when it comes to effective and efficient marketing strategies. Reputation is a component that one shapes to positively influence perceptions about our country. It makes it important that we educate stakeholders on brand reputation and competitiveness so they understand the road ahead as far as strategic positioning of South Africa is concerned.

Our messages are often delivered through dialogues rather than monologues, in smaller group sessions where stakeholders can play a part and contribute towards a positive narrative of our country and feel ownership in understanding that their little bit of good they do eventually impacts positively in building a competent and competitive South Africa.

■ ***What do you see currently as the main challenges and or opportunities for your brand sector?***

Ntombela: I guess an unstable political environment will always affect the nation brand reputation. The rand being weak also affects the competitiveness of this country. If one looks locally, we cannot be oblivious of brand disablers that are a challenge e.g. youth unemployment, crime, human rights, I could go on, we're not making an awful lot of progress against an awful lot of those challenges. So in a nutshell, that's the challenge that we all face today at this interesting point in history. What we've got to do next is to get our act together and figure out how to reduce the disabling factors and do more constructive things, as from this will be born a country that is sustainable in terms of economic performance.

■ ***Does your brand still see the value of TV, print and other mainstream media, explain.***

Ntombela: Marketing a country is slightly different to marketing a tangible product. If one considers that a nation brand is the sum total of a country's level of investment, tourism, governance, people, exports, culture and heritage one realises that one medium is not enough. Through television one is able to reach masses and arguably so is digital. Most countries promote their infrastructure, favourable tax structures, or other incentives in an effort to lure foreign investment. Some countries also promote their financial markets in an effort to increase their standing as a financial hub. We market brand programmes in targeted channels like CNN, CNBC and this allows our messages to reach potential investors.

In communicating to local audience, radio and social media becomes so relevant particularly when one considers that people spend hours and hours driving in traffic. Without a doubt print is still relevant, and often we pitch our stories to newspapers particularly when driving thought leadership agenda.

Word of mouth is also an influential medium. Ultimately it's all about creating a positive image for the country and an integrated approach goes a long way.

In summary: I am a firm believer in keeping the message simple, but deep in meaning. Messages that inspire are particularly important when you are sharing a significant accomplishment or introducing a new initiative that relates to your strategy. Whether you're looking to build optimism, change focus, instill curiosity, or prepare them for future decisions, you'll have more impact if you stir some emotion and create a lasting memory. Our people are doing this be it in sports, arts, fashion, music etc. Our role is to craft inspiring narrative that we disseminate to international markets in attempt to build a positive image for this country. Collectively these stories and conversations will be a strong influence on positive culture-building behaviour that relates to our core purpose and strategic goals.

■ ***What are the biggest obstacles to take up and planning of "new media" campaigns?***

Ntombela: Innovation as far as identifying relevant and influential channels to enable us to tell a South African story. Nation brand requires a different, strategic approach. There is a saying that says "facts and figures won't be remembered. Stories and experiences will". New media campaigns should be about telling a story and experience for it to be relevant. Stats (which are often overly used are not so much a driving force) they are simply reasons to believe. Communicate the

essence and back it up with reasons to believe.

▣ ***What do you love most about the South African consumer?***

Ntombela: South Africans are courageous, have the ability to somersault from a bad to a good motion, they are forgiving and most importantly they continue to inspire the world and this is true when one looks at the strides that have been accomplished by South Africans in movies, music, fashion and innovative solutions in the medical field.

▣ ***What inspires you, personally?***

Ntombela: Over and above my family. It is really seeing ordinary people doing great things.

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ABOUT BEVERLEY KLEIN

Beverley Klein is the editor of the Marketing Media South Africa section on Bizcommunity.com. With a background in journalism and historical studies, she's dived into the world of industry news, curating content, writing and interviewing thought leaders. She's often spotted in a forest on the weekend and rarely seen without a camera. Follow @BevCPT.

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