BIZCOMMUNITY

# A year of hard work for brands

By Janice Spark

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If 2010 could be summed up as soccer, vuvuzelas and national pride, 2011 will be all about the hard work of restoring the economy to sustainable growth, paying attention to environmental concerns and mastering the technologies that are changing the world. Here are a few trends to watch in 2011.




## 1. Conservatism and caution

A full recovery of the global economy remains elusive, and growth is stagnant or even declining in many major economies. For that reason, many investors and multinationals are looking for growth from Africa, with its underdeveloped infrastructure, young population, high interest rates in some countries, and fast-expanding middle-class.

Despite Africa's political and social challenges, expect massive interest in the continent's economies in the year to come.

## 2. The African Internet revolution - time to get naked?

Bandwidth is becoming cheaper and more abundant in South Africa and other parts of the continent, thanks to all the new submarine cables linking Africa to the rest of the world. That will create massive new opportunities for businesses and drive big changes in the way that consumers (the middle-class ones, at any rate) behave.

Video-streaming, music downloads and other attractions of the Web 2.0 world will become a South African, and African, reality. Companies will need to look at ways of integrating these more tightly into their branding, marketing and sales strategies.

## 3. Multi-level devices

Smartphones, gaming consoles, tablet computers - true technological convergence has become a reality as consumers embrace online devices that allow them to access a multitude of services, applications and entertainment products.

While innovations such as 3D TV will capture many imaginations, it's going to get harder and harder to tell the difference between the TV, the computer and the phone. Leveraging these channels to communicate with consumers will be a major challenge for marketers in the year to come.

## 4. Consumers are demanding - and defining - value

Consumers, shaken by the prolonged economic downturn, are seriously questioning their basic 'reason to buy'. Unlike a few years ago, if a clear reason doesn't exist, the sale may not happen. And where value does exist for the consumer, in 2011 it will be tightly defined.

Brands that clearly 'stand for something' will win over those with vague identities and those just riding on the latest trend wave. Those brands that facilitate personal connections and authentic, human communities are likely to stand out.

Today, consumers aren't just paying attention to word-of-mouth referrals; they're getting serious about them. That means every connection with a customer could impact a brand's relationship with several people in his or her social network.

## 5. Green concerns grow in importance

With growing concerns about South Africa's water and power supplies, there is a distinct possibility 2011 will see environmental sustainability becoming a major talking point for government and the private sector alike.

In this scenario, feel-good 'green washing' brand campaigns could well start to rub up against the reality of environmental decay and degradation, and come off second best.

To operate successfully in this kind of environment, local brands will need to throttle back on the green washing and focus as hard as possible on humble, demonstrably practical and committed community involvement projects.

## 6. Think virtual, local and communal

Members of South Africa's Culture Club use the Internet to share information about local events, experiences and happenings around Jozi (Johannesburg), and frequently get together as a group for photo opportunity tours, theatre visits and so forth. This is one example of how social media is connecting local communities in the real world.

This is a massive shift for brands that have become very used to one-way, one-size-fits-all mass media communication - one that will require a far more fragmented, nuanced and localised approach to engaging consumers.

## 7. Social media - can it possibly get more fashionable?

Both Cell C and Woolworths underestimated the power of social media in 2010. Cell C found a lot of people didn't appreciate being conned by a fake Trevor Noah YouTube post, while Woolworths received a quick social smack for ditching non-profitable Christian magazine titles, creating a tricky consumer context for the brand moving forward.

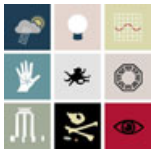
Combine these case studies with the real BP vs fake BP Twitter account debacle, and you have a South African business sector now taking social media very seriously. As it should, based on the evidence - social networks are already over-taking search engines as the biggest source of web traffic, for example.

In 2011 we can expect more advanced and complex (although not necessarily more illuminating) models to emerge from communications and brand agencies breaking down how and why to engage with consumers via social media. From bar graphs to flash movies and everywhere in-between, social media will be 2011's big brand trend.

## 8. Mobile on the move

And then, of course, there's mobile. As with social media, integration and convergence will be the real mobile watch words for brands over the next five years. The bottom line is that it's getting increasingly difficult (and pointless) to differentiate between mobile and Internet, between cellphones and computers, between a social media strategy and a mobile strategy. We're entering the era of ubiquitous connectivity - and that means that mobile is becoming a central part of the marketing mix. Watch this space!

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## ABOUT JANICE SPARK

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