

Advertising in the vernacular: global speak vs local is lekker?

The easy answer would perhaps be yes: when consumers watch, read or listen to a commercial they want the communication to be in their home language. The answer is not all that simple, however, and there is no magic formula...

By [Monique Leech](#), issued by [Kantar](#) 5 Jun 2009



Taking a step back and reflecting on the past few years it is undeniable that a plethora of media avenues have suddenly mushroomed, these have created a dizzying myriad of options available to the average marketer and offers a bouquet of interesting alternatives, including among others, mobile marketing, branded taxis and busses, road shows, social network sites and the large untapped potential of more conventional internet avenues.

However, has anyone given any thought to the *language* they use in their adverts? There is some conventional thinking which suggests that radio (due to its specific reach) is primed for advertising in the vernacular, and the common assumption is that vernacular radio advertising makes sense and works in harmony to promote better brand value.

Unfortunately, radio spend still constitutes a very small piece of the media pie when TV is added into the mix. As such this paper aims to explore the value of using vernacular advertising in TV adverts... Specifically exploring whether or not consumers can recall vernacular ads, if so which are top of mind and as a secondary objective looking at drawing conclusions as to whether or not vernacular advertising aids relevance, brand appeal, persuasion and understanding.

Two-phase study

Embarking on the journey to discover how important language actually is, two phases of research were conducted.

The first, in August 2008, was a qualitative phase which consisted of five two-hour focus groups comprising one English, one Afrikaans, one Zulu, one Xhosa and one mixed black vernacular (Venda, Sesotho, Tswana). Respondents aged 25-35 were recruited and groups were mixed male and female. The limited number of groups was a result of limited budget; however a spread across language, gender and race was achieved and as such the findings are valid in terms of "formative" research (i.e. the findings were used to inform the design of the quantitative study). These findings also helped to gain a better understanding of the quantitative results as well as helped explain quantitative findings.

The second phase was a quantitative ad hoc study in which 400 consumers spanning LSM A and LSM B, 18+; male and female in the greater Gauteng were interviewed.

It is also important to note up front that language is merely one piece of the creative pie and that many other elements drive overall resonance (music, character selection, cultural references etc), as such this research offers only a topline view into vernacular advertising and in all likelihood this topic could be explored further.

So what did the research uncover - just how important is language?

Overall the answer is not all that simple. Consumers found it difficult to separate their views around vernacular programming and vernacular advertising. Qualitatively, African language respondents singled out the SABC as doing much to accommodate all 11 languages on television, and news was cited as a prime positive example. Furthermore, a sense of justice prevailed in these groups about language issues on TV because “everyone is paying the same TV license fee”.

Some responses included:

“What comes to mind is that there is provision for all the languages in the country and as we all get to pay the same license fees, people are getting what their money is worth, especially in terms of addressing all the languages”, LSM A: Zulu-speaking.

“I think that they are trying; there are more languages that are used now, although the time is limited. They probably will increase the slots as time goes on”, LSM B: Xhosa-speaking.

“Yes there is Swati and Ndebele now; they are trying to accommodate everyone”, LSM B: Nguni-speaking.

However, the other side of the coin does not look as shiny: Afrikaans respondents felt particularly disenchanted about the diminishing levels of their language on television these days and find that both African languages and English are becoming more and more dominant. Both English- and Afrikaans-speaking respondents felt that there was little justice in paying television license fees as there is little for these language groups to watch.

“I think that paying TV licenses is ridiculous because I cannot understand 90% of the stuff that they show on those (channels)...you cannot really watch anything else because it's normally all other languages”, LSM A: English-speaking.

Exciting discovery

Whilst the grumblings about program selection continued throughout the groups for both Afrikaans- and English-speaking respondents, there was an exciting discovery to be made around the resonance of vernacular advertising amongst consumers in general...

When respondents were questioned about whether or not they could remember TV ads in their home language, top of mind vernacular advertising was almost non-existent.

“I don't think there are any Afrikaans ads, I haven't seen one yet”. LSM A: Afrikaans-speaking.

“One normally sees only English ads, one is so used to seeing English advertisements That one can't actually think of an Afrikaans advertisement”, LSM A: Afrikaans-speaking.

“Non-existent to me”, LSM A: Nguni-speaking.

“I don't have any in my language”, LSM B: Nguni-speaking.

It did emerge that perhaps consumers found it difficult to remember the language used in advertisements as many advertisements use a mixture of English and vernacular advertising, or use township slang.

“There are so many ads with African people but they are in English now”, LSM A: Nguni-speaking.

“I like it, it carries a lot of township style, you cannot it is Zulu or Sotho. It is a crossover thing”, LSM A: Nguni-speaking.

An eclectic mix

When a few respondents did mention ads top of mind, these executions were not completely in the vernacular, but were rather an eclectic mix of languages.

“If I'm not mistaken there was a Hilux advertisement with two guys, a white guy and a African guy, and when they had to change tyres, and he has the African guy from the back of the bakkie sit in the front of the bakkie and when they got a flat they had to change the tyre, and when they had business they changed the sticker on the side of the bakkie, so when they go out to a white guy, or a African guy”, LSM A: Afrikaans-speaking

“She spoke about that one of the ice just now, and I actually forgot about that Klipdrift one, that was one, you know, that type of advertisement, because it is quite Afrikaans, they should produce more advertisements like that, that is what I would say”, LSM A: Afrikaans-speaking.

Quantitatively, the results are **not** very different, with only 46% of LSM A consumers able to recall that they have seen vernacular advertising, but when asked to verify these ads, almost half could not remember which ads they had seen. Vernacular ads that did manage to break through the proverbial clutter include, amongst others, KFC (30%), Cell C (17%) and Chicken Licken (22%).

A similar picture can be seen in LSM B, where half (50%) of respondents remembered seeing ads in the vernacular. The vast difference here however, is that almost everyone who remembered an ad could recall what brand the ad was for (87% could recall what brand advertised in the vernacular).

In LSM B, the list of brands that consumers could remember stretch a little further than the ones cited in LSM A. These include, amongst others, KFC (46%), Cell C (19%), Chicken Licken (18%), OMO (14%), Vodacc (14%), Domestos (14%), Dawn (11%), Nedbank (10%) and Vaseline (10%).

The language used must relate to the target

With such little recall, are vernacular ads all that important then? What do they in fact add to overall brand perceptions? The answer? A lot and then nothing...

Looking at 'a lot': generally LSM B consumers feel that ads in the vernacular are more appealing (67% agree), relevant (77% agree) and persuasive (62% agree). However this means nothing if advertisers do not get the cultural mix and the language nuances right:

“The Xhosa must relate to someone that you are targeting, speak the township Xhosa. If you are selling Al

Star tekkies and you speak Xhosa, speak the Xhosa that I can relate to the Tsotsi language”, LSM B: Ngur speaking.

“Again, the script should be originally in that language, don't try and bring an English script and then translate it. You should have the script in Zulu originally, because you find a lot of things that come out in English and they try to translate it to Zulu and it doesn't have the impact that it is supposed to have”, LSM A: Nguni-speaking.

“I think also they need to try and understand the people that they are talking to. If they want to talk to Tswanas, they must first understand the culture of Tswanas and how best to portray that”, LSM B: Nguni-speaking.

A shopping list, but no magic formula

LSM A consumers are mostly indifferent to vernacular advertising, with no clear feelings either way. Whilst some consumers agree that vernacular advertising is more appealing (48%) and relevant (54%) the majority of consumers are not persuaded to purchase brands based on language alone. Some 72% actually disagree that language will drive their purchase decisions.

Everyone does however, unanimously agree that English ads are equally as good as advertising in the vernacular (65% of LSM B consumers agree with this message as do 78% of LSM A consumers).

So what can advertisers and marketers do to ensure that their brands really benefit from vernacular advertising? Ticking off as many of the following might help:

- Don't translate from English, create proper vernacular scripts instead
- Use the right dialect
- Simple language is best - don't confuse consumers
- Use the right characters
- And make it catchy/entertaining

The above is certainly a shopping list of elements that one would need to consider, but unfortunately there are no hard-and-fast rules creating powerful ads. There is no magic formula and as such marketers will need to continue testing and refining concepts to ensure they resonate with consumers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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