

Ready to Change: Absa's ad campaign shatters creative comfort zones

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It's odd to think that people whose careers are built on creativity can become set in their ways.



Take advertising, for example. People might suggest daring concepts and funky ideas, but when it comes to the actual filming, there are rigid ways that things are done. The old saying of ‘lights, camera, action’ means a rack of artificial lights, a very expensive camera, and a reassuring narrator delivering the corporate message.

“We didn’t want all that,” says Jenny Moore, head of Brand and Design at Absa Group.

Absa’s ‘Here for the Ready’ initiative is being promoted through a campaign that matches its intentions, which are to help young Africans take charge of their destiny and for Absa to play a leading role in advancing African society. Since young people can’t enter the advertising space if the barriers to entry are too high, the new advert had to be shot in a way that smashed those barriers and looked distinctly African, not Hollywood.

“Storytelling is an inherently African way of communicating – it’s in our blood and in our music. But for young people to get into this creative economy, into a space where they can hone that skill, traditionally needs big fancy equipment, a million people on set, and a lot of experience. And that makes it hard for young storytellers to get started. We created a test case by scaling back to show youngsters that you don’t need sophisticated equipment and deep pockets to succeed,” Moore says.

Rethinking the processes and using different technologies can make things more accessible, which will allow more African voices to be heard on the global stage.

The minute-long advert also had to position Absa as an organisation pushing for change, and to spark curiosity about how it can help you to achieve your own goals in life. That’s a big ask from 60 seconds of screen time, but the team, led by creative brand agency Grid Worldwide, has excelled.

Moore admits she was nervous. “It was a calculated risk which forces you to rethink the way you do things, because that’s the only way that change will happen,” she says. “It was a bit of a gamble and there were some very grumpy faces on day one and two. The very real risk was that we’d end up with a second-rate campaign. We didn’t know if not having all the bells and whistles on set would impact our ability to achieve our creative vision and deliver content that’s world class, because as a multinational bank we can’t go out with anything that’s not top quality. And Grid Worldwide would not want to put their name to anything that’s not top grade either.

“It wasn’t about cost-cutting, but about seeing how they could change the production approach for new entrants to the industry, she stresses. “If we can build a case for doing things differently, it’s a step towards a more sustainable, inclusive, just society, creating new opportunities to become the continent and the people we believe is possible. So, we took action, but being the first to start is uncomfortable and scary and it requires a lot more effort.

“Grid Worldwide’s creative director Kyle Schoeman says the advert itself may not strike viewers as particularly unusual, but the methods used to create it were.

It takes people out of their comfort zone, he says. “I was very uncomfortable myself, to be honest, because I’m set in my ways and it took me a couple of days to really buy into the vision. But once I’d done it, it felt like a revelation. I could see the potential – it’s going to be so much bigger than just another ad campaign over time.”

One decision was to use far more accessible equipment. No artificial lights were used either, so the locations needed great natural lighting. “That required a lot more effort from the scouting team and it made the shooting different, but so rewarding because everything looked beautiful,” Schoeman says.

While the advert looks like it’s filmed in different African countries, it was all shot at different locations in Johannesburg, using a cast drawn from across the continent. There were no make-up artists, and the actors were asked to come as themselves. “We didn’t want to change anyone, so we cast for who they were,” says Schoeman.

Another difference was the lack of spoken words. “In bank adverts there’s typically a voice-over speaking about success and the need to believe, and we decided to keep it more authentic by not having a narrator speaking to you about some fictional, aspirational future. We just let the music and the personalities of the cast speak for themselves,” Schoeman says.

The team also brought in a young, upcoming photographer, Basetsana Maluleka, to film a series of stills to support the campaign. That demonstrated ‘Here for the ready’ in action, with Bassie being mentored by the director, Justice Mukheli of Romance Films. “It was an opportunity to really empower someone looking for a break,” says Schoeman. “We will continue down this road, and maybe in the next production we’ll move from one mentee to three.

“The teams are excited about what this alternative style of production could lead to now that they’ve seen the potential. “This is an ad that punches far above its weight and looks like it cost far more than it did to produce,” Schoeman says.

“Obviously you think in the creative industry we push the boundaries and concepts, but from a technical point of view, we are very stuck in our ways and we need to be challenged.”

During the project, the agency documented the behind-the-scenes processes to show young filmmakers that there are alternative ways of producing high quality films. Those case studies will be flighted on social media and offered to film schools to help upcoming creatives think differently.

The result has delighted everybody; Moore says: “I’m incredibly proud of the team. As much as we were pushing and scaring everyone, no one said ‘you are insane’, and bravery is important. What makes this campaign a success is people getting behind the vision of what we are trying to do. They put their heart and soul into it and magic happened.”

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