

Responsiveness, the only way to go for future-fit brands

 By James Maposa

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In my opinion, for most brands, one of the things that are keeping them awake at night is longevity. More entities are entering the market place. They're hungry and gunning for your breakfast, lunch and supper. If you slip, you're gone.



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It's hard for you to rely on your legacy because your modern-day consumers are now more open to trying new things. They have access to more information. This has led them to be more empowered and taking on more risks like trying new products. The information age has thus reduced switching cost risks and challenged new entrants in the market to bring products/services the market that will leapfrog existing players.

This brings me to my question. How do brands withstand the test of time in an era where stiff competition prevails, and legacy is no longer the asset that it once was? According to Lynda Decker, "responsive branding" is the solution. Decker conceptualised responsive branding as an agile and adaptable branding approach that adjusts in alignment with a changing marketplace. She goes on to say that responsive branding is a framework of consistent voice, persona, values, look and feel that allows for a high level of customisation and success. With the above in mind and the fact that consistency is always highlighted as paramount to building strong and long-lasting brands; one wonders how responsive branding can work without compromising this critical element?

Competition is stiff

I'd like to answer this question using an example. The craft beer brewing market is growing at a fast pace within both emerging markets and the developed world. A rebellion of the larger and commercial beer brewing companies has resulted in the South African craft beer market growing at an estimated 20 – 30 percent per annum over the last few years. Leading restaurant and cuisine outlets have caught onto this market shift, entering into exclusive partnerships with leading craft beer manufacturers to offer different beer drinking experiences to a customer base that has returned to celebrating hand-made, home-brewed and local ingredient produced beers.

Despite these positives, one needs to appreciate that competition within this sector is stiff. In addition to other emerging entrants, you're always faced with the threat of being bought out by the deeper-pocketed and larger commercial breweries once you start making the right noises. I'd like to think of this as a good problem to have. What would I need to do create such a buzz in a highly contested and congested market?

Always good to start with knowing your audiences both primary and secondary. For consistency sake, I agree that strong brands are built around a core audience. Building your brand around a core audience leads to loyalty and with time advocacy. Advocacy through word of mouth contributes to you growing your customer base. This, however, takes place over time and for a new market entrant/growing brand you're looking for faster recruitment to assert yourself in the marketplace. With the in mind responsive branding suggests you build your brand across two to three audiences.

A framework should be established that enables you to speak to these different audiences in a focused way with a more encompassing positioning being the frame of reference. Such an adaptive approach thus allows you to speak to a cumulatively larger audience and spread your word. The same can be said for organisations that cater to both business and private customers. For such a business, a different tone is employed when communicating with either a business or private consumer but the tenets of the brand such as quality, uniqueness and value to the customers remain critical elements to the way the brand is positioned to these two audiences.

Monitor your audiences closely

In addition to knowing your audience, responsive branding requires you to closely monitor your audiences' trends to enable you to continue to remain relevant based on their ever-changing needs. As an example, what packaging would speak to the audiences you're looking to target. Will it be a pint, a quart or even a litre for the craft beer you've brought to the marketplace? For one audience, they'd prefer a beer that they can share with their mates. For another audience, individuality is prioritised so distribution by the pint will be preferred.

For the last audience (for example), value for money trumps everything else. For this reason, this audience will prefer buying a quart (750ml bottle) as their preferred unit of consumption when compared to the pint (340ml). Despite the difference in packaging requirement; authentic taste, mastery in brewing and consistency of the product is critical across these consumption options and could, therefore, be the main reference point across these audiences but also building up to the core tenets of the main brand. From time to time, these sub-positionings should be re-checked from time-to-time to ensure the brand is delivering value through interactions across the different audience groups.

Creativity and ingenuity are also critical when you're building a responsive brand. Because you're speaking to a "wider" audience, you're communicating with them across more channels. If you're engaging with them across different platforms, it is important for you to design your brand for these platforms and ensure it can showcase its strengths within each platform. As an example, if you're communicating your brand across desktop, tablet and mobile devices, ensure that you've designed for each platform and when your brand is viewed on each device, it is being presented to its audience at its best.

An approach that embraces creativity

Other aspects that need to be considered are when the brand is being presented between digital, print and other physical platforms. Designing and creativity should also ensure that the brand is exhibited at its best across these platforms as well. Like communication, design should also be audience focused. Design should, however, be made within the confines of a

pre-determined framework. This framework limits how far the design can be adjusted and ensures some level of consistency for the brand. Without this check, the risk is that creativity can go too far and with time take away instead of giving to the brand.

In addition, the brand might need to have a story across each of these selling unit points that responsive branding offers marketers an approach that embraces creativity, leverages media fragmentation and eschews uniformity. It aims for a coherent framework of cross-platform visual and verbal communication.

In conclusion, responsive branding is supposed to offer diverse repetition to ensure your brand remains relevant in an ever-changing marketplace. Responsive branding enables you to build an audience focused brand that changes in alignment with changing consumer trends and preferences. Context drives the brand's narrative, enabling it to exist in culture and exhibit dynamism that renders it relevant from a current and future-fit standpoint. Value is derived from building equity through communicating to your audiences in a way that addresses current and future market needs.

ABOUT JAMES MAPOSA

Maposa is the founder and managing director of Birguid, a research and advisory company. Maposa has 15 years work experience, mostly spent in research and strategy consulting. Maposa is passionate about socio-economic development, business growth and continuity.

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