

Zimbabwe's ad industry forges ahead in turmoil

By [Dumisani Ndlela](#)

27 Sep 2007

One thing stands out as the greatest plague facing Zimbabwe's advertising industry, and it is the economic malaise that has dogged the country for eight successive years.

To hear Brian Gamble say it, the advertising industry in Zimbabwe is now stagnant – advertising budgets have been cut, and agencies have scaled down their operations just to stay in business. It isn't looking good, he says, maintaining: “There's nothing to sell. There are no new (advertising) campaigns or products being launched.”

The backbone of any vibrant advertising industry is a vibrant economy, and so far Zimbabwean advertising agencies have been caught up in the wreck that the country, once one of Africa's most prosperous economies, has been reduced to. There is virtually a shortage of everything, from toothpaste to cooking oil and laundry soap – products that kept the creative desks of advertising agencies busy trying to come up with new ideas for fresh campaigns.

Some companies, packed up and left, but those that remain are somewhat holding on for a new day and have stuck to the tried-and-tested advertising campaigns of the past, but are not launching new campaign projects.

With the dearth of new campaigns came the death, metaphorically, of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), that independent regulator for commercial advertisements, sales promotions and direct marketing in the country, which separates the good from the bad, protecting the public from misleading advertising campaigns or sales promotions.

But when regulatory concerns emerged due to the three-year dormancy of ASA, market players looked around for the gray-haired men among them who could retrieve ASA from the closet and put it back in its rightful place.

They found Gamble, who has close to half a century of experience in advertising and marketing.

Now ASA, resuscitated in May this year, is active and ready to play its part in the industry.

“The advertising industry is a vibrant sector and it was growing until the economic downturn,” says Gamble, matter-of-factly. “The growth has been dramatic and there have been a lot of locally-trained talent,” he adds.

But, when judged from newspaper pages and the television screens, that mass of talent is not visible: Zimbabwean adverts can be very boring – the messages are direct and predictable and repeats can send you to sleep.

But Gamble is defensive: “It's not the fault of the creative people; it's the fear of the (local) advertisers to try something

new,” he says.

When Gamble entered the industry in 1963 there were four or five advertising agencies on the market, he says. Now, there are at least 25 recognized by the Advertising Media Association of Zimbabwe (ADMA), and a lot more that have failed to win recognition because they have failed to qualify under ADMA's strict qualifying criteria.

“Twenty five is a lot (for ASA) to be looking after,” he says.

Commercially, that also presents challenges to the sector, remarks Gamble, noting: “The more agencies, the smaller the spread of clients. As a result, most can't keep afloat in a crisis.”

ASA's primary areas of responsibility include ensuring that all advertising in Zimbabwe's media is decent, honest and truthful and that it complies with a plethora of statutory laws like those to do with liquor and gambling.

ASA also adjudicates on disputes between competing advertisers and Gamble envisages that once the economy comes back to life, there will be more competition and more complaints on the advertising arena.

“The revival of the economy will mean more advertising budgets. The (current) depression has led to a cut in ad budgets and people have lost their jobs. Products have disappeared from the market and advertisements have also disappeared from the media,” Gamble notes.

ASA, he says, with the rule and regulations it needs, will be at the forefront of the industry, ensuring it is efficiently self-regulated.

ASA has the power to withdraw offending advertisement from the market, and can instruct the media not to publish advertisements judged to have messages that misrepresent or are simply inaccurate.

The challenge, Gamble says, is now to ensure that ASA's activities become well known to the public.

“The authority intends to launch a campaign to make the public aware of its activities – that any complaints against advertisements can be investigated,” Gamble disclosed.

Over concerns about the Indigenisation and Empowerment Bill, which has been heavily criticized by the opposition and black business groups, Gamble says the advertising industry had transformed over the years, and the proposed law is unlikely to cause any serious problems to existing advertising agencies.

“Most players have taken care of that,” says Gamble about the law, which has been framed to force foreign-owned companies to give up control of their operations domiciled in Zimbabwe.

“The industry now needs to forge ahead,” says Gamble.