

Misconceptions about marketing "in Africa"

 By [Al Mackay](#)

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With some of the fast-growing economies in the world on our doorstep and growth sluggish at home, more and more South African brands are getting serious about expanding "into Africa."

Surprisingly, since we're an African country ourselves, we have seen that South African marketers often make the same mistakes and assumptions when planning for African growth as marketers from outside the continent.

These misconceptions about Africa make it difficult to create relevant, engaging and effective marketing - making it more difficult to achieve business growth in these high-opportunity markets. Some of the most common and damaging of these misconceptions are:

1. Thinking Africans are all the same

There is no such thing as "the African consumer." People generalise more about Africa than about any other continent, and yet it is the most diverse continent on earth - in terms of language, culture, history and economic development. A Kenyan tech entrepreneur, for example, will have very different brand expectations and tastes to a Congolese market trader. Neighbouring countries may be vastly different and even within markets - for example, in Nigeria - the regions and cities can be very culturally distinct.

Linked to this misconception is the idea that "middle class" means the same thing everywhere. Middle class is a relative term within a country. A Nigerian middle-class consumer won't have the same spending power as an American middle-class consumer, and so entering Africa with products and services developed for "middle class consumers" elsewhere is bound to end in failure.

2. Thinking the consumer is a moron

In the early phase of expansion into Africa it was good enough for brands to just "be there" - there was so little choice that consumers had to just take what they could get. This is no longer the case and yet many marketers we interviewed for our paper said that marketers treat consumers like morons in their markets by dumbing down communication or dumping sub-par products in the market.

Consumers in the rapidly growing African economies that marketers are interested in are increasingly informed, connected and sensitive to being patronised. If you want to win over consumers in any market, treat them with respect and get to know them. This is no different in Africa.

3. Thinking it's just a volume game

Despite the rapid growth of middle classes in key markets across Africa, the vast majority of people on the continent are either below the poverty or just scraping by. It's common for marketers to treat Africa as a volume game: selling the highest quantities at the lowest prices - making money from volume rather than high margins.

This bottom-of-the-pyramid thinking is short sighted as it simply displaces the small amounts of disposable income consumers have from one category to the next. Brands should rather think about how they can increase that disposable income - by collaborating with consumers, including them in their production or distribution models and investing in social innovation that makes them better off while cementing the brand in their lives.

4. Thinking it's all about status and bling

Many African markets are highly aspirational and ambitious, make no mistake. But the fixation on this one particular need results in marketing that all looks and sounds the same. It also only tells a small part of the picture. Our work across Africa reveals that there is a community-mindedness that persists even amongst the newly middle-class.

Most consumers don't just want to look good; they want to provide for others and contribute to the success of their community. More people identified as "caregivers" in our research than any other kind of archetype. Family and God were the most important things to most people we interviewed. "Go-getters" were the second most common archetype in many markets, but they get almost all the attention from marketers.

5. Assuming West is best

There is a certain arrogance that global brands can bring when they enter Africa, and South African brands can fall victim to that arrogance too. In certain African markets consumers are highly conservative, traditional and opposed to outside influences, and local pride is on the rise throughout the continent. Consumers would rather you celebrated their culture and country than tried to impose a foreign sense of 'cool' on them. Great brands are innovating at a really local level, celebrating local heroes and developing campaigns and aesthetics that riff of the particulars of each African market.

The greatest mistake marketers can make when planning for African growth is to think they know best because the markets they are entering are new or underdeveloped. Transplanting models, messages and products from other markets will give mediocre results at best. It is far better to start from the inside out: understand the attitudes, contexts and needs of the people in each market you are trying to enter and then innovate for those particular attitudes and needs.

Look beyond the numbers, drop the assumptions and get to know the people on the ground. It's the surest way to avoid the common mistakes of trying to build a brand across Africa.

Download the full Yellowwood white paper [African Attitudes: Marketing Beyond the Numbers](#)

ABOUT AL MACKAY

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