

Eyes front and centre

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How does your brand break through the clutter? Consider the following: technological and mobile advancements, marketing ideas and advertising campaigns have made it possible for brands and business to have a meaningful relationship with their customers.



The following trends are relevant to any individual or brand. If you're in the business of understanding and catering to the evolution of consumer needs, desires and expectations, look front and centre. Here are my predictions for 2013...

Transparency

The proliferation of social networking has shifted the online space from a product-centric to a customer-centric model. In turn, this has affected brands, and has pushed them to form a new level of transparency and authenticity now required, if not demanded, by customers.

If your brand or business is entering the social media landscape, if not already there, razor-sharp clarification of your digital strategy and sound know-how of successful interaction in a social environment are required. If you're not clear on these objectives, you are opening the door to criticism, especially if you over-promise and under-deliver. Customers are looking for brands to be genuine, honest and open. Give them a reason to stay loyal.

Start seriously considering and observing brands, if not your own, in the mega-trend of transparency. Expect to see brands be proactively informative and authentic about their values and culture. This will include ongoing topics such as sustainability, environmental impact, quality and ethics.

If these conversations are not already being seeded, long-term reputation damage can occur when consumers jump on the social "complaint" bandwagon. Case in point: McDonald's social media and PR faux pas with the [#McDStories](#) Twitter campaign that spiralled out of control when consumers began relaying their horror stories. While the campaign aimed to raise awareness of their successful supplier stories (a great example of transparency), this campaign did not go as planned and #meetthefarmers was used for the majority of the day instead.

Let this be a reminder that bad reviews are not the problem, but *not listening* to your customers, dissatisfied or not, is often at the root of the challenge. In the majority of cases, there is an opportunity to settle an issue *before* it goes public, which business can solve in their structure when examining their customer journey.

However, failing this, should you epically fail, be proactive, transparent and authentic about the failure first. Let your customers see you as part of the solution, not the problem.

Do good-ery

The Information Age consumer has evolved to a point where customers actively participate and engage with their favourite brands. In fact, what they want to know is that their choices are worthy of that love. Typical CSR/CSI approaches, with a cheque handover housed in the HR or a financial department, have become archaic. Expect to see more brands evolve with sustainable conversations and legitimate "do good business". I predict corporate CSR portfolios moving into marketing departments and away from financial directors.

However, this is not as simple as finding a charity and a "PR this" approach. Being able to profit and leverage your brand off your "do-goodery" means your marketing team needs to have a sharp focus on an aspect of social engagement that suits your brand identity.

You need a brand that your consumers are proud to love. Do good and mean it.

Africanese

Historically, brands have seen Africa as the poor third cousin of the global economic family, often used as a backwater opportunity for companies to sell their second-rate merchandise. However, the reality is this: Africa's consumer-facing industries are expected to grow by more than US\$400 billion by 2020, according to a recent McKinsey report.

The continent is about to explode with opportunities. While we have typically seen developed markets catering to emerging markets, we will begin to see a paradigm shift as local players begin developing and offering services and products catered to people *for* the people. From emerging markets for emerging markets.

Our peers will begin to tap into the zeitgeist of what is current and relevant to them and innovate. Expect to see a huge creative offering from our African counterparts as both global and new local brands begin to adapt themselves.

However, be prepared to get your hands dirty. This is not a continent for sissies. You cannot work in Africa from the boardroom as it often doesn't translate on the ground. Companies are starting to see gaps in their knowledge as they enter into Africa because they have historically never needed to gain knowledge and data for their new consumer's attitudes and behaviour. Watch this space.

Fragmentation of routes to market

As the buying power of lower-income earning consumers increases, so too do the distribution channels that service them. This is evidenced by the explosion of thousands of Spaza shops, shebeens, car washes and street vendors servicing these consumers.

The nett result for brands is they have to reengineer their own distribution mechanisms to ensure that their products remain 'within an arm's reach of desire'. This has resulted in a shift from just distributing to a small number of major distributors to having to go direct and service thousands more channels.

Brands are also changing pack configurations to better suit this market, by creating smaller pack variants, for instance. This all means that marketers need to understand how to communicate effectively in this channel. The Pick n Pay aisle is much easier to merchandise than the 1x1m spaza window.

Data

This vision can now be realised with data's newfound power. Data's potential to build individual relationships, which has been the case even before Aaron Montgomery Ward invented the mail order catalogue in 1872, is no secret.

Businesses have always had a fair idea of who their customers are, what they bought and why. In modern times, whole industries have been spawned out of data use. Billions have been spent using data to develop effective one-to-one relationships; however, today's technological advancements make this dream a reality.

Technology has created two fundamental changes that alter the way we generate access and leverage data. First, by exponentially increasing the volume of data generated and, secondly, by making the analysis of this data stream more feasible and accessible to many more businesses. These two technologically-fueled data tsunamis have forever altered the way we are now marketing.

Social media, mobile phones and other data tools mean that billions of people on the planet leave mile-wide data trails, making for much richer data sources than ever before. This data explosion is coupled with our ever-increasing ability to slice and dice this commodity.

Computers are now better able to analyse the non-structured data surge, such as words, images, tweets, blogs and text messages. Whole industries are forming that help dissect this data into actionable and rich insights.

However which way you look at it, 2013 is bound to be an interesting year.

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