The state of the nation: Advertising in Africa

By Staff Reporter

21 Sep 2013

Is Africa the Dark Continent when it comes to the advertising industry? On the contrary, says Alan Edgar, Regional Creative Director, Ogilvy Africa and one of regional judges for African and Middle Eastern categories at this year's Loeries. It's alive and vibrant, but in dire need of world-class tertiary training institutions to tap into that potential.

You mention in your bio that Africa was a bit of a culture shock when you first arrived, in what way?

A year ago, whilst working at Ogilvy Johannesburg, I was offered the position of regional CD for Africa. I was blown away when I heard what the job entailed but it had just one snag... I had to start within a week.

I'd never even visited Kenya, nor ventured much into Africa. In one week I had to sell our home and cars in South Africa, get married (seriously) and then immediately move north (to Ogilvy's HQ in Nairobi), leaving my wife and daughters to pack up the house, and leave their jobs and schools to start a whole new life with me.

Amazingly, we did it but I wasn't quite prepared for the culture shock. In your own culture you understand the language, the customs, the who's who and the where's where, what's in and what's out... you know what I mean. But in a new country, let's be honest, you're clueless. Literally. Now take that knowledge gap and times it by 29 - because I have 29 completely different countries in my portfolio. THAT was the shock.

Thankfully I had the most incredibly supportive people, across our African Ogilvy network, who fast-tracked my learning and immersed me into these vastly diverse, rich cultures - helping me understand the fascinating African nuances and freeing me to have fun in my new role.

How does advertising in Africa differ from the rest of the world, or even from South

Africa?

Africa has no shortage of imagination, ingenuity, passion or balls. What it does have a shortage of is advertising and marketing schools; in fact, I don't know of any in Africa north of SA. So how would dentistry, architecture, fashion design or a multitude of other trades fare if there were no training institutions? Those industries would continue to get by, as people would be getting trained, probably one-on-one, from a great mentor, but at a slower rate than in other countries.

South Africa, for instance, has globally ranked institutions producing hundreds of highly skilled advertising practitioners every year. This translates into work that not only garners creative awards but generates greater bottom line rewards.

I honestly believe that as soon as somebody invests in building ad schools throughout Africa that we're all going to be stunned by a new wave of advertising with a refreshing, uniquely African twist. The raw talent is there - it just needs help with training.

What brands are trending in Africa?

Brands that are trending in Africa are really being driven by financial growth or lack of it. For those doing well there is the conspicuous consumption trend happening in most developing markets like South Africa and China. People want to show they're doing well by consuming Moet & Chandon, driving luxury German cars and wearing Vuitton, Prada and Gucci - even if they are buying the cheaper fake copies. On the bottom end of the market, people are clamouring to enjoy the availability of more affordable smartphones coming into the market. Tecno (a China-based mobile manufacturer) is focusing on this continent and does business now only in Africa. By producing smartphones that are within financial reach of the masses they have already taken 20% of the markets they're in.

I see brands such as Tecno, which intelligently listen to what the customer wants and build products that match these needs, but also their financial reality, as those that will continue to trend for the foreseeable future.

In your opinion, which African countries are the most innovative and creative in brand communication and why?

Firstly, Nigeria. With a current population in excess of 170 million, and a burgeoning economy, they have the financial clout to create the most innovative, hi-tech electronic outdoor sites on the continent. Across the continent, there are pockets of great creativity, but I've seen a real concentration in Kenya.

Why? Quite simple - better internet access. The greater the connectivity the greater the opportunities to learn, develop, share, and then people inspire others who learn... and so it continues. A real virtuous circle.

Are consumers in Africa as vocal with their opinions on client service from brands as elsewhere?

From my experience, the majority of Africans are extremely polite and would not offend somebody by complaining about poor service delivery face to face. But the internet is changing all that. Consumers are now choosing to use social platforms to voice their discontent - they blog, post on Facebook, tweet or post on popular consumer forums about the brands from which they've experienced bad or good service. And, as word of mouth is one of the most persuasive forms of advertising, brands are starting to really take notice; they recognise that one irate customer can generate more bad publicity than ever before. Case in point - the disgruntled United Airlines passenger who got over 13 million people watching him sing about his guitar that got broken onboard - and which cost them approximately US$180 million in lost revenues.

Which media work best in Africa?

Unlike the West, TV in Africa is still king because the majority of people don't have the internet to download what they specifically want to see without the ads.

And newspapers also kick ass. Because of poverty, many people can't afford to buy their own paper, but 'rent' or share the paper, which means an advertiser will get exponentially more eyeballs from one copy of the newspaper - so it maximises an advertiser's reach.

Is the number of entries from African countries growing in competitions such as the Loeries?

Year on year every awards show is getting more popular - Clios, Cannes, the Loeries, especially as African agencies see more and more of their countrymen winning and realising that there is a chance of them being recognised too for their work.

In your opinion, what is the standard of this year's Africa/Middle Eastern entries?

The standard of Africa/Middle Eastern entries this year was far better than ever before. And I can see it only improving every year going forward as people become more inspired.

Is there a difference in the styles of North African - more European influence - and Southern African brand communication?

There should be, but no. We've become such a global village that most people would be hard pressed to tell the difference between a great ad developed by a top agency in Dubai and a great ad done by a top agency in South Africa. I saw work this week produced for Land Rover from Dubai which was exceptional - on par with similar Land Rover awarded work produced by Hunt Lascaris\TBWA South Africa years ago. I don't think geographies are determining 'styles' in advertising. Brands are creating their own distinct style that traverses geographical locations.

What is your favourite all-time African advert/campaign?

Ooooh, so many. But, if you had to put a gun to my head, I'd have to say 'The Trillion Dollar Campaign' for The Zimbabwean newspaper. So simple and clever. A real attention-getter. Unlike most advertising it wasn't just wallpaper but made people think about the plight of people in that country. Wish I had it in my porti.

Is there anything else you would like to expand on in terms of the African advertising industry?

Only that I see the most incredibly bright future for advertising throughout the whole of Africa. Everybody is talking about Africa being 'the last untapped frontier' so the investment here will be huge; and where there's investment there's development in everything. I can see greater infrastructural development allowing more brands to come into Africa, better production facilities and faster internet - allowing these products to be better advertised - and more schools creating brighter minds to produce even more dynamic communications.

With all this on the horizon I can't think of a more exciting or dynamic place to be, anywhere in the world, right now.

Biography

A British graphic designer with over 23 years of experience in London and Johannesburg, Alan Edgar, Regional Creative Director, Ogilvy Africa, has working experience at a multitude of highly awarded agencies including Ogilvy Johannesburg, TBWA\London, Net#work BBDO and The Jupiter Drawing Room.

After an initial culture shock, Edgar quickly recovered to embrace the diversity of the African continent and adopted an entirely new mindset on how to speak to audiences in persuasive but also captivating ways. He currently oversees 29 countries across the continent in his capacity as regional creative director. Ogilvy Africa is the four times winner of the Financial Mail AdFocus Network Agency of the Year since the awards' inception in 2009.

He has been awarded at international shows such as Cannes, London International Awards, New York Festivals and also at the Loeries.