

Five PR lessons when working with tech start-ups in Africa

 By [Judith Middleton](#)

31 Oct 2013

I've been involved with tech companies and start-ups in Africa for the past 15 years, and have seen some major success stories that have helped to establish Cape Town as one of the tech start-up capitals of the world.

But I have also seen an untold number of start-ups fail, unable to make the transition to a successful, established company, in the process disappearing into obscurity.

As a marketing and brand elevation specialist, my interest lies in how companies drive growth and achieve long-term success through establishing strong brands. Over the years, I've learned some hard-won lessons of how companies can use marketing to go from start-up to established, successful business. Here are the top five marketing lessons I've learned working with tech start-ups in Africa:



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Lesson 1 - Have a simple, clear and honest message

Many entrepreneurs undervalue research and planning. In their world, rapid innovation and product development often represent the quickest path to success. But nearly every market is saturated with competing products vying for customers and market share.

Differentiation is a key driver of customer acquisition and, by effect, success. How often I hear the statement: "We don't have any competitors." Really, are you sure?

The same qualities that make tech entrepreneurs successful often also pose serious challenges. The tough, determined entrepreneur that jumps out of bed to conquer the world often struggles to articulate the business value of their solution without getting lost in technical jargon and complexity.

This poses a huge challenge to marketers, who have to extract this business value and make it accessible to broad audience segments, without losing the essence of what makes that particular entrepreneur unique.

Start-up companies that have a simple and clear positioning statement explaining what they are about, and how that makes them different to competitors will have a better chance of creating meaningful engagement with customers and, ultimately, investors.

Lesson 2 - Test before you invest in the marketing tactics

It's attractive to shout your amazing idea or product from the rooftops. The excited energy of an innovative entrepreneur is fundamental to a start-up's success, but there's also a risk. You don't want to introduce a product that everyone wants to a broad audience, only to see it all cave in under the weight of massive demand. Growth pains are common and not every business survives them - commercially.

Perceptions of poor service linger long.

Do proper testing before you go for the big bang approach. The damage to your brand in the long run far outweighs any short-term gains you make in terms of brand awareness.

Lesson 3 - Invest in a specialist

Whoever you entrust to be in charge of your marketing should be intuitive enough to scale marketing activity up or down to ensure companies don't 1) get burnt or 2) lose out on opportunities. Marketing and brand elevation are often an afterthought for start-up companies, who tend to hand this critically important responsibility to inexperienced staff.

Marketing and PR professionals have over the past few decades earned a seat at the boardroom table - for good reason. Invest in someone with the necessary skills and experience to effectively manage your brand through its various growth phases, if only an external marketing consultant to guide the process and mentor; don't pay for someone else's learning curve.

Lesson 4 - Don't lose touch with customers and clients

One of the great things about working with start-up companies is that you have direct access to the leaders and decision makers. But as start-ups grow, clients and customers often get handed down the ranks to more junior staff - a client that is used to deal directly with the founder-CEO suddenly finds himself dealing with a junior account manager.

While it's natural for CEOs to shift focus more to the big picture stuff, it's equally important that they don't alienate the very people that made them successful in the first place. Relationship equity is pivotal, and there's huge risk in allowing it to be devalued during growth phases.

Always remember - the role of a leader is to serve, and that means you need to work in some time in your schedule to stay connected with the key clients, customers and stakeholders. The digital tools available these days enable this - use video, newsletters, Twitter and other tools to keep engagement up.

Lesson 5 - Play the long term game

We've become used to instant gratification and easy wins in our age of consumerism. It's filtered through to tech start-ups too - how often do you hear entrepreneurs talk about "that one day" when they can cash in and never have to work again? Too often, we see good products suffer under flaky brands that seem to shift and warp to suit whatever the current trend demands.

Instead, play the long game - focus on building a sustainable brand built on long-term values and timeless principles, one that can stay stable even in the shifting sands of a changing world. Build brand equity through being consistently superior in all your dealings - from your product to your customer service to the quality of your thought leadership.

Most importantly, start from within the company itself - your staff will always be your greatest brand ambassadors.

ABOUT JUDITH MIDDLETON

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