

The book publishing industry – marketers, here's one chapter you need to read

 By [Thamsanqa Malinga](#)

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The recent South Africa mission to Davos-Switzerland with its theme: 'South Africa is open for business', got me thinking. What happens then when with the best marketing strategy and a good product, you still have your target market not coming to engage despite your 'open for business' sign with its entire neon glow?

Do you simply make more noise, pay someone to shout, "We are open!" Do you close shop and decry that the product is a non-seller or do you simply move to an affluent neighbourhood?

As an avid reader, I have over the years watched how the South Africa book industry took a decline. Bookshops closed down, you would swear they were being targeted like authors being banned in apartheid South Africa. Publishers alike. The blame was put on the door of the market that was not reading, new technology – more TV content, video games and what nots. It was just blame this or blame that interference with the target market.

Recently I have observed the emergence of new players in the book publishing industry and they have proven to be astute marketers. The book industry is undergoing some form of marketing renaissance that all marketers can learn from.



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Four things stand out on how marketing has been able to pull the book publishing industry out of near extinction and what marketers in general need to bear in mind on a day-to-day basis, without fail.

1. Be bold, challenge stereotypes and forage into the unknown

South African author, Thando Mgqolozana, stirred the hornet's nest at the annual Franschhoek Literary Festival in 2015 when he decried the "very abnormal nature" of the "literary system." He bade farewell to the Franschhoek Literary Festival and late in 2016 launched Abantu Book Festival. The Festival became a success in its maiden weekend.

Mgqolozana could have just sat sulking within a system he believed was not working for him and his publications, and those of his colleagues. He could have sat believing his target market was just what he had been seeing all along but no he took a bold step and challenged stereotypes.

The one problem with marketing is at times you get the "my partner's company did this campaign and it worked for them, let's do it as well" and the "that target market will not spend their money on that" lines thrown at you. Marketing and marketers sometimes get too comfortable in the norm and then become insipid. Think of how every second advert on TV is about people singing or dancing, even a funeral cover advert has the song and dance routine.

Go ahead and challenge stereotypes and stand against bland. Some marketing concepts that went on to be great campaigns started off as career suicide ideas.

2. Innovate, innovate, innovate

In 2009, rapper mogul Jay-Z partnered with Microsoft search engine Bing to launch his autobiography, *Decoded*. For me that remains one of the most innovative ways to market a book. This marketing campaign created an interactive game experience that put every page of the book (365 in total) in a different location, based on the content of the page. Bing allowed fans to discover the book in real world. The campaign created a media value two times the investment and generated nearly one billion media impressions.

If you take a walk around any CBD in South Africa (especially Small Street in Johannesburg), tell me, with all that clutter and loud music blasting from every shop, what differentiates one seller from the other? Does the noise make you want to buy or simply rush past? Does a hijacked family singing at the sight of at their car being driven away make you want to buy the insurance cover?

The days of deal announcers are long gone. Innovate. Innovation should be your daily mantra. Do it every day and when you feel all worn out and out of ideas, innovate. Stretch yourself and your team. I had a boss who used to say, "Whatever we did last year and was great, don't tell me about it this year."

Get your message out with by not blasting a 500-megawatt sound just because your competitor is blasting a 200 megawatt.

3. Age of pull rather than push

South African publishing house, Jacana recently activated a campaign on social media tapping into spaces where its target

market is spending most of its time – social media, shopping queues, park benches et al. Jacana's #PuffnPass - Find it; Sign it; Live it activated on social media tells of books in spaces all over town. If you find the book, you can read it there and then sign it and live it for someone else to find it. Since not many people can read a book in one sitting, worse if you found it while standing in the check-out queue at a convenience shop, you are sure to want to read more of it leading you to search for it at a bookshop.

Social media partnered with the mobile device has shifted the balance of power from the publisher to the consumer. People no longer wait for content to be delivered to them (push); instead, they search for it (pull). How many people wait for a newspaper to be delivered to their doorstep? Granted there are old school hogs like yours truly who want to read the actual physical copy but most people wake up and first thing they do is grab their mobile devices and scroll social media for news and other content.

So if you still think people will wait for you to put your content out before they respond, if you think you need to switch on the neon sign that says, "OPEN" for customers to walk in, you might as well flick the switch to "CLOSED", as chances are they walked right past before your OPEN could flicker on.

Look at where your target market is pulling the information and when are they pulling it and invade those spaces.

4. Big budget is outdated

When in 2016, entertainment producer and self-published author Msizi Nkosi brought out his book "I'm a Different Mess Than I Was Yesterday" (later renamed Young Black and Wasted), he did not have a huge marketing budget and a team to back him up. He had no distribution deal. However, he did not let his lack of a marketing budget deter him. Instead, he came up with an out of the box marketing and distribution strategy – set up a pop up mobile sales points using his Facebook status (he had about 5,000 friends on Facebook).

Every day he would post on where the store was going to be the following day. He asked friends to sell for him when he could go there. Between April and September 2016, he had sold 4,000 units, a bestseller benchmark in South Africa. This led to his book being picked up by an established publisher, which then unlocked a bigger marketing budget.

Every year, companies go into a frenzy of "cost containment" – just a fancier term for the drastic and now defunct "cost cutting." We all know which budget gets reviewed after the catering and team building budgets all together now marketing. Therefore, as a marketer, you know that for every rand you request, you will get half of it if you are that lucky, and still a rabbit is expected out of that hat.

Find better ways of doing things. Maximise on what you have. Get other departments to finance your initiatives by inviting to piggyback on your campaigns. Think about getting more from every rand you spend – for everyone who calls you and wants you to spend your marketing budget with them, ask them how are they going to offer an out of the ordinary service.

If you look at it though, marketers in the book publishing industry were caught napping, like the Kodak marketers who were caught in a similar position by the emergence of the digital camera. It is a common phenomenon that of marketers being caught in the quagmire of resting in laurels and believing in perpetual continuation of the years of plenty and forgetting the years of poverty.

Be careful not to suffer the same fate. Look at what the new age authors and publishers are doing and assimilate.

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