

Has the advertising industry lost its way?

By  Mpume Ngobese

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The advertising industry is in crisis. Many people hate ads and some research is telling us that ads have lost their effectiveness.



Source: www.unsplash.com

SA's most memorable and impactful TV adverts were made between the 1980s and the late 1990s. It was a time when ads like Sasol's Ama-Glug-Glug and Telkom's Molo Mhlobo represented more than just a visual marketing tool to sell a product. The ads of that era had meaning, they inspired and shaped culture, and played a vital role in unifying our nation.

Today, South Africans are subjected to fake, overprocessed, overstylised and severely photoshopped pieces of communication with curated and exaggerated perspectives of life. It's concerning that for an industry that spent R47bn in 2021 in media alone – excluding agency fees and production – that what we see is mostly wallpaper that neither builds brand love nor delivers on its effectiveness.



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Despite the changing media landscape, left-brain thinking and short-termism may have something to do with it. According to the Lemon [Report](#) produced by System1 Group's CIO, Orlando Wood, culture over the years has fluctuated between left-brain and whole-brain thinking. Currently, we're apparently in a left-brain-focused period of culture.

Because the left brain's primary tool is language, the ads use prominent voice-overs, monologues to camera or regular metered prose. Words obtrude over the visuals, spelling out what you should be thinking and how you should be reacting to what you're seeing. It shuns things that only the right brain understands, so there is no room for characters, betweenness, dialogue or drama.

How did we get here?

During what was revered as the Golden Age of Advertising (1960 to mid 1990's), creatives produced top-quality advertising with the highest production values. It required exotic locations, famous names, brilliant film work, masterful special effects and seamless editing. While it took time and required large budgets, the results were impactful and long-lasting.

In the last two decades, we've seen many independent South African advertising agencies disappearing as they're acquired by major international holding companies like WPP, Omnicom and Publicis. It's estimated that almost 80% of the industry is now in foreign hands.

These companies were built on the idea that by putting all the capabilities of the marketing and advertising ecosystem under one roof - creative, research, PR, media buying and planning, digital production, and social media - they could act as a one-stop shop for the world's largest marketers. What this has led to is a marketing-driven approach to drive profit using short-termism as a strategy.



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The move to digital

On the flip side, the move to digital media has also seen more people moving away from traditional outlets such as TV, radio and newspapers. Streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime don't have any adverts, and realising they were not reaching their target audiences, advertising budgets are being spent where audiences - and especially young audiences - now go: online and social media.

With so many digital channels competing for our clicks, it's no surprise that we can't focus for too long. Marketers, therefore, encourage short-term sales activations which focus on productivity, standardisation, repetition and risk avoidance. This not only hurts creativity and creative effectiveness but it ends up squeezing agency fees and profit margins. Adverts then tend to look flat, with no depth, perspective or backdrop. The people in an ad then also tend to be devitalised, expressionless and presented as statues.

Advertising has the power to challenge the status quo, especially in SA, and address issues like racism, diversity and representation, culture and inclusion. With digital media here to stay, it's crucial that the mindset needs a shift to find the balance between long-term effectiveness and short-term demand.

For the future of advertising

Moving forward, I do believe we are again on the verge of change. Consumers are demanding brands become more authentic, placing social and environmental considerations at the fore of their buying decisions.

Brands will need to consider their purpose and ensure that it connects to culture. The Edelman's 2018 Earned Brand study refers to consumers being "Belief-Driven Buyers", where they choose, switch, avoid or boycott a brand based on where it stands on the political or social issues they care about. This will give marketers the opportunity to inspire and uplift society.

Traditional media is making a comeback. While the closure of Associated Media Publishing (AMP) and Caxton Printing and Publishing came as a complete shock, many magazines are hanging on. And what we have seen with the printed newspaper industry is that local newspapers are playing a more dominant role. Their supporters perceive traditional media channels as more trustworthy than online media. Concern about fake news and the speed with which it is posted and shared online makes it harder for people to trust what they read digitally.



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It ultimately boils down to brands and marketers understanding who their customers are, what they do and what they love. Because we know that consumers are always looking for engaging content, the key is for advertising to tap into the culture in a unique way.

Creativity that is informed by culture turns heads. Advertising needs to prioritise getting under the skin of the mainstream and create memorable characters and situations. Effectiveness is a consequence of brands investing in the creation of ongoing support for distinctive brand assets and collections of assets into fluent devices over time.

ABOUT MPUME NGOBESE

Mpume joined the Joe Public team in 2013 as Business Unit Director, spearheading a portfolio that included the development of brand strategy and ATL campaigns for some of South Africa's most iconic brands such as Nedbank, OC's Brothers for Life, Zazi, British American Tobacco, South African Breweries' corporate brand, Brutal Fruit, Redd's and Castle Milk Stout.

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