

On meaningful collaboration and how we unearthed young stars (Part 1)

By [Babalwa Nyembezi](#)

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How collaborating with young black people and opening up a seat at the table changed the perception of a brand.



Photo by [Retha Ferguson](#) from [Pexels](#).

For almost 2 years, I had the privilege of being the lead consultant on a financial services client's social media campaigns. Essentially, my role was to collaborate with my clients – senior marketers – and leverage content strategies that would effectively capture the attention of social media audiences.

Brand engagement on social media

I joined the team at VML at an interesting time when our client was looking to invest more expertise into how campaigns were rolled out on social media in line with the investment into the ATL work. The team had just sold an exciting new concept that would change the way the bank engaged with consumers online.

While creating amazing, engaging content is important to help a brand stand out on social media, the thing that really helps you stand out is how your brand engages with the community on social. Does your brand have a distinctive online personality? Do people walk away from a conversation with your brand genuinely feeling seen and heard? These were all the questions that led to the creation of Dinaledi—a team of moderators whose sole purpose was to engage on behalf of the brand.



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Now, I've worked with community management teams on brands before. This was a team like no other—working with Digify Africa, we employed 10 young people who did not have any previous advertising experience. The dual point of the project was to create an entry into the industry for young, black people who ordinarily would struggle to access jobs in advertising because of all the different ways this industry makes it difficult for young, black people to enter.

Creating work that would trend

The power of a moderation team like the one we had was that they were tuned into the pulse of what was happening in South Africa, and they were uniquely positioned to partner with us as agency and brand to create work that was impactful by helping us be consistently relevant.

I think what made the project unique was how we chose to collaborate with this team. Instead of bringing them onboard and just asking them to “use some slang” or “put that in vernac” once we’d had everything figured out. On every brief they had a seat at the table in deciding how we would tackle it—alongside strategy, social, data/ORM and client service. While they were junior in advertising, their unique lived experiences brought so much value to the table and giving them a voice helped give us a real edge.



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For us, it wasn’t about creating work that would trend. It was about building a brand that genuinely resonated with our consumers. Over a series of campaigns, collaborating with some of the best people I’ve worked with in my career, we were able to shift the public perception of our brand through meaningful engagement with consumers one response at a time. For every fire piece of work we rolled out on our socials, we had 100 authentic engagements to go with it. Which helped us go a step beyond and use social media for what it was intended for—building relationships.

A brand that previously had been shunned for coming across as cold, and very technical with no personality, grew into a brand that the community looked forward to engaging with. It wasn’t just about having a personality and coming up with clever tactics to jump on trending topics, it was about even the most difficult queries being addressed with a human touch so people would feel heard.

Opportunity to mentor

The result was a growth in our community, insights that impacted how we would run campaigns and post-campaigns that told a story about the brand’s progress each time. By bringing more voices to the table, and working with them we were able to shift the boundary. All while giving them experience working on a massive brand, experience that would help them build a meaningful portfolio to grow in the industry.

In 2018, Facebook presented an algorithm that helps brands to get the most out of the short attention span of audiences that spend hours scrolling on their mobile phones. Essentially, the update was set up to encourage brands to build communities with their audience online. Instead of just buying space for your brand to appear on people’s timelines,

consider a community management strategy that encourages people to want to interact with the brand online.



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In closing, the real plus for me was the opportunity to mentor some really dope black talent and give them access to me, the teams I was working with and to meeting clients and finding their feet in this industry. If that project was the last impactful thing I've done with my career, it would mean 10 really gifted careers were kick-started, and I love the idea of that. So I encourage you, senior whatever you are, to create opportunities that open up a seat at the table where you are. You lose nothing for it; in fact, you might actually learn more from the people you open a seat for than you bargained for.

ABOUT BABALWA NYEMBEZI

Babalwa is an award-winning Social Media & Digital Consultant who consistently leads her clients to create work that meaningfully connects with audiences across the African continent. She's young, and unafraid to make her voice heard from telco to tech to the financial sector she has worked across a number of brands as a content strategist.

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