

Digital marketing comes under the spotlight in 2021



By [Roan Mackintosh](#)

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Digital marketing was, for many brands, the saviour of 2020. This has been both a blessing and a curse for local CMOs, who now face massive performance expectations for the year ahead. Remaining agile, building a budget safety net, and stepping up to the boardroom table are some of the tips to overcome choppy waters ahead.



Roan Mackintosh is managing director at Incubeta MEA

Planning for the unplannable

South African CMOs are operating in a weird limbo. While the atmosphere remains muted, expectations of a quick and significant recovery for 2021 are high. What's more, because Covid-19 all but wiped out normal user behaviour, there is very little historical data to lean on when it comes to planning for the year ahead.

In addition to this, the importance of digital has never been as high. All of a sudden board members are paying attention to digital marketing performance, where before it barely even registered on their radar.

This expectation on digital is making for some very pressure-filled months ahead for almost all marketing teams. We are also seeing strong intention to invest in digital for 2021 from most companies we engage with, but no clear indications of exactly how they plan to do this.

Searching for patterns

Speaking to people who have been in the industry for many years, I am seeing no real local trends that are emerging. This is in contrast with what we are seeing in global markets, where precision planning for multiple scenarios is a clear trend.

“ For local digital professionals, the added pressure to perform along with bigger assigned budgets will be daunting. Of course this makes for a wonderful opportunity to allow digital to shine and finally take its place at the table, but it's going to be very difficult to make the call as to how to do so. ”

For this reason marketing leaders struggling with the increased C-level expectations may well lean more on their agencies throughout the year. Even more so, when we are not sure what Corona curve balls may be thrown our way in the coming months.

Markets will correct

When preparing for the year it's important to remember that while digital has played a huge part in how we interacted with one another during the pandemic, there hasn't been a digital big bang from which the only way is forward. Things will return to some normalcy as Covid vaccines and treatments become more widely available. People will return to physical stores - albeit possibly in smaller numbers. And so with this in mind, marketers should plan and prepare for a correction - possibly much larger than we thought mid-2020.

Prepare to be super-agile

The best way to face an unknown future is to be ready to switch at a moment's notice.

“ Remaining agile should be a given for digital marketing pros, even in a normal year. After all, the beauty of our industry is that we can respond to changes on the fly. ”

This year, though, we need to limber up for super-agility.

There is no doubt that 2021 will be a 'fortune favours the bold' kind of year. Those who want to win will need to take a punt. But like all things, many leaders will want to mitigate risk. And to do this, they will need to rely on measurement controls. This means if you are on a path that is not working, you can change course. It also means that if you are on a path that is showing all the signs of working well, you can plough more budget behind your efforts. We should expect adaptive media plans where leaders try new things, but with the safety of being able to pull the plug.

Innovation budgets could save your skin

With super-agility in mind, we place added importance on having the ability to quickly respond. We have always advocated that clients have an innovation budget. This is not necessarily an R&D budget, although that would be nice, but rather a few percent tucked away in a budget line item that is set aside for a quick response should it be needed.

This placeholder or flexibility budget can be used on media spend if you see a certain channel responding well, or it could be pushed towards a tech integration, or even a new format of rich media that looks interesting. Knowing you have the flexibility to act on information from your measurement tools and from market trends will give you the competitive edge, not to mention some welcome peace of mind.

Take your seat at the board

Never before has measurement been more important. Adopting a super-agile response depends on clean data. But data is dumb unless it's interpreted and actioned intelligently and this depends on surrounding yourself with the right team and partners to lean on.

What's more, marketing must be seen as a core part of business delivery and CMOs should be taking their seat at the boardroom table - most especially when it comes to risk planning. After all, we truly have no idea what 2021 will bring, but we do know that digital is going to have a big part to play in how we respond to it.

Take a look at [how technology can help you stay agile in 2021](#).

ABOUT ROAN MACKINTOSH

Managing Director - Africa at Incubeta. Roan joined Incubeta in May 2019 after spending 11 years at WPP's global digital marketing technology and consultancy arm, Acceleration, where he was group business director. Roan's extensive experience as well as his insatiable curiosity have helped hone his skills in digital strategy and mobile advertising, making him a valuable industry commentator.

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