

Traditional brand building in the modern times

By  Musa Msane

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Growing up in the 80s, both in the rural and later in the township environment, Unilever used to treat us to free bioskop sessions at local shops where we watched the brilliant washing performances of Omo or Surf washing powder, and people would win branded washing basins, branded towels and various product hampers, provided they were able to answer brand-related questions correctly.



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At schools, Mama-Colgate would come and give us free mouth hygiene lessons with huge mouth models complete with teeth, tongues and mega-toothbrushes as her props. There too, we would go home with branded toothbrushes and Colgate tiny promotional tubes. It was fun. It was educational. It was engaging. For some reasons, our mothers would also buy the bigger versions of the same brands we came home with, even though we came home with tiny samples.

Even today, any toothpaste is Colgate. Any washing powder is either Omo or Surf. Well, Punch didn't stay long in the market. Often times I find people, even those with marketing qualifications falling into this emotional trap of referring to brands in a generic manner. It could be that they too were exposed to mass promotions when growing up. I wouldn't know for sure!

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Where am I going with this retrospective waffle, one may ask? I find myself in the midst of such a native brand promotion the other weekend and I couldn't help but trace my first ever brand promotional experiences. The KZN-based Orange Grove Dairy company which has a product range that includes *amahewu*, long-life milk, juice and yoghurt, sponsored a sports tournament in partnership with a local district municipality in the northern KZN.

Not only was the event part-sponsored by a local municipality but the local *amakhosi* (chiefs) were part of the sporting event. It was the celebration of the Heritage Month. The championing product was *amahewu* (a mealie meal porridge-based drink which now comes with various flavours). The packaging of the product has images of people into sports such as rugby, running, cricket, soccer and boxing and the event sponsored the codes found on the packaging.

It was not lost to me that *amahewu* drink was a corner-stone of the native households, back in the days *amahewu* was easily available and should any visitor or sojourner pass by, the drink was offered. It's also normal for people to refer to traditional functions as 'having *amahewu*' with the advent of Christianity you will find people 'having tea' which is a modern version of referring to a traditional function.

What all this traditional and modern values have to do with marketing? One would ask. I don't know much, but it was also not lost to me that the event had the blessings of the traditional leaders yet the participants at the various modern games were the youth. That emotional connection with shared values is what builds sustainable brands. With all the modern Apps being applied in the business of brand building, it was refreshing to see a product tracing its communal roots and maintain its relevancy in the modern times.

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