

Look for the opportunities in Africa

 By Louise Marsland

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Africa is a hot bed of opportunities. If you look for that opportunity you will find it, says Robyn de Villiers, vice chair of the African Public Relations Association (APRA) and chair and CEO of Burson Cohn & Wolfe Africa.



Robyn de Villiers, chair and CEO of Burson Cohn & Wolfe Africa.

De Villiers chaired a panel discussion on ethics and reputation management at the recent APRA conference in Botswana. A survey undertaken by APRA measured what companies and communicators were thinking about ethics from a personal, organisational and government point of view.

“There isn’t a low level of ethics in Africa at all. There are always things we have to be looking at when working in Africa, we have global standards to adhere to with multi-national companies, but I’ve been working in Africa for a long time and ‘dodgy dealings’ are not the norm. Often misunderstandings arise due to miscommunication, so context is always important about how things are done.”

De Villiers has been working in Africa for 25 years, travelling to 38 countries, by her recent account. “I love working in

Africa, and in 25 years, I can't think of a single bad experience. I've probably been to 38 different countries in Africa and every single place I've been to, it has been fantastic.

"From a personal point of view, I've never had any prejudice or a bad experience. I think it is about how you go in. There are many places in Africa that they don't like Americans and South Africans as we are considered arrogant."

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But she believes it is about going in to Africa and having some to give, to share, rather than just taking. "We are delivering training to our partners on the ground. And our point of departure is that everything that can be done in the country, must be done in that country."

De Villiers agrees that this is a very exciting time to work and live in Africa. "We have a young exciting population, new innovations coming the fore, the population is enormous – an obvious market. There are great discrepancies from an economic level, but the world is looking for good markets as markets in other parts of the world are stagnating. I do think Africa is the next wave, the place to move to if you are looking to open up a new consumer market, even to find young people with potential.



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There are challenges of course, as she outlines:

- In any emerging markets there are always going to be some things that make doing business more difficult – we don't make it easy to do business in Africa, in terms of visa regulations from other countries, so Africans are struggling to get in and out of each other's countries. It doesn't make sense.
- Product distribution in a developing market is subject to infrastructure challenges.
- There are different languages and different religions, so there is the need to be culturally sensitive. Not everything translates well. Do not assume that the way you do things elsewhere will work in one part of Africa to another.



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Africa is a complex continent which makes it more challenging to achieve things, but the potential is there, says De Villiers.

“What we need to get right, is for the regions in Africa to work together. East Africa is probably the more successful in regional integration. SADC is there, but we’re not doing that well together. If we want to do better as a continent, we need to have regional integration.”

She also believes that part of the problem is that we don’t tell Africa’s story properly.

“We allow other people to tell our story. In Africa we don’t have a strong African media outlet. We need to come up with a communications concept that Africa will buy into across the board, so more CEOs will tell the African story.”

ABOUT LOUISE MARS LAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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