

# Geometry Global on the rising importance of the human touch in brand communication

 By Ann Nurock 29 Jun 2015

Having just appointed a new MD for South Africa, Grant Rightford, Geometry is making waves in the global brand communication scene. Their shopper market insights in particular are fascinating as they light the way for greater penetration on the continent and China's market domination.

Geometry has won 20 Lions at Cannes this year so far (1 Grand Prix, 4 Golds, 8 Silver and 7 Bronze). Very impressive for a relatively new agency, activation and shopper marketing agency. Our media correspondent on the ground, Ann Nurock, found out more from Geometry's Jonathan Dodds and Steve Harding.



Jonathan Dodds and Steve Harding

**Ann:** Tell us more about the offices in South Africa for Geometry as well as Africa...

**Steve:** For us, in SA we didn't have a full enough presence with critical mass, so a lot of discussion has been going on in the recent past, and Grant coming out of it as our new leader has been the catalyst for bringing our whole operation together. So we'll have a sizeable operation in Johannesburg as well as in Cape Town, and he will be the bridge to make sure they are working together and we're getting the maximum opportunities.

SA in itself is a big opportunity for us, and we're just scratching the surface. I've been down quite a bit, I know a few of the agencies and met with them over a period of time, so I know what our competition is like, but I know that the whole shopper marketing area is taking off, so it's an opportunity for us to really drive and grow the business with the critical mass that we got now. We need to work with our partners and our WPP partners down there, as Martin was quoting earlier in the press week how important South Africa is, I think he's got a half a billion dollar business in SA overall, so I think we can capitalise on the shopper-marketing by working with many of our partners down there which we continue to do.

**Ann:** I think there's a big opportunity to in Africa where shopper-marketing hasn't really taken off yet...

**Steve:** Our whole shopper-marketing proposition that we've got, the way we approach things and our purchase decision journey, the pivotal ideas which is at the core of what we do, and that is resonating in the success we've had in Cannes. As that is making our business more international, I think historically, the below-the-line industry was very local and implementation-late, but I believe we're at the forefront of being a much more strategically-led business, with still having pivotal, behaviour-changing ideas and that is fundamental to what we do. And where we're seeing the greatest growth is on an international stage with global clients looking to get continuity the same way they are with their advertising and other disciplines that they've been doing for years, so that's fuelling our growth internationally, we're lucky to have the largest footprint of any shopper-activations agency in the world.

But we've got a couple of footprint gaps, and one of them is sub-Saharan Africa and Africa in general, so we've already moved one of our top shopper-marketing planners already to Kenya, and we're discussion with a number of companies in building critical mass there. South Africa is very important in itself, but it's part of an overall African strategy that we've got to do in the next three years, because I'm seeing sub-Sahara Africa as sort of the last frontier, it's like the new eastern Europe, it's the new Middle East in terms of growing a more sophisticated approach to shopper-marketing, so we therefore have to go there and it has to be an integral part of our Africa strategy.

**Ann: Geometry Global was launched 2 years ago and the success has been pretty impressive...**

**Jonathan:** Yes, we're only two years old but we were sort born big, so the challenge we've had is to take that size and use it positively. Being big just for the sake of being big isn't really an advantage for anybody including ourselves and our clients so to leverage that scale we've done a lot of work to create a culture of business, defining common purpose across the business, certain common ways that unify us as a network, but still allowing the flexibility and different skill sets.

I was just thinking as Steve was talking from a shopper point of view, a lot of the foundational shopper-marketing theory came out of developed markets like north America with big customers, and what we're finding now is that because of the growth in regions like Africa, a lot of clients are expanding their own business into those markets, and that means translating those principles into whole new channels, so yes you have big retailers like Shoprite in Africa, but then you still have markets like Nigeria where all the trade is done still through traditional trading.

**Ann: Then you have markets like Nigeria, where it's a completely different to anywhere else; it's very much an 'open market' environment. Yes there are some big centres being built and there is Shoprite there, but it is a very complex, difficult market. Have you got any ideas of how you would actually tackle a market as big and as complex as Nigeria?**

**Jonathan:** Yes, it builds on a lot of what I was saying, on the principle of translating in other markets. We've done a lot of work with a range of clients, understanding the general trade in the channel, and as chaotic as it might be, there are certain common principles you can identify. So we've done work with defining the different types of general trade outlet and there are three broad types, we then understand the dynamics within those such as the shopper behaviours, the needs of the shoppers, and of course shopper buying behaviour is very different in those open markets, it's a lot more common to buy cash, have less disposable income and you can still apply shopper communication principles if you understand shoppers' needs. The retailer and his or her needs are still every bit as important as Wal-Mart in North America. Leveraging technology, surprisingly - we talk about developing markets but mobile is hugely important not only as a way of connecting individuals - consumers and shoppers -but actually with retailers themselves and understanding how to leverage. Technology is critically important but there are changes. Market coverage, from a capability point of view, we have to have more than just strategic and creative ability but also to actually land the activity in the markets. That requires us to have greater execution capability in our offices, whereas in other markets, you can either outsource that or it's less significant.

**Steve:** Just to add to that, in terms of our strategy for Africa, we're doing all the things Jonathan said but we're not doing it in isolation. WPP have a lot of interests and a lot of experience there, and we're working with them to devolve what we're going to do and how we're going to structure ourselves, but I repeat it's a very important area of focus for us over the next three years.

**Ann: Let me ask you about a different market now, seeming to dominate Cannes a lot - China.**

**Steve:** Yes China is another big opportunity market for us. We have a significant presence in China. We've got offices in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and even Hong Kong, from the mainland. We have a Chinese leader; she's a lady, [Tracy](#) who is doing a great job. We have a mix of capabilities there, including the full capabilities from a shopper perspective, but most importantly is a whole field marketing operation, which you need in China because it's such a vast country, it's an army of people of around 80,000 people in the field. To quote Jonathan, we were born big in China. It's a very important market for us and we're doing very well there. We've got good growth but we still see more growth to come, because as Jonathan was saying, if the US is the most sophisticated shopper marketing place, China has got a long way to go in terms of that sophistication, but it's growing quickly, transforming, and we want to be at the forefront of being able to transform that into the strategic shopper marketing operation that we know it will become, but you will still need for many years to come that

army of people to deliver what you want in the stores for a client's business.

**Ann: In terms of your perspectives and insights from this year's Cannes Lions awards, what do you think has been the most significant for you?**

**Jonathan:** A couple of things. A general point I was saying to someone is that as Steve made clear, we're very pleased with our performance. We've come to Cannes and we think we've made an impact. But I also felt that Cannes is coming to Geometry. It's not that many years back when Cannes was led by traditional media and the like, trying to shape attitudes. you look now at the main themes, they're all about changing behaviour, connecting with people at the right moment, using technology appropriately to do so, and that's at the heart of what we're all about as an agency. There's probably never been a closer converter than what Cannes is about and what we're trying to do as an agency.

An observation you have if you walk around the boards looking at the work is that technology is ever-present now, but for the ideas that are coming through compared to those that appeared a couple of years ago, it's as if back then it was a case of 'We're entering this because of the technology', whereas now the technology is there as an enabler, but it's more transparent and it's actually the idea that matters. It's good to see that the strategy and insight.

**Ann: Completely. After listening to [SY Lau of Tencent](#)... What he says, which I think is so important, is that it's the human behind the technology, and not just technology for technology's sake but focusing on what it does to improve the lives of people. Again at this year's Cannes, it's all about a higher purpose and improving people's lives, if you look at the majority of the Gold and Grand Prix winners. It's like this is the 'Do good' Cannes awards.**

**Steve:** If we look at why that's happening, it's because consumers and shoppers are changing, with the millennials coming through, this is what they want - to engage with brands in a different way, and the brands have got to engage with them in a different way. We talk about insights of consumers and shoppers; it can get a bit like Sir Martin Sorrell's mats men scenario. But at the end of the day, behind it is a person and we have to get those insights to target our messages with that emotion; human touch in a much better way. And that will be increasingly important in Cannes going forward. At the end of the day as Jonathan said, it's about the idea and the idea getting people to change their behaviour. We've just got to do it in a more human, personal way and I see that increasing over the next five to ten years.

**Ann: What was your biggest learning, insight or overarching view from this Cannes Festival, other than your phenomenal success, that you have identified?**

**Steve:** It's an obvious one -the human emotional element has come through strongly, stronger than ever before. I've only been coming to Cannes for the last five years, but what I've seen in that is an amazing thing; the growth of clients being here has had an impact as well. Someone told me that in the past five years, it's trebled in terms of around 25% of people attending being clients, that's had a major effect. But overarching more than anything is that we're still focused on the pivot ideas and changing behaviour, great ideas are still winning through and will continue to do so, just in a more emotional and human way.

**Ann: Thank you Steve and Jonathan, I wish you lots of luck with your new office in South Africa and with your endeavours in the region.**

## ABOUT ANN NUROCK

Ann is a Partner at Relationship Audits and Management, a global consultancy that measures and optimises client /agency relationships. Her proprietary Radar tool is used by 30 corporations globally and as a result, she interacts with over 200 agencies of all disciplines. In addition to Radar, Ann attends the Cannes Lion Festival of Creativity on behalf of the SA Creative Circle and Bizcommunity and presents the trends to all sectors of business. Contact details: [Ann.nurock@relationshipaudits.com](mailto:Ann.nurock@relationshipaudits.com); LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/annnurock>. View my profile and articles...