

Treading softly - creativity in sensitive times

By [Amanda Dlamini](#)

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The world of advertising and creativity has come under great scrutiny in recent years. The rise of consumer activism has caused ordinary people throughout the world to question the integrity of brands as well as corporations at large.



Amanda Dlamini, strategic planning manager at Y&R

This has evolved beyond just good corporate citizenry to what the brands communicate through their advertising and how they display their core values. The likes of Unilever have made a bold move by aligning each of their brands with the United Nations' SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), and setting development targets for each of their brands.

Despite that, Unilever was still not exempt from recent consumer backlash on one of their most iconic brands, Dove in 2017. Dove is famous for promoting self-acceptance in women, yet when they were perceived to be promoting racist sentiment in their communication, all their previous goodwill didn't seem to matter as outraged consumers globally pledged to boycott their products.



'White like me' advert grounds Dove

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South Africa has also had its fair share of communication message *faux pas*, often related to gender and race biases that left consumers quite upset. In the last few years, brands like [Bic](#), [Telkom](#) and [Outsurance](#) have all come under fire for how they represented certain genders or races in their communication.



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Very often, agencies lay the blame on junior staff members that manage social media pages. Blame is also attributed to the

proliferation of communication elements, as media channels have increased and senior staff members are unable to approve each element before it's flighted.

Adaptation of global campaigns in local markets sometimes misses the mark and local nuances, and brands don't have big enough budgets to create locally relevant content.



Brands, Black Twitter will come for you if you are not careful

Khangelani Dziba 31 Jul 2017



But today's consumers are very unforgiving of all these excuses, and they place stricter demands on brand custodians to be attuned to societal sensitivities.

Faded Rainbow Nation communication

Race remains a contentious issue -- particularly for South Africa. Post-1994 SA saw a general spirit of openness and even humour around race issues; the concept of the Rainbow Nation was all about peaceful transition into democracy and unifying the country. South Africans welcomed the likes of Leon Schuster and his movies, TV shows like *Suburban Bliss* and even TV adverts like the iconic SABC 1 advert that illustrated how different life would be if white people lived in townships and black people in suburbs:

But the reality is that the colourful glow of Rainbow Nation-themed communication has faded. Most of the post-1994 “comedy” would be met with great contempt today as South Africans grapple with self-determination and debunking dominant stereotypes whilst struggling with daily social and psychosocial dilemmas.

The question then becomes, is this environment conducive for creativity to thrive?

“ A broader look at other creative sectors would suggest that trying times often birth the greatest creative expression. This is true in the arts, in music, fashion, poetry and literature. ”

A case can also be made for how bold advertising has played a role during challenging times in history or inspired the world to move beyond what they believed themselves to be capable of. Examples that stand out are the iconic Apple Think Different commercial, Coca Cola’s 2010 World Cup advert, P&G’s Olympic Moms and Nike’s Find Your Greatness:

So, what are the implications for South Africa's creative industry in 2018 and beyond?

1. It was TS Eliot who once said: "When forced to work within a strict framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost – and will produce its richest ideas." The creative fraternity needs to embrace the rare opportunity presented by such times.
2. There's no greater gift to creativity than a bold and fearless client. Fear has resulted in clients restricting creative ideas in order to be 'safe'. Without being reckless and insensitive, brands can still, and should be – bold and daring.
3. Creative agencies need to hire and retain culturally diverse talent and also listen to their points of view in order to truly embrace diversity. This is not just a tick-box HR exercise, but also a competitive advantage.
4. Agencies should not be just another supplier to their clients. The more integrated we are into client's businesses, understanding their values and business challenges, the more valuable we can be as strategic partners.
5. Resonating at a human-to-human level. The most timeless creative work comes from real insights into human nature.
6. Don't just hope for the best, but plan for the worst. Even the most diligent of people can miss the mark. Contingency and disaster planning is no longer a nice-to-have, but mandatory for all communications.

As advertisers, we need to be attuned to the world around us. However, we **can't allow the fear of getting things wrong to limit our creativity.**

Consumers and clients look to us for inspiration and, whilst that's become increasingly challenging, it still presents a multitude of opportunities. It was Einstein who once said that: "Creativity is intelligence having fun."

We are in the business of creativity and should embrace the nuances and challenges relevant to our diverse and layered cultural context by facing them head-on.

ABOUT AMANDA DLAMINI

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