

Branding without culture

 By [Al Mackay](#)

7 Nov 2014

I was really amused the other day, while watching an episode of The Simpsons on TV, to see a pair of weird, deadpan New Zealander musicians as the stars of the show.

The two cartoon characters, counsellors at an Arts Camp that Lisa Simpson attends, were quite clearly based on Bret and Jemaine from [Flight of the Conchords](#) - in character, occupation, voice and even the way they were drawn - although that was never mentioned in the episode.



It amused me not just because I find Flight of the Conchords really funny, but because they cropped up in an unexpected place and in an unusual way. You had to know them to realise what The Simpsons was doing. The episode made perfect sense if you didn't know them, but it was given another layer of meaning if you got the reference. It was like a giant pop-culture inside-joke, and I was on the inside. It always feels good to be on the inside.

It made me realise how much work it is to be culturally relevant.

Brands, and the people behind them, work tirelessly to become embedded in people's lives. They spend huge amounts of money figuring out what their consumers' needs are and then tailoring their messaging and product benefits to meet those needs. That's all very important and you would have no hope of being relevant as a brand if you did not do that. But is it enough to understand consumers' needs? In order to stand out and catch their attention, do you not need to also understand their cultural context?

Relatability

Brand strategies rest on universal human truth. There is a nugget of genuine human insight at the core of every strong brand. We all want to feel happy (Coca Cola), we all want to feel safe (Volvo), we all want to feel recognised for what we have achieved (Premium banking, premium spirits) or who we are (Dove). Brands appeal to us when they represent a human truth that resonates with us, that we can relate to.

But although human needs and truths are universal, not everything that we relate to is. Relating to something requires it to feel familiar, and that familiarity is often incredibly culturally specific. When global brands enter a market, they know they have to localise the language, and often the demographics in their ads. But for the brand to feel genuinely relevant and not lose anything in translation it needs to localise much more than that - it needs to understand and reference existing cultural content.

That cultural content takes the form of existing local aesthetics, cultural traditions, well-known stories, pop icons and generally accepted beliefs, amongst other things. Consumers don't exist in a vacuum, and brands are much more engaging when they reference that context. Universal human needs are true, but they can also feel a little generic without insight into cultural context and content too. Brands that "get" the culture are so much more relatable to those within it.

Nando's does a great job with mashing up news and political stories to get their message across, and they referenced izikhothane culture before many people knew about it. Simba ran a great campaign last year that referenced humorous township youth culture of "[niks mapha](#)." And many designers are starting to pay attention to our local aesthetic traditions - using shwe-shwe patterns or referencing VOC motifs, for example. But I think the majority of South African brands still don't understand enough about the culture of most South African consumers.

How often are African stories and folklore, rather than Western ones, referenced in advertising campaigns? How many African culture inside-jokes crop up in marketing messaging? Many brands are scrambling to win over the black middle class - but until they "get" the cultural context (and not just the consumer needs), I think those brands will only ever be half relevant.

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Content Strategist at Yellowwood

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