Purpose-driven communications in Africa

By Louise Marsland

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The future direction of purpose-driven communications in Africa and how purpose-driven communications can drive sustainable growth and sustainable development, was under the microscope at the recent Holmes Report In2 Innovation Summit in Johannesburg, in a panel discussion with Brian Tjugum, the UK-based managing director for Weber Shandwick's EMEA Social impact practice.

Brian Tjugum, managing director, Weber Shandwick EMEA Social Impact practice.

Tjugum told Bizcommunity.Africa in an interview following on his presentation, that brand purpose should be at the top of all brand and communications strategy.

The context of the conversation took place in how fake news is leaving consumers uncertain about how they digest content, and with economic growth at a low, globally, how do private and public sectors ensure that their sustainability programmes are adding value to their organisations and broader communities in which they operate?

He also spoke on the current evolution of the traditional drivers of purpose and the role of the communications function in shaping our world – in the context of Africa and the more 'Afro-optimist', 'Africa Rising', narrative currently influencing the global conversation on Africa.

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Tjugum, who has worked across Europe and the United States, as well as 15 developing countries, providing communications counsel in creating lasting social change around the world, said we have to talk about doing business for sustainability development and for business growth.

"Purpose-driven communications is the who and the what of the organisation. We are helping our clients to deliver a purpose statement that leads with those values that underscores their ethics and the how and why."

Purpose-driven strategy

Tjugum quotes eBay CEO, Devin Wenig's question to brands on fulfilling purpose: "What hole would be left in the universe, what would be missed, if we were not doing what we are doing?"

That, reiterates Tjugum, forces us to put brand purpose at the top of all strategy, communications architecture and brand strategy.

"Putting it at the top and explaining the why. Why do we exist? Why also taps into an emotional reception in your audiences. We also need to be engaging our audiences more emotively – both stakeholders and consumers."

The drivers of a purpose-based brand and communications strategy come from consumers, shareholders and employees.

"Nearly nine in 10 consumers believe purpose should be as important as profit. It is the same in South Africa. Consumers are likely to buy from brands that are caring for people and the planet and giving back to consumers.

"Then, nearly eight in 10 young employees under 30, are choosing a place to work where the values are in line with their own. It is an incredible statistic. Young people want to work towards a good cause and make a contribution to the environment, work for a cause, towards a social purpose.

There is as much as a 30% increase in productivity in organisations where this happens," Tjugum states.

From the investor side, companies need to deliver societal impact. Proof is in the fact that of all global assets being managed, a quarter of total wealth assets fall into socially responsible investing (SRI): $23 trillion in assets.

"That means that investors are increasingly looking for that shareholder return, which is essential, but not the only thing. Companies see the value… their purpose is now to uplift people and improve their lives, not just their customers, but he lives of all people."

Tjugum said companies were now also adopting the United Nations SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals).

"That kind of focus really helps. We have moved beyond corporates just writing cheques. They are still contributing to worthy non-profits, but they need to look bigger. The SDGs are a wonderful benchmark and these SDGs differed from the millennial goals by bringing the private sector in, as that is where the money lies.

Challenges ahead

There are obviously still challenges to adopting a purpose-driven brand approach, explains Tjugum:

- Sometimes the leadership of a company, including the board members, don't want to take risks. They may have pet

projects or the company may have a charitable foundation, but executive leadership need to be convinced to support purpose-driven branding.

- Another obstacle is a concern about putting themselves out there too much, by making commitments that they cannot achieve. “We advise that bold audacious goals are meant to inspire and challenge a company, but do not have to be met or exceeded like a monthly sales target.”
- There is a trend in CEO activism, so even cautious businesses realise that they need to take a stand on an issue. “We are seeing a trend of people boycotting companies that do bad things, making purchase decisions on company values. They are also looking at the CEO – they want to see the CEO taking a stand.”
- Driven by cultural movements with greater citizen activism shaping social agendas; millennials and the youth are questioning societal norms, challenging the status quo. “That won’t stop, no matter who is in office, conservative or progressive, in South African and in other countries… young people are demanding transparency, there are anti-corruption efforts… I have a lot of faith in our young people.”
- Africa’s youth bulge can become a youth dividend, rather than a youth risk, if governments get it right and if business can support initiatives to engage the unemployed, Tjugum says. “I am an optimist… We saw this in China in the 70s and Asia, where they turned their youth bulge into the Asian tiger.”

Communications is helping shape the world, he believes. “We believe that purpose and purpose-shaped business strategies are there to shape and change the world. Through storytelling we are creating tangible impact as through storytelling we inspire and engage others.”

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

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: FMCG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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