

Africa will no longer be a victim of 'image'

I work with a client who is a business leader in the telecommunications industry in Africa. He insists that his perception of risk when it comes to doing business in Africa is different from most people because he never bases his opinion of any country on a Google search.

By [Mmi Kalinda](#) 18 Jan 2019



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For example, if he believes that there are opportunities for business in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), he travels and spends a considerable amount of time there, meets decision-makers, understands their agendas, and conducts extensive on-the-ground, first-hand research before drawing conclusions about the DRC's business environment.

This approach resonates with me because it recognises that the media has the power to create and count stereotypes. It is also aligned with a belief I have always strongly held: reputation is measurable and quantifiable.

A country's image influences the flow of tourism, its ability to attract FDI, and global sentiment about what to expect from its policy makers, and a Google search and word of mouth are all it takes to either attract or deter favourable attention from potential investors.

Image influences behaviour. Perceptions matter. With this theory as a starting point, here are what I have identified as key trends for 2019...

We will no longer be image victims

In 2019, reputation management will play a critical role in Africa's development. We are becoming increasingly aware that perceptions can be deliberately created, managed and measured. We do not have to be helpless victims of stereotypical and negative stories about Africa. We can define and shape how the world thinks and talks about Africa.

This is not just a job for storytellers and media, but for policy makers, corporate leaders and multinationals, social sector organisations and individuals. Countries like Rwanda have shown us that the careful and

deliberate management of our image can shape the outcome of our economies.

The role of communications and reputation management will be recognised as increasingly vital in 2019, and put to its rightful use in order to move the continent forward.

We can influence the polls via social media

The DRC just elected a new president and most Congolese people living abroad can testify to having spent a few sleepless nights over the past few weeks glued to their smartphones and Twitter to keep abreast of how the elections, which unfolded like a soap opera, were developing. They also used the platform to comment and attempt to influence choices.

Internet access in the DRC was eventually cut off by the government to curb speculation. Nevertheless, social media and increased access to data and smartphones have heightened the democratisation of our political systems. Despite some incumbent governments' wariness towards the internet and the power that yields, social media activism has been known to effect real change, even in the African context - a trend that will continue to grow in 2019 as many countries, including Nigeria, go to the polls.

We are changing how we view leadership by watching African women in action

It has never been a more exciting time to be an African woman working in Africa. With the continent's increasing economic growth and political stability, we see a critical mass of strong female leaders in various industries taking centre stage and changing the way we think about women in positions of power as they give us proof points of success. Africa is increasingly starting to include and leverage the other half of its brain power, and the results will be positively impactful for all of us.

Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia and recently Ethiopia, have exhibited progressive mindsets in elevating women to leadership in government and also the private sector. We look forward to more of the same across the continent in 2019.

The information and reputation industry must innovate to survive

The information and reputation management industry (I consider it one and the same), including public relations, communications, media and marketing, will have to take an introspective approach in 2019, as it can no longer ignore the shifts that technology will force upon its business models.

The recent collapse of Ndalo Media, one of South Africa's most respected media houses, came as a shock for many in the industry. The way people create, consume and distribute information is changing rapidly with each new app, program and website that hits our smartphones and computers. The industry will need to reshape how it operates to retain market share and profitability.

Decision-makers have access to various tools to determine whether or not to engage with certain countries and do business in Africa: the "Ease of Doing Business Index", the governance index, and many others. Reputation should have an index of its own. It is vital to influencing decision-making and, by default, continental growth.

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