

Africa will ignite what is next

 By [Thabang Skwambane](#) 19 Jan 2026

Africa is sitting on the world's greatest creative advantage, and most people still underestimate. Globally, marketers are spending billions on martech and AI. Worldwide spend is projected to pass \$200bn by 2027, and marketing teams now invest close to a third of their budgets in technology. Yet almost every study says the same thing: organisations only use about half of what they buy.



Thabang Skwambane is the CEO of Nahana Communications Group. Source: Supplied

Renting the future

That is the global context. Here in South Africa, and across the continent, the picture is different. We are renting the future instead of owning it. Our data, behaviour and languages feed into systems built in New York, London and Singapore.

Most African organisations are still in the early stages of AI and digital readiness, held back by legacy systems, limited skills and fragmented data. But this is also the continent with the most powerful creative engine on the planet.

Africa is the youngest place in the world. Seventy percent of sub-Saharan Africa is under 30. The median age is under 20. In 20 years, we will still be one of the youngest global regions. That is not a demographic curiosity. That is raw, unstoppable potential. It is our creative superpower if we choose to invest in it.

The truth is that trends, as we talk about them, are backwards-looking. They are summaries of things that have already happened. By the time something becomes a trend, the movement has already been built in communities, subcultures and informal networks. In fashion, gaming, street culture and nightlife, the rhythm is consistent. A movement starts on the ground, gains momentum, reshapes behaviour and shifts language. Only later is it packaged and presented as a trend.



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Better aspirations

Marketers often celebrate themselves for spotting trends early, but the opportunity for Africa is bigger than that. We should not aspire to be better trend chasers. We should be building the movements that the rest of the world will eventually call trends. With the youngest and most culturally dynamic population in the world, one is better positioned to do this than us.

To unlock this opportunity, we need a fundamental shift in how we think about technology. Globally, AI and martech have moved from optional tools to essential growth drivers. Locally, technology is still treated as a cost to negotiate down instead of an asset to co-own and co-create. We license international tools, underutilise them and then repeat the cycle.

Africa does not win by licensing other people's infrastructure. We win by building our own.

That requires co-investment instead of procurement. It means creating data systems built for African realities. These include identity graphs, clean rooms, retail media exchanges and models that reflect how our people actually live and buy.



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It means building AI that understands isiZulu, Yoruba, Sesotho or Kiswahili with the same precision it understands English. And it means building measurement frameworks that recognise the economic value of the informal market, including spaza shops, taxi ranks and cash-based ecosystems.

At Nahana, we have started building our own AI and data ecosystem with a clear intention. It cannot be a closed box that benefits only us. If we say our purpose is to build brands that build Africa, then our capabilities must help build African brands broadly, whether they are small or large, local or multinational, as long as they are committed to rooting themselves in Africa's reality. When clients and agencies are willing to co-own this infrastructure and share both risk and reward, we stop renting a digital future. We start writing an African one.

Our biggest lever is still our youth. They are often positioned as a challenge or a risk. Yes, unemployment is real. Yes, systems are under pressure. Beneath that narrative is the greatest pool of creative, technical and entrepreneurial potential on Earth.



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Invest in capabilities

We can already see hints of what the future could be. Creators in Lagos, Nairobi, Accra and Johannesburg are building audiences the size of traditional broadcasters. Township entrepreneurs are using short-form video and social commerce to sell products and build sustainable micro-businesses. Young coders, edito

and designers are using open-source tools and generative AI to work on global projects from their homes. These are not exceptions. They are early examples of what the next African economy could look like.

To make this real at scale, we need to invest in capabilities, infrastructure and accessible markets. We need digital, data and creative skills built directly into schooling, tertiary education and vocational training. We need public and private investment in affordable devices, reliable connectivity, cloud access and safe spaces where young people can create and collaborate.

And we need frictionless trade across African cities and countries, so that a designer in Gqeberha can sell into Lusaka, Lagos or London without unnecessary barriers.

Marketing has a meaningful role in this transformation. This industry understands behaviour. We know how to remove friction. We know how to shift people from interest to action. Those same muscles, applied beyond campaigns, can help move millions of young people from the margins into full participation.



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Being brave

So, what does this mean for marketing leaders thinking about 2026 and beyond? It means being brave enough to stop renting tools and start building platforms. It means designing for movements rather than moments. It means ensuring that every campaign leaves something behind, whether that is IP, skills development, new suppliers, new platforms or new economic value.

Africa's creative superpower is not only our music, humour, talent, languages or cultural energy. It is the exponential potential we unlock when creativity meets data, technology and ownership.

Trends will come and go. Movements endure. If we invest in African capability, African platforms and African youth today, the trends the world will talk about in the next decade will be the story of what we built together.

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