

Youth vs. brands: Who wins?

By [Pat Mahlangu](#)

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The idea of interacting with digital natives, who have been swiping on touch screens since they were in diapers, can be intimidating for companies and organisations, but there is simply no way out of this arena for any brand that wants to capture the youth.



Source: Jonathan Petersson from [Pexels](#)

Brands these days must face the challenge of speaking to the sensibilities of these device wielding, opinionated and impatient humans who are always ready to move on to the next thing. After all, young people have the potential to bring forth fresh ideas, groundbreaking inventions and leadership that can change things for the better.

As American professor David Aaker puts it "the brand is the most valuable real estate asset in the world, a corner of the customer's mind". The young mind, according to me, is the most precious of all corners to occupy because it represents the future of our society.

This asset is so precious that during every election, the Independent Electoral Commission releases messaging aimed at enticing young people to vote. The fact that South Africans observe the month of June, to honour the youth of 1976 for changing the cause of history by fighting against an unjust system, is another reminder of how important it is to consider the youthful voice.



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In the past, companies could spend millions on ad campaigns to capture people's attention, and this was nearly enough to get the job done. But the audience has evolved into one that can choose to ignore your loud ad or colourful poster and move onto other business. Mobile phones, tablets and laptops have created a situation where people are forever plugged in

and exposed to an avalanche of information.

“ *An information intensive world means that brands need to be more innovative to stay relevant.* ”

People will always gravitate towards brands that they love. I repeat these words incessantly at the expense of sounding like a broken record. A generation that is said to be more self-absorbed than any other in the history of humanity is bound to expect to see a better reflection of themselves in a brand.

This is the generation that invented the cancel culture, a phenomenon that has seen prominent personalities get fired from their jobs over a hashtag or tweet. While public protest in the traditional sense still exists, people do not necessarily have to spend months making submissions to governments and picketing outside of buildings to get what they want.



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Brands that allow young people to lead the conversation instead of trying to dictate to them will win the day. Those who are hell-bent on creating conversations based on what they imagine to be best, will fail in this exercise.

As a young person myself, I will tell you this: you cannot dictate to us. Instead, join in on our conversations and allow us to create the story with you. Marketing guru Seth Godin says you should be empathetic to the people you are trying to reach and if you have the keyboard, you can touch the culture. But it's how you choose to use that keyboard that matters. "Put yourself in the shoes of the people you are trying to serve," Godin says.

In this arena, the youth wins. The best brands will allow this win to happen effortlessly, as they explore the stories that are waiting to be told.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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