

But can they convert the lives they changed into active brand communities?

By [Bandile Ndzishe](#)

3 Nov 2016

One of my marketing articles, titled, [Is it wise for brands to insult black township consumers who are worth R100 billion](#), had a segment on building brand communities, through brand activism.

In that segment I reminded retailers, brands, marketers and advertisers not to have cockeyed delusions about consumers' loyalty, because consumers are more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than in the brands themselves.

The need for human beings to belong continues to govern our lives. That's why in every community you'll find many social organisations. However, it is very rare to discover that some of these social organisations are brand communities. This is an opportunity untapped by brands, retailers, marketers and advertisers. Marketing and advertising leaders can grow brand communities by tapping into the need for social links, through providing avenues that foster "personal interactions between your customers".

From brand to cult.

DISCUSSION:
Some brands are able to transform customers into passionate brand advocates. How do they do it?



Image credit: [flickr.com](#)

In all industries, and across the board, active and engaged brand communities remain elusive. They are few and far in between. Retailers, brands, marketers and advertisers are very short-sighted in not exploiting this opportunity. The first step to building fervent brand communities who are advocates for your products and services is through philanthropy and corporate social investment.

Philanthropy and great humanitarian generosity root out socio-economic deprivation, foster deep connections with consumers and build strong die-hard brand communities.

Consumers' lives are changed, and bad personal circumstances of poverty are improved. ABSA and Coca-Cola get it. Build it and Tiger Brands' Ace Maize Meal get it too. All other retailers and brands, which are not mentioned in this article, who are reaching out to consumers through any kind of humanitarian work, also get it. This is how these retailers and brands are getting it:

ABSA gives its customers a share of R20 million and donates R10 million for the 'missing middle' students of the #FeesMustFall movement

1. 'Thanks a million' campaign



Image credit: absa.co.za

ABSA's 'Thanks a million' campaign gives ABSA customers up to R150,000 each, and another R150,000 for the charity of the winner's choice, if they have two products with ABSA. At random, ABSA knocks at a consumer's door with a silver briefcase, loaded with envelopes that have different amounts of money to be won. The maximum amount an ABSA client can win from an envelope is R100,000. If they bank with ABSA and have two ABSA products, they get to pick an envelope twice.

If they are lucky enough to pick an envelope with R100,000, and another with R50,000 (the second biggest amount one can win), they get to keep their winnings totalling R150,000. ABSA then pays the same amount of money – another R150 000 – to someone else chosen by the winner or a charity of the winner's choice. The winnings are part of one's share of over R20 million to be won.

2. R10 million donation to undergraduate students of the #FeesMustFall movement

ABSA's manna from heaven does not seem to end. The bank has donated R10m toward supporting "missing middle" undergraduate students of the #FeesMustFall movement, at the University of the Witwatersrand. The money would be allocated for the funding of at least 250 students.

Coca-Cola's 'Coke Studio Campaign' captures the hearts and minds of consumers by providing a place for musicians to create and share music, musical tips, advice, and inspiration with like-minded musicians, on live television.



Image credit: kenyanpoet.com

Look at Coca-Cola's Coke Studio. Observe how this campaign is building the South African music community and the

African continent's music communities. Coke Studio gives a platform, physical studio space, studio time, studio sessions, mentorship and support to musicians from around South Africa and Africa to collaborate and make hits. Different musicians from around Africa are given 48 hours to write, produce and perform their music hits live on television. Through this campaign, Coca-Cola has managed to build strong brand communities through brand activism.

Coca-Cola created a TV platform that extends to various online mediums, building additional online and social media brand communities in the process. The campaign's presence is integrated on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, et cetera.

Build it improves lives of ordinary South Africans through home renovations: The 'Sinawe' campaign

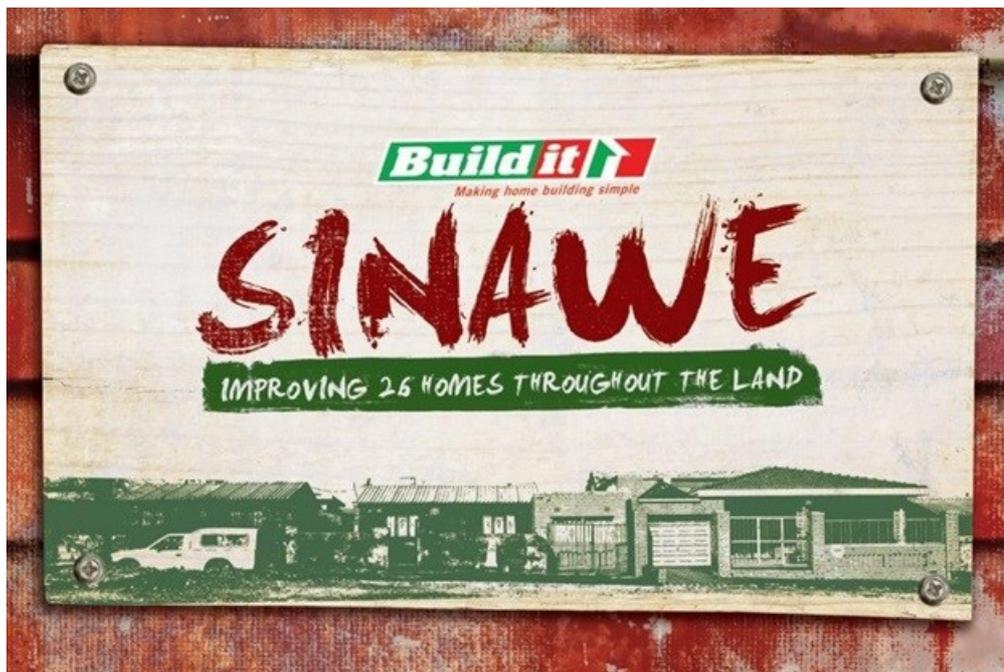


Image credit: Buildit.co.za

Through the 'Sinawe' campaign, Build it, in conjunction with e.tv, creates opportunities for their retailers to connect with their customers and communities. The company travels around the country and to the neighbouring countries of Lesotho, Swaziland and Namibia, in search of 26 consumer homes that are in dire need of renovations. Once they find such homes and families, they make their dreams come true by dispensing building and renovation expert advice, which is followed by the renovation of homes. The Sinawe campaign is captured on rolling cameras and 26 episodes of the show are produced. It is then shown on e.tv as the *Build it Sinawe home renovation* TV show.

First, it was 'The Perfect Ace', a TV cooking show with a modern twist, and now Tiger Brands rewards its customers with R1,000 cash voucher for stocking Ace Maize Meal

1. The Perfect Ace TV cooking show

Each week this past winter, Ace Maize Meal, in association with e.tv, visited the kitchens of ordinary South Africans and cooked for the people, a three-course meal which matched the occasion of the day. Ace Maize Meal tantalised their customers' and e.tv viewers' taste buds with an Ace Maize Meal cooking show, *The Perfect Ace*.

Using the culinary skills of well-known TV chef and bistro queen, Chef Nthabiseng "Nti" Ramaboa, the show celebrated everyday South African meals and provided new and easy ways to prepare them, using Ace Maize Meal. The shared cooking experience provided a bonding experience between a brand and its customers. There was also an exciting and creative modern twist on traditional maize meal recipes.

2. Ace Maize Meal 'Koko' campaign



Image credit: acemaizemeal.co.za

The Ace Maize Meal 'Koko' campaign team knocks on consumer's door. The consumer shows them any Ace pack, and she/he instantly wins an instant cash voucher to the value of R1,000! The negative aspect of this campaign is that it snubs and alienates Tiger Brands' customers in seven provinces. It only rewards Gauteng and KZN customers. This is a flat-out insult to every Ace Maize Meal lover who does not reside in these two provinces. Even with the 13-episode cooking reality show, *The Perfect Ace*, the Ace Maize Meal chef only travelled in and around Gauteng, visiting homes only in one province.

This inconsiderate mismanagement of some of Ace Maize Meal brand communities through the acts of exclusion says that Ace Maize Meal customers, who are not in Gauteng or KZN, are good enough to be supplied with the Ace Maize Meal, but are not good enough to be included in the competitions, prizes and winnings. I think Xhosa consumers who inhabit mostly the Eastern and Western Capes, would be amongst those scores of consumers who feel excluded the most, because their staple food, *umphokoqo*, is cooked with a lot of Ace Maize Meal. I love my *umphokoqo* and use the Ace brand to cook it, but I don't hear knocks at my front door from Ace Maize Meal because I'm in the wrong province. Most South African brands are guilty of this notoriety. They always host their major events-shows, competitions, community-outreach programmes, etc., only in Gauteng. This is not good for any company's brand community.

Can the above-mentioned brands (and all other brands) convert the lives they've touched and changed into active and engaged brand communities?

1. What happens after these campaigns are over? Will the momentum end with them?
2. Will ABSA, Coca-Cola, Build it and Tiger Brands' Ace Maize Meal brand seize the opportunity and convert these consumers, from being apathetic customers into active, engaged and passionate brand communities?
3. What are the strategies and tactics in place for turning average customers into brand advocate superheroes?
4. Are there any well-considered actions on how to create strong affection for their respective brands that their customers would feel compelled to become active brand champions?
5. What are the programs put in place for cultivating brand communities?
6. How would such programs run and succeed?
7. When is the next social gathering of these newly formed brand communities and what are the planned social engagements for these groups?
8. When are the next community-outreach events which involve these brand community members?
9. Are retailers, brands, marketers and advertisers doing enough to tap into their existing customers by converting them into ardent and die-hard brand community members?
10. Is there a budget for building brand communities?
11. What about time investment and dedicated human resources for it?
12. Is the building of a brand community a high-level business strategy as it should?

Building powerful brand communities who are die-hard and fervent groups of consumers organised around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of your brands is the way of the future for brands, retailers, marketers and advertisers

We want consumers to love our companies, our brands and our products. We don't just want to settle for 'like'. We want 'LOVE'. We want to engender a very strong feeling of affection for brands, retailers, products and services.

Why can't our retailers and brands be loved the same way fans go crazy about the rock stars? I believe this is possible for brands. In fact, it is already happening. Apple is loved and followed like a cult.

The answer lies in the following, which must be wrapped inside brand communities, not outside:

1. Offer products and services that undeniably - not questionably – provide the solutions they claim to offer.
2. Your products and services must fix the problems they profess to fix.
3. Have complaint handling systems that work.
4. No more long bank queues at the banks.
5. No more long checkout queues at the grocery stores.
6. No more holding on for a very long time when calling the call centres.
7. Why must consumers listen to more than 10 IVR choices, when calling the call centres? Then they select one choice, which has a further eight choices! Overall, five or less is enough.
8. Customers' time must be respected. Some make calls to call centres during their lunch hour and cannot afford to hold on for the whole lunch hour. Some go to the bank or grocery store during their lunch hour and cannot afford to exceed the hour. If they do, the same bosses give them verbal or written warnings, when they return late from lunch. This unfair vicious circle must come to an end.
9. Let us fix our systems and make sure that they work. Whilst at it, let's understand why the world does not work and thus create products that fix some of the world's problems. Who wouldn't want to buy such products? We do this through innovation. We force ourselves to be amazingly inventive. An article titled [#InnovationMonth: Mastering innovation and marketing at retail](#) will get you started.

Brand community strategy builds brand value: Brand communities spread information, influence decisions, and help new ideas and products gain traction.

If building the value of your brand is one of your marketing and advertising priorities, then add the development of brand communities to your list of prioritised business strategies. Develop a well-defined brand community strategy. Through brand communities, your brand will be able to increase brand value and create brand demand. Brand communities serve the following purposes for brands:

1. Despite the huge availability of brand-related information on the internet, a major factor influencing brand preference is still consumer advocacy.
2. Brand communities increase the effectiveness of your other marketing initiatives.
3. Buy more products and services.
4. Remain loyal to brands.
5. Create product demand.
6. Reduce marketing costs through grassroots evangelism.
7. Members of a brand community drive the brand message, and their passion for it, into the market.
8. They are the best promoters for the brand.
9. Generate more value for the brand, its products and services. If it is seen in numbers, it must be important to have. Look at the consumers who camp out overnight and stand in very long queues to get an iPhone, every time a new one comes out.
10. They facilitate innovation and new product design and development. If brand communities don't like how a product works, they communicate immediately and make suggestions for product improvements and developments.
11. Selective brand communities help you collect important data, both quantitative and qualitative, to get a better understanding and build a detailed profile of who you're selling to.
12. Brand communities feed the innate need of human beings for forging social links, fostering personal interactions, developing friendships, creating personal connections, finding emotional support, getting peer-to-peer assistance and

expanding social networks. Let your brand be the focal point of such social links and societal norms.

13. They help brands understand consumers on their own terms. Not through research, but actual interactions with the brand.
14. Through participating in brand community activities, executives get to spend time in the field with customers. By so doing they bring their first-hand insights back to the company and can use such insights to formulate effective product strategies and close-to-the-customer business strategies.
15. Brand members rarely practice brand-switching, instead, they promote the brand actively, and often try to convert others into becoming “brand believers”.
16. You can leverage and integrate your brand community insights with CRM.

An article titled [SA's top 50 valuable brands in 2016: What constitutes brand value](#), will also help your creativity, innovation and keenness in building your brand value. The article answers the following critical questions about building the value of your brand:

1. What is a brand value?
2. What does it mean?
3. Why is it important?
4. How to get it, have it and keep it?

In conclusion

There would be no brands and retailers without brand communities who continue to show allegiance to all multi-national companies. The results and benefits of building, running and maintaining brand communities can be demonstrated through two great examples:

1. The SAP Community Network (SCN)

The SAP Community Network (SCN) has over 2,5m active brand community members. SAP software users, developers, consultants, mentors and students use the SAP Community Network to get help, share ideas, learn, innovate and connect with others. SCN enjoys the title of having the most extensive use of social media by a corporate, with an average of 2 million unique visitors each month. The visitors use the wealth of information that has been shared on the site.

SCN community members range from massive multi-national companies such as Bose, Disney, etc. What makes this brand community to be highly successful is the fact that almost all the members are highly involved and eager to contribute time and expertise to grow the strength of the network. End results: More SAP products are sold/purchased because of the product support from the brand community. Brand community members who are experts are always advocating for new products in the form of upgrades to facilitate product speed and efficiency. This means more sales for SAP.

2. Harley-Davidson's Harley Owners Group (HOG): The Brotherhood and Sisterhood of riders

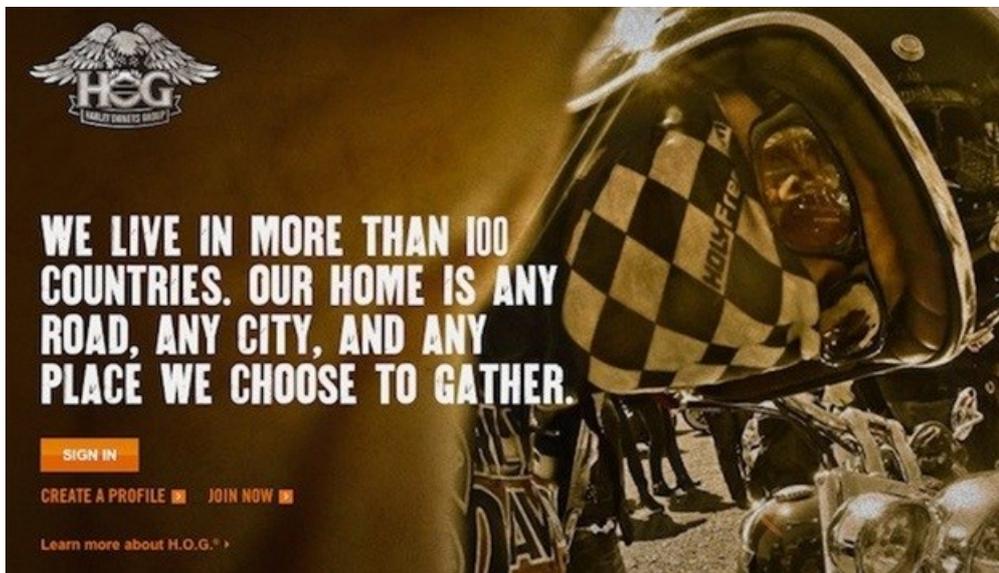


Image credit: hog.com

Harley-Davidson has well-documented and highly publicised brand communities around the world, with over one million strong and active members. More than thirty years after facing extinction in 1983, Harley-Davidson boasts a spot as one of the top-50 global brands. Harley's commitment to building brand communities was instrumental in its turnaround, and subsequent success. The brand community strategy helped in saving the company from extinction in 1983.

Harley-Davidson reformulated its competitive strategy around a brand community. For instance, all community-outreach events are staffed by employees, not freelance contractors. Many employees become riders; many riders join the company.

The company's brand communities are organised using global chapters. Each chapter is affiliated to a dealership and is sponsored by it. Brand community enthusiasts don't only share their loyalty to a brand. For them, Harley-Davidson symbolises a culture and a way of life which can be found all over the world. From the inception infancy stages in the 1980s, the idea has always been about diligently building up a brand community based around shared lifestyles, tastes, and ethos. The highly passionate consumers connect and engage both online and in the real physical world.

I am very zealous about building, running and maintaining active, engaged and passionate brand communities. I would love to help retailers, brands, marketers and advertisers to build and leverage brand communities around their own brands. If you are interested, you like what I do, my beliefs or ideas, please go ahead and connect with me at bandzishe@bandzishe.com or visit www.bandzishe.com.

My mind is always buzzing. New, exciting, creative and actionable ideas are forming all the time. Think Harley-Davidson devotees, fixated Playstation gamers, and Apple, the cult figure brand with an infatuated built-in fan base. Brand-community members buy more, create demand, remain loyal and reduce marketing costs through consumer advocacy and grassroots evangelism.

ABOUT BANDILE NDZISHE

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