

What we can learn from ants

 By [Megan Sayle](#), issued by [Dentsu](#)

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I recently read an article on Wired which made me stop and think just a little longer than other articles I've come across lately. The line that caught my attention was **"ants never get stuck in traffic jams, here's why"**.



The article goes into greater detail about why this is the case, and you can read it [here](#) and while this article really was focused on traffic flow, and quite interestingly, about how we can learn from them in our implementation of autonomous vehicles, it actually made me realise there was a lot of likeness that could be taken from how ants interact and what makes, not only successful agency teams function, but successful brands grow – especially in Africa.

Firstly, what can we learn from ants as media, strategy, creative and client service teams?

"Ants are a textbook example of collective behaviour. A few ants spaced well apart behave like individual ants. But pack enough of them closely together, and they behave more like a single unit, exhibiting both solid and liquid properties."
(Wired)

The one thing that's always true in advertising agencies is that, on the good days and the bad days, you're working in a team. This certainly isn't a solo job, there's no coming in at 9, working with your headphones on until 5 and getting out, it's people, collaboration and brainstorming for eight hours (if you're lucky) every day, five days a week. I, among a lot of people in our industry, probably count this as a blessing – what's better than getting to work alongside like-minded people bouncing ideas off each other and learning from one another constantly? What it can also mean, however, is a whole lot of traffic jams. Individuals will always have different ideas, different opinions and different ways of working – and it takes a very special team, normally with good leaders, for things to go smoothly all the time.

So, what can we learn from ants? When we're packed closely together, forced into operating as a single unit, we have to exhibit both our solid and our liquid qualities. We need to trust our individual ideas enough to have an opinion, and be able to bend when we need to, for the greater good of our work. The best work is born out of collaboration – we need to try and imitate the textbook example of collective behaviour that ants achieve. Like one of my own team members said, *"Playing your good-idea cards close to your chest isn't a smart move... being able to recognise that most of your ideas will most likely be partially formed, takes quite a bit of humbling."* (Graham Deneys). It's this mentality that we try and foster in our teams; each end result is the output of every member of the team, not just an individual; someone is always responsible for the work, but in the end, we're all accountable.

Secondly, what can we learn from ants on how brands should behave on the African continent, and how we, as our client's partners, should push them to behave?

"Ants are notoriously much better than humans at organising their collective traffic flow when foraging for food... Even in dense, crowded conditions, ant colonies still manage to maintain a smooth and efficient traffic flow, primarily by adjusting their behaviour to adapt to changing circumstances... Ants self-regulate, adapting the "rules" as needed when things start to get crowded." (Wired)

This statement is almost self-explanatory in how it should guide our brands and how we work with them to appear on the African continent. It is vital that we have systems and processes that we follow, ones that are proven to work in marketing across the world. We need these to build proper a proper base as a brand and to succeed on the continent. However, what is almost even more vital is that we are completely agile on a continent that changes not only everyday but every hour, and where something that worked last week might not work at all today. We need to constantly learn, adjust and readjust in order to create successful "traffic flows" for our brands, our consumers and ourselves. We need to be able to accept when something isn't working and let it go, and by the same token accept that something works even if we didn't rationally think it would.

Lastly, to sum up what we can learn from ants (although this article is not exhaustive; I haven't even delved into their super-human strength), I think this paragraph from the Wired article sums it up quite nicely:

"Traffic jams are ubiquitous in human society where individuals are pursuing their own personal objectives... In contrast, ants share a common goal: the survival of the colony, thus they are expected to act cooperatively to optimise food return."

At the end of the day, whether you are an agency or a brand, your end goal is the same: work collaboratively, not individually, to best optimise your food return.

ABOUT MEGAN SAYLE

Megan Sayle graduated with a BA degree, majoring in English and Philosophy, from the University of Stellenbosch. She continued her studies, completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Marketing, Advertising and Communications at Red and Yellow in Cape Town. Megan now works as an SSA Strategist at Carat, part of the Dentsu Aegis Network, across a number of clients with the goal of redefining media and communications for Carat's clients.

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