

The 5 "S's" to understanding the youth mindset

By [Brad Stern](#)

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I was asked by a client, "How should we 'talk' to the youth?" The short answer; "To talk to the youth, you need to understand the youth mindset." But it got me thinking and looking for answers, for my own agency, brand strategies, and campaigns for clients.



Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

This particular client is looking to establish their brand in the minds of the "teenager", a high school kid in South Africa.

Over the past few weeks, in building their brand strategy, I've been discussing this animal, called the teenager with some friends, colleagues, clients and industry leaders and asking them for their input.



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No fear of failing

One thing I've noticed in teenagers is a huge amount of confidence. They exude confidence. No fear of failing. When they do fail, they pick themselves up and try again. In my days, I was generally scared to try things. My world was small. Some friends, my school and some access to the world via TV and my Dad's Sunday newspaper. Their world is open and full of opportunity.

They have likely accessed more information in their 18 or so years, than most of us 30 year-old-pluses have in our lifetime.

This confidence makes them brave. Like a teenager, I'm brave enough to admit I don't have the answers and that the best advice comes from experts.

These experts gave me their input. I've weaved that into some of the insights I've gathered. In a lot of our agencies activations, we get to talk face to face with the target market, the actual high school learner.



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That forms the basis of this insight into youth marketing and the media and consumption of this target market we older marketers don't seem to understand.

I'll break it down into the simplest form. My 5 S's. Quotes from some youth, coupled with some insights from some "in the know"

1. Social –

"You can't email me because I don't have an email address. We see emails like you guys see fax machines. I'll find you if I like you." Jon, 15 years old, Cape Town.

"Youth advertising has changed rapidly in the past few years due to technological advances and the youths' access to the internet. Some key communication is often lost when speaking to the youth via mobile as your message is a swipe away from being redundant to them. Face-to-face advertising is an amazing "old-school" medium that is uninterrupted, direct and very personal." Phumi Masango, media strategist, Carat.

2. Simple –

"Don't overcomplicate things. We don't have time for complicated messaging, just get straight to the point!" Jett, 16 years old, Johannesburg.

"To connect with the youth of today it is important to be authentic as a brand, keep your messaging personal and relevant, and most of all - keep it simple to not waste people's precious time because they don't have much to spare!" Ashleigh Melvill, brand activation manager, Adidas Emerging Markets.

3. Speak –

"Talk to me in my language. English is fine, but don't adult talk me, I'm a teenager and that's a whole different language" Phylis, 16 years old, Pretoria.

"If we (youth) don't like it, if it makes us uncomfortable, then it is probably on-trend. Culturally relevant marketing are changes and movements away from established thinking. Not always just reinterpretation thereof. " Phil Venter, "Titles are what old people aspire to. Lame" (But also the founder of www.snow.africa).

OK, if your attention span is like mine, I've broken this up into 3 sets of quotes and then the rest to follow. Take a 2-minute break; get distracted by a new WhatsApp...

OK, welcome back...

Middle-aged marketing directors and agency strategic minds need to understand this teenager in order to resonate with them.

I can feel safe knowing that no teenager is likely to read this article.

Generally, their attention span is limited to 300 words max. A YouTube video by a vlogger should be maximum 10 minutes and an "advert" shouldn't exceed 60-90 seconds or they will be lost... possibly forever.

A lot of online publications have adopted a method of showcasing the amount of time it will take to read particular articles, even at 40 years old I'm more likely to read a 2 or 3-minute article than anything over 4 or 5 minutes.

We are dealing with a generation who converse in "newspaper headlines." Short, simple bursts of words and nothing more than 280 characters!

OK, back to the S's

4. Swag –

"I create my personal brand by the brands I wear and use, the brands I accept into my life define my personality." Betty, 17 years old, Durban.

"With always-on social media, they see themselves as brands. So what equity does *your* brand bring to my personal brand?" Luke Jedeikin, founder of Superbalist.

5. Society –

"Don't tell me what to buy, show me what your brand does for my community and Society. If you aren't authentically for me and my community, you don't exist." Siphon, 16 years old, Soweto.

"Younger generations are having a greater impact on society than ever before. Powered by digital communication - their ability to affect societal, political and cultural change is unprecedented. Blanket communication approaches relying on traditional tactics WILL fail.

Specialised tactics and bespoke solutions will be the only way to win with this audience." Mike Silver, founder, Elevator Agency.



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ABOUT BRAD STERN

In my marketing career, I've worked on client and agency side for brands like Woolworths, Kauai, MTV, Nickelodeon and as Brand Activations Director of Adidas. No-one (especially me) could grasp this "youth mindset" or seemed to get this right.
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