

NATIVE VML's view of the scary, exciting SA digital marketing landscape

By  Leigh Andrews

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What do you get if you mix the Instagram culture, R1-Man and Jean Claude Van Damme? NATIVE VML co-founder Ben Wagner's presentation at the 2014 DMX Conference, of course.

On 26 November, I attended the Digital Marketing Exchange 2014 annual conference programme at the Table Bay Hotel. The day kicked off with master of ceremonies, former radio presenter Mel Jones setting the agenda. First up was Ben Wagner, co-founder of NATIVE VML and head of NATIVE Cape Town, on the South African digital marketing landscape. He spoke of the opportunities available for marketers and brands alike.



Ben Wagner of NATIVE VML, mid-presentation at the 2014 DMX Conference

Like all trends, Wagner says digital is like a day at the beach. You knew high tide was coming but suddenly your towel's drenched. He likes to look through [Zapiro's lens](#) for an idea of what's truly pulsing in the country. More specifically, he says there's no more exciting time, in terms of advertising spend. It's a very robust industry that has matured locally, with many agencies being bought out by international companies. There's a huge amount of discussion about the coming digital age, but all elements that will make up the future are already here now, and converging fast.

Brands, be careful - consumers aren't afraid to speak over your message

He then discussed trends of the local digital marketing landscape. The first trend was that the individual has found the power within himself to take on Goliath. We only need to look at the recent [consumer Cell C billboard debacle featured on Bizcommunity](#), and the [RottenBank site](#) as proof of this. Consumers are not afraid to make their voice heard, and to join forces and stop brands' bullying tactics. This means brands need to have more than just the correct price and promotion in place - they also need purpose to lead with. Wagner says at NATIVE VML, they focus on creating purpose-driven work that actually makes a difference.

“ [@Native](#) mantra: "Marketing with purpose". Nice! [@BenWagner](#) [@DMXconference](#)- Andrew Glenister
([@amglenister](#)) [November 26, 2014](#) ”

Wagner gave the Sanlam Savings Month video of R1 Man as an innovative way of educating consumers about the importance of saving. Wagner said the important thing here wasn't that R1 Man became such a phenomenon, but rather that he helped kick-start a national conversation around saving.

Work with your consumers and they'll remain loyal to your brand

The next important trend Wagner mentioned is the need for marketers to develop shared value with community by providing entertainment. It's also important for these shared values to resonate with stakeholders and partners. He spoke of NATIVE VML's Gold-Loerie winning 'Ke Yona soccer team search' integrated campaign for Nedbank, which demonstrated how ordinary South Africans can make things happen and achieve their goals with Nedbank. Wagner says the campaign worked as it was about more than just football, it was also about dreams and ambitions, with nine of the 'Ke Yona' players now playing for Orlando Pirates.

Data, mobile, people - how they work together

The next trend Wagner mentioned is the obvious one of mobile starting to overlay social and data, in order to create new inflection point for advertising. Wagner says Nike got this right with its [Nike Plus](#) ID and Fuelband campaigns, which weren't just about moving product but about creating a community around fitness.

Next, Wagner spoke of the growing trend of designing for mobile-first or mobile-only becoming more prevalent. He said this is especially true of brands targeting the lower LSMs, as is the case in much marketing across the African continent. He says there's already been a dramatic shift but he predicts it will happen more and more. Keep in mind that mobile means you have limited screen size, which offers a much more intimate experience as we literally lean into the handset to experience it.

As an example Wagner mentioned NATIVE VML's Bookly campaign - simply put, this is an e-book reader for basic feature phones. It uses minimal bandwidth and also encourages users to become writers in their own language, to create the largest vernacular library in the world. It now boasts stories in all 11 official languages, which is a boon to those who previously didn't have access to basic literature.

Wagner said the next intersection is data. It's not about the 'big data' buzz either but rather about smart data, finding insights to create something useful.

Take note of how the Instagram generation lives in two realities simultaneously

There's no doubt that the youth are the Instagram generation, but did you realise they view the present as an anticipated memory. Wagner explains that the success of photo-filtering apps has created a generation that sees each moment as something to experience later, meaning they live in two realities at the same time. This means we learn to be happy for this moment as it's your life, but also remember that it'll be gone in a flash and then all you'll have is the memory. This means we all become artists and architects of our historical digital paper trail, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, just a new, fascinating trend to note, with Wagner mentioning the Ogilvy Cape Town Polo Tag test drive social game as an example of this...

The fifth and final trend Wagner covered in his 40-minute presentation was the Internet of Things, which is currently exploding overseas and starting to make itself felt locally. He finds it exciting as marketers get to leap out of the browser into shopping centre environments, but advises that if content is king, context is queen so there's no point coming up with something amazing if you skip the contextual relevance.

Wagner concluded and said one of the best examples of branded content he's seen is what Volvo trucks did in a typically boring product category with its Jean Claude Van Damme video, calling it a big idea that worked well for a brave client.

With so many new trends emerging and the industry in a constant state of flux, Wagner said it's important for marketers to become ambidextrous 'mathemagicians' who can do the deep dive into data to pull out the few crucial elements and keep training themselves. If not, they won't get the results they need. Marketers also need to narrow their focus and market to a single person instead of a 'market', and see the consumer as an individual. Where possible, get the audience to participate in your marketing efforts as they're there and already interested, so help them to help you.

[Click here for my interview](#) with Jason Xenopoulos, CEO of NATIVE VML, from earlier this week.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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