

Justine Cullinan of Nando's on building an empathetic muscle

 By [Ruth Cooper](#)

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In this #BehindtheBrandManager feature, we find out more from Justine Cullinan, GM of marketing and brand strategy and communication at the iconic and well-loved South African fast-food chain Nando's.

Cullinan chats key campaigns, pivoting during the Covid-19 pandemic and bravely (and humorously) voicing what South Africans are feeling.



Justine Cullinan

■ ***Nando's has such a strong voice and brand story. Was this the idea since the beginning, and how do you keep this voice consistent?***

The Nando's brand evolved over time with many twists and turns and many people working within the marketing team to make it the brand people know and value today. We keep a very interested eye, ear and finger on the pulse of what's going on in SA and we are led by our customers. We really listen to them and like to understand what they need, what they're worried about and how we can play a role in helping them. We always ask: What is the role of the brand here? Our consistency is born of this approach and an unwavering Nando's brand positioning.

■ ***How do you navigate working in a consumer space yet at the same time instilling a strong point of view when it comes to politics and current events? We like to think we have the opportunity to voice what people might be thinking but are unwilling or unable to say. This is part of the role the Nando's brand plays in the landscape of South Africa – to say things which most South Africans are feeling and to do so in a funny and smart way. We like to keep conspiracies out of the kitchen. #VaccineforSouthAfrica pic.twitter.com/1HnEOGu5Pw— NandosSA (@NandosSA) February 1, 2021***

■ ***How has Nando's had to adapt strategies since the Covid-19 pandemic?***

Operationally, we've adapted by launching new channels like the Kerbside collection when people couldn't enter into our restaurants to make it easier for our customers to get their Peri-fix. We instituted social branded distancing protocols,

branded PPE for staff, had to reshuffle our staffing rosters to make sure we minimise risk to our people and our guests among many others.

This has meant a very agile approach to operating where we make mistakes, head off down roads to learn things, take risks and then figure out what works best for our business. For the most part, we operate from the position that it's more important to make progress than to be perfect.

From a marketing perspective, we aren't dissimilar to the brand before Covid-19.

“ We continued to focus on building our empathetic muscle and being with and for South Africans in a time of great need. ”

■ **What is it like managing such a well-known and loved South African brand?**

It's a privilege, can be intimidating at times and is often very rewarding and a lot of fun.

■ **What have been some of your highlights while working for Nando's?**

Winning Marketing Organisation of the Year at the Marketing Achievement Awards. We won this as a whole team for driving a marketing-led organisation in the toughest year the country has seen in a long time due to the Covid-19 pandemic.



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We're also delighted that we didn't retrench any staff, no franchisee went bankrupt, our brand grew and our sales are recovering steadily post the immense challenges of 2020.

■ **What have been some of the most noteworthy and successful brand campaigns you have worked on?**

We launch a variety of promotional campaigns throughout the year. It's these campaigns that I'm most proud of because they connect our products with our customers in meaningful and often humorous ways. When Covid hit we had an Easter meal campaign live that encouraged people to gather together and share a meal, which we quickly had to pivot away from. We ended up changing the line 'distant relatives are closer than you think' to 'distant relatives...must remain distant'. We did this in a week.



During the last festive season, we launched the Gatvol Fed-up Festive Feast including a stunt that had a choir of 'Karens' performing our own rewritten Christmas carols outside our Sandton restaurant to bid the outgoing year 'tsek. I doubt there are any other brands willing and able to use the word 'gatvol' in their advertising. In fact, we weren't able to flight our original radio and out of home material in certain spaces because media owners weren't willing to take the risk that we were using such honest language so overtly in our advertising.

■ **Can you tell us more about your current #TinForTjips campaign as well as any other recent brand campaigns and the rationales behind them?**

Tin4Tjips enables us at Nando's to help you (South Africans) help those in need by collecting your panic-bought tins of food and redistributing them to hungry children. In exchange for the tins of food we collect from our customers, those customers get free Nando's chips on us!

Nando's has for the second time in the past year partnered with a non-profit organisation, Joint Aid Management (JAM), who will distribute the tinned food to South Africa's most vulnerable through its well-established network of charitable organisations that focus on taking care of pre-school children through early childhood development centres. You can participate in the Nando's Tin for Tjips initiative by ordering through the Nando's mobile app or online for delivery or collection (kerbside too).

It's been wonderful to see South Africans heading into their pantries for their unused tins to get free chips. Corporate South Africa has noticed our efforts in this campaign and has come to the party too. Our food friends at Koo, McCain and All Gold have pledged to add tins to our collection so that we can make even more of a difference in the lives of hungry kids.

“ Y'all already spilling the beans online, now you'll be doing it for a good cause. You give the tin food, and we'll chip in.

👤👤👤👤 #TinForTjips <https://t.co/Owmd14VrTk>— NandosSA (@NandosSA) March 24, 2021 ”

■ **What do you think are the most successful channels for getting your brand message out there?**

It depends very much on what your message is. We have different objectives for doing different things. Tin4Tjips is a very PR and online/social-driven message because our customers participating need to order their Nando's online or through our app. However, some of our biggest brand campaigns are very TV-centric because that channel still maintains the highest audiences in South Africa and we like to tell a story to which all our customers can relate. So, we need a visual medium. The hero of our festive campaign last year was radio – our Christmas carols were all about an audio experience.

■ **What career advice would you give to aspirant young marketing and branding professionals?**

Instead of trying to solve a business problem and fit the world to your needs, turn your attention to a customer problem and,

in solving those, you often derive commercial value in return.

ABOUT RUTH COOPER

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