

The trouble with branding things African

 By [James Maposa](#)

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I have often heard people describe products and services coming out of our continent as African, such as African attire, African cuisine, African print and so on. For those who have been lucky enough to have travelled our beloved continent you would understand the problems that come with blanket branding or making the secondary branding your primary branding.



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To plead my case, I will start with the fact that Africa is made up of 54 countries. So when someone says that something is uniquely African, is that labelling not a bit too loose? Moreover, should not the African theme be secondary or better yet a tertiary reference from a nomenclature perspective. I recently read an article which mentioned the seven key attributes of successful brands. The seven criteria were purpose, agility, uniqueness, consistency, authenticity, simplicity and engagement.

A successful brand has purpose

A successful brand must have some motivating factor that connects them to the brand. Internally, the dilemma is that our continent is made up of 54 countries. If we had to roll out a regional survey to define an African's purpose, I am sure that we would get a variety of responses rendering it near impossible to uncover crosscutting themes that we can leverage to develop an African brand. I would like to propose that Africans are connected and are passionate about their continent but uniting to identify with one to two common themes on what it truly means to be African could throw our initiative off track, diluting our message, resulting in the generation of a confusing purpose. Therefore, when one says a brand is truly African what is the motivating factor that connects us to that theme? From an external standpoint, it is a simplification of the complexity of our continent, embodying everything into some sort of common cause. However, Africans are more complicated than the term suggests. A day in Nairobi is different to a day in Dodoma, yet these countries are both in East Africa and situated next to each other. Surely, what connects these people to the African theme would be somewhat different. Moreover, some of these differences do not even go beyond borders. Within countries, large and small diverse opinions exist on what connects the populace to the African theme.

A successful brand is agile

Your brand needs to be able to change with the times. Your brand needs to be able to keep up with the evolution of the

surrounding culture. I return to the 54-country reference to emphasise how difficult it is to develop a central African culture. Africa has been exposed to various internal and external elements that have created a plethora of micro-cultures, which in a sense guide a given community's way of life. An example is urbanisation, which has resulted in people within urban areas behaving differently to those who reside in the rural areas. Again, this is in just one country, or better yet province within a given country. Moving from one African country to the next could deliver different cultural results even though the two populations are exposed to the same phenomenon of urbanisation. Bringing it back to agility, because of the differences in cultures across the continent, a one-size fits all approach to align with the African theme will be a cumbersome ask. An example is the mixed results that have been experienced by South African companies penetrating the Nigerian market. It is assumed that by being a South African company, you identify with the African cause and have a decent understanding of the continent, giving you a competitive edge when expanding to neighbouring African countries, compared to your global counterparts. However, based on some of the failures that successful South African companies have encountered in Nigeria, we begin to realise the level of cultural dissonance that exists within our continent. In addition, it is also revealed that the agility of brands developed in Southern Africa will not necessarily deliver the desired effect when in another region of the continent. So defining a central African culture to build your brand on is much, much harder than one would envision.

A successful brand is unique

something that differentiates you from your competition. What it means to be uniquely African? Do you have to come from all 54 countries or just one in particular? Do you have to identify with all African cultures or is there one that a majority of the population gravitates toward? What language should the brand use to assert that it is uniquely African and does a majority of the population understand that language? What tone of voice and message is African? Lastly, how would one define African essence? Surely all the aforementioned would differ considerably as one moves from one region of the continent to the next. Being uniquely African requires more flexibility than a narrowed definition and defining this uniqueness would take a considerable amount of time and effort to crystallise.

A successful brand is consistent

If you do not stick to one main idea, very quickly people will lose the feeling of trust and consistency that they associate with your brand. As an example, I refer to Africa's dilemma of economic growth and environmental conservation. Because of its resource richness and comparably better climate, the continent's economic progression is built around exploiting and processing mineral resources and converting more and more of the countryside into agricultural land. At the same time, many African countries have acceded to the CITES agreement aligning themselves with the conservation concept. These two perspectives create a bit of confusion and conflict regarding the African story. Some countries within the continent are more interested in the economic progression angle, whereas the others leverage the conservation angle to boost tourism. In addition, this is just one of the many consistency issues that we go through in Africa. Another example would be to use clean or carbon fuel for energy. Which choice is pro- or anti-African? If you change your position based on those two choices, what does it mean for you from a consistency perspective? Being consistently African is thus another topical issue.

A successful brand is authentic

Brands must be faithful to themselves, true to their customers, motivated by caring and responsibility and able to support consumers in being true to themselves. Boxing African authenticity to embody it in your brand is also not an easy one. Where do you begin? We are fortunate that some of our cultures have been preserved and their legacy carried forward through converting these pockets into heritage sites. However, some of our authenticity has been taken away from through modernisation. A friend of mine, from a 'francophone' country, informed me that the youth from those countries frowned at anyone their age who spoke the indigenous languages. Within his country, French is accepted as the first and in other cases only language that a person who is knowledgeable must speak. That differs to Southern African, who speak English second after their respective mother tongues; your inability to speak your home language is abominable. Yet individuals from 'francophone' Africa consider themselves authentically African and so do we. Therefore, how then do we define and describe African authenticity. How pure does pure have to be to reflect it?

A successful brand is simple

Keep the message that your brand is trying to convey as simple as possible. With 54 voices called upon to define you, simple is hardly the word that you are going to arrive at in a hurry. Particularly when all 54 voices have equal say on what a truly African brand should stand for. Also considering the vastness and diversity of the populace, simple does not describe the task required to bring opinions together into one common theme.

A successful brand is engaging

Strong brands make their strategies engaging and interactive. By calling yourself a truly or uniquely African brand, I am certain that you have lost your continental audience. I opine that although Africans identify with some core theme (this is said loosely), they've also come to realize that they're different and would rather be thought of as South African, Nigerian and Ghanaian first, before being blanketed as an African. I am also of the opinion that there is more equity in building your brand around a national instead of a continental theme. Granted that by going the African route, you are trying to appeal to a wider audience. Nevertheless, an all-encompassing approach in a way dilutes your messaging from an authenticity and uniqueness standpoint. It also makes it difficult for you to tell your story because it requires you to get buy-in from several stakeholders (54 in this case) and you coming up with a purpose that the entire continent identifies with unilaterally is an ask in itself.

Based on all of the above, I propose that the relevance in African brands will not be found in a continental positioning but a national positioning, which takes the rest of the continent into account. That in my opinion sustains your brand's authenticity.

ABOUT JAMES MAPOSA

Maposa is the founder and managing director of Birguid, a research and advisory company. Maposa has 15 years work experience, mostly spent in research and strategy consulting. Maposa is passionate about socio-economic development, business growth and continuity.

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