

Beyond the crumbs: why big agencies need to invest in empowerment now

 By [Dharmesh Nagar](#)

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While the MAC B-BBEE codes have been gazetted and the PR and advertising industry does a lot of empowerment talk, small black-owned marketing and advertising agencies feel they are still not getting a fair shot at opportunities in South Africa.

There's a big pie at stake, and most of that pie is being gobbled up by big agencies with international holdings. The small players must resort to picking pie crumbs off the floor to survive. Government efforts to enforce transformation are frequently ignored for as long as possible, or are met with grudging token gestures that have as little impact as possible on actual operations.

In the eyes of many small, black-owned agencies, the old school tie still rules in South African marketing and advertising, and anyone from outside the circle of trust is going to face an uphill battle to crack the nod for a meeting; let alone a large contract. The township born and bred youth who speaks in township slang and doesn't yet wear the right brands is unlikely to get further than the boardroom door. The small businessman still building a resource pool will be eliminated from the bidding process because of doubts about his ability to deliver. Everyone in the industry appears to have to conform to Eurocentric trends and mannerisms to be taken seriously in client meetings.



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Another perspective, presented by advertising industry veteran Chris Brewer, is that the world of advertising has always been a tough one to break into; but that once you're in, the industry doesn't care about your skin colour, background or even any quirky habits you may have – it just wants you to deliver inspired, amazing advertising. He believes that of all industry sectors, the advertising industry has always been the most liberal and open to transformation, and that forcing quotas now will be met with reluctance.

But Brewer does concede that only around 32% of client-facing staff in advertising agencies are black, and that only around 16% of client service directors are black.

These figures do not reflect South Africa's true demographics. Somewhere along the way, black players are leaving or being edged out of the equation.

According to the new MAC Codes, by 2018, agencies must have 75% black middle management, 88% black junior management, and 80% of all spending has to go to empowerment suppliers.

For genuine transformation that reflects the demographic realities of South Africa today and aligns agencies with the new MAC Codes, black executives must be empowered and given decision-making power in local agencies. Clients and large agencies need to become more open to assessing partnerships with smaller agencies based on actual ability to deliver – not perceived ability to deliver.

This change is not only needed to meet the new Code requirements: hidden within the rising tide of black-owned agencies and up and coming black creatives lies the key to talking to the South African consumer of tomorrow. The big spend is emerging out of consumers who are not old school tie-wearing members of the circle of trust. It's coming from a new middle class; new money with roots in the same places the small black-owned agencies are rooted.

Transformative change has become a must, and the onus is on large agencies to find approaches to change that go beyond window dressing. They must strive to empower up-and-coming black-owned agencies by partnering with them on large contracts.

Brewer notes that there must be ways to attract more black talent into the industry, possibly by way of bursaries to advertising schools. He believes the pool of talent simply **MUST** be expanded before quotas are imposed, or the industry could face the risk of falling standards.

Indeed, if there is a lack of suitably skilled black advertising talent, then every effort must be made to address this shortfall as soon as possible. It is in the interests of large agencies to invest in a skills pipeline and offer more upskilling opportunities to young black creatives and business leaders. And they must move away from US and European norms and focus on becoming truly African businesses that speak effectively to the South African consumer's sense of self.

ABOUT DHARMESH NAGAR

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