

Talking to Africa in 2018

By [Mimi Kalinda](#)

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Africa is at an interesting and exciting crossroads in its history. The predicted ease with which globalisation would be adopted is being questioned and nationalism is rising. Yet the continent is becoming an economic, political and cultural melting pot. It is inevitable if Africa is going to truly rise.



Mimi Kalinda, managing director, Africommunications Group.

In 2018, public relations and communications professionals must find the balance between developing strategies and business practices that keep the individual front and centre, and speak to the whole.

The individual remains at the core

Xenophobia, anti-immigrant sentiments, and the nationalistic approach of many African and Western countries would lead many of us to believe that globalisation has failed. The reality is, the scramble for resources remains real and we're all fighting for a piece of the pie.

For public relations professionals, this means putting the individual at the core of our messaging first and foremost, while keeping in mind the bigger picture - community, company and nation. Trying to understand individual needs and how people are incentivised to action based on their personal relationship to a brand is vital for strategy development, and implementation with impact.

People still want to feel like their individual needs, concerns and ambitions matter, even though the world is getting smaller. It is a bit like conducting an orchestra. You have a vision of what you want the ensemble to do, but unless you can connect with each player at a personal, emotional level, you're only going to cause confusion and create a cacophony of noise that appeals to no one. Studying and understanding what makes Africans tick at a personal level is going to play a major part in developing successful communications campaigns in 2018.

Collaboration versus competition

In an increasingly specialised world, it benefits no one to be the master of all trades. The world of public relations is becoming increasingly competitive. In 2018, we see the rise of agencies and communications specialists from Africa competing with major global players, and bagging major contracts.

Clients want experts who understand African audiences at a deeper level, who have lived and worked in the countries they target, and who speak the languages of the audiences they aim to reach. They also want a more diverse set of skills than sending out press releases or managing crises using a by-the-book approach.

Public relations and communications professionals will need to increasingly merge, and call on partners, affiliates and collaborators to offer services with a broader scope and reach than ever before. Cross-agency collaboration will increase. If meeting the client's needs is indeed the objective, it really must be all for one and one for all.

Looser borders increase the need for cultural identity

Many African countries have already announced looser border bureaucracy for Africans traveling across the continent. The latest one is Nigeria, which announced the launch of visas on arrival for Africans traveling to the country. The African Union is pushing for an all-Africa passport. For Africa to truly transform, less stringent borders are inevitable.

However, Africans being able to travel freely across the continent will increase the need to hold on to cultural identity. Communication that celebrates cultural nuances and sensibilities is going to be important to ensure that audiences still feel like brands understand that they have a cultural heritage which they deem paramount.

Afro-optimism gives birth to African pride coupled with a dose of reality

“Africa rising” is a great concept and, for a while, everyone on the continent bought into it unquestionably. One of the biggest benefits of this narrative has been the upsurge of African pride across the continent. Africans have never been prouder of their heritage. Coupled with this unprecedented sense of pride is a willingness to look at the “Africa rising” phenomenon from a realistic standpoint. Brands that can communicate realistically, coupling the continent’s challenges to its immense opportunities, will win in 2018.

Africans are not looking for brands that pretend everything is wonderful. They want brands that can effectively communicate the notion that there has never been a better time to be African, even though there is much to be done for the continent to truly rise. Brands will be required to keep it real in 2018.

Social impact to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor

The African middle class, the “elite”, are becoming increasingly aware of their privileged position. As they become more exposed to economic empowerment and political opportunities, they are also more aware of the gap between the rich and the poor on the continent. They want to buy and interact with brands that have social impact, and they want to feel like they are playing a role in uplifting more disadvantaged communities. Winning communications strategies that target this demographic must speak to their need to contribute to making Africa a better place for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miri Kalinda is managing director Africommunications Group.

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