

Absa: vying for traction via your heart, not your wallet

 By [Kat Potgieter](#)

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'Expect the unexpected: Building a brand amongst brand builders was Sizakele Marutlulle's point of departure for her keynote address at the Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) Conference at the CTICC last week.

A case study was presented by Marutlulle to illustrate the importance of having insight into one's target market, as well as the necessity of adopting an integrated marketing strategic approach that 'threads' across channels.

Marutlulle, the chief marketing officer for the Absa Group in Africa, spoke about the Democratic Republic of Design brand activation that had tongues wagging at the Design Indaba earlier this year.

For those of you that missed out, a smartphone app allowed event goers to create a virtual economy simply by sharing their ideas and inspiration: virtual currency (or 'design dollars') was earned by tweeting and posting photos through the app. Earnings could then be cashed in at Absa's concept store that stocked a selection of products from up-and-coming South African designers.

In the end Absa's Democratic Republic of Design brought the creative community together by reinforcing how design and creativity really are the backbone of a country's economy.

Now you are probably wondering what I was wondering: where is Absa going with this?

The purpose of this activation seems to have been to pleasantly surprise young South Africans as to Absa's very ability to rock up, come to the party, and deliver. By demonstrating an in-depth understanding of and involvement with its Design Indaba audience, Absa wanted to change perceptions about the brand, make a fresh start, so to speak.

Marutlulle kindly answered a few questions I had about the Absa brand and its attempt to win back the hearts and minds of South Africans.

Question: *How will Absa attempt to build/create a thread through successive experiences of this 'new' image?*

Answer: The distinction here is that the work we ran for Design Indaba was for a confined audience in a confined space. We ran that internally only during the three days of Design Indaba so this wasn't a campaign we took out into the market place.

But what we are doing is using its *flavour* to start to say to South Africa: expect differently from the brand, because if we

can get you to expect differently, then you may very well believe that you will experience differently.

And this is all we really want to do, is [to] get you to a place where you go, 'I don't believe it's from them!', 'cause then it gives me energy and impetus to build for a future relationship with you that's a lot more funky and pleasant.

Q: In creating this new image, how will Absa, as a brand, address its existing customers? What will the angle be that Absa will employ to re-initiate the conversation with existing customers? A couple's therapy type of conversation, so to speak, with existing customers?

A: There are three lots [of customers], right. You've got the people we've let down who've left, the people we've let down who've stayed, and the people who are delighted in us, who talk about us.

Now what we want to do is, those we've let down who are still with us, is to go back and reaffirm the correctness of their choice - you did the right thing by choosing us - now let me give you reason to reinforce that correctness.

For those that are happy with us, I'm like, I'm happy you are happy with us, but let me give you more happiness so that you can go and tell other people how much joy we are adding to your life.

For the people who have left us for other shores, I want, in the building block, to show them what they have left behind, or what they can look forward to returning to, because all it is: *if I win your heart, then you'll choose to spend your money with me, but if I go for your wallet, your heart may never be involved, and I'd rather do the heart bit first, 'cause then you'll stay longer.*

Q: Which spaces (lifestyle) will ABSA look at moving into in the near future?

A: Obviously the bulk of our customer base is grown-up and very traditional, and very safe in their choices. [However], the world is young: the highest population in any nation is the ages of 18-35, so we do need to start finding a way of speaking with the younger consumer, and younger consumers are impatient: they don't want to be sold to, they don't want to be given answers, they want to be asked the questions. So it is about adjusting the way we behave and the way we do business, to be attractive to a younger mindset.

It's a lot of work, because it requires a culture shift; it's happening on every level of engagement. So for example, we also have to cater for the diversity of customers that live in South Africa today: it's just about crafting solutions that are responsive to your needs versus 'here is how we do it', because that level of rigidity is what makes people think we are inflexible, which we are, in some instances.

Q: Will ABSA be considering building brand partnership to flesh out its existing brand image from a 'flat, red bank', to a more approachable brand that offers customers relevant content of value? If so, which brands have or will you approach to expand the brand identity?

A: I come from the school of thought that says [that] I don't necessarily have the answers to everything, but I also don't have to do everything alone.

Fortunately for us we have already cultivated partnerships in our rewards programme, whether those people are Coricraft, or Hirsche's, or an airline, or a travel/hotel group, the purpose is to start associating with brands that will have a positive halo effect on mine, and for whom I will also present some level of brand upliftment.

We are resolute in finding and marrying brands that share our values, but also share our aspirations, because if we are united on that front, the world is a flat hill, not a mountain, so it can be done.

I think part of what we haven't been really good at doing, is what [Nic \(Haralambous\) was talking about](#) - the through-the-line concept - is getting things to thread together. When I speak to you about a new credit card, I also should say to you that

every time you swipe, you earn cash which you can redeem at any of our participating rewards partners.

So we need to create that linkage for you, so that I don't give you a rewards message, an account message, a car investment message; it's about creating that thread.

That's the focus, that's how you win.

Q: How do you go about creating that thread?

A: You have to customise your message so that it resonates with people where they are on their life journey: I speak of messages that are needs responsive and life state relevant. So, where are you now in your life? What do you need? [If I ask these questions], the message gains traction.

For more:

- The Democratic Republic of Design's webpage: www.thedrd.co.za
- YouTube video [about activation](#)

ABOUT KAT POTGIETER

An adventurous knowledge-junkie, Kat is curious about all things digital. She has moved into the digital marketing communications arena and is currently the in-house digital and communications specialist for chef school Capsicum Culinary Studio. A part-time Media Theory and Practice honours student at UCT, Kat's primary passions are engaging with people, being in nature and exploring consumer tech. Contact details: Twitter [@extremelykat](#)
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