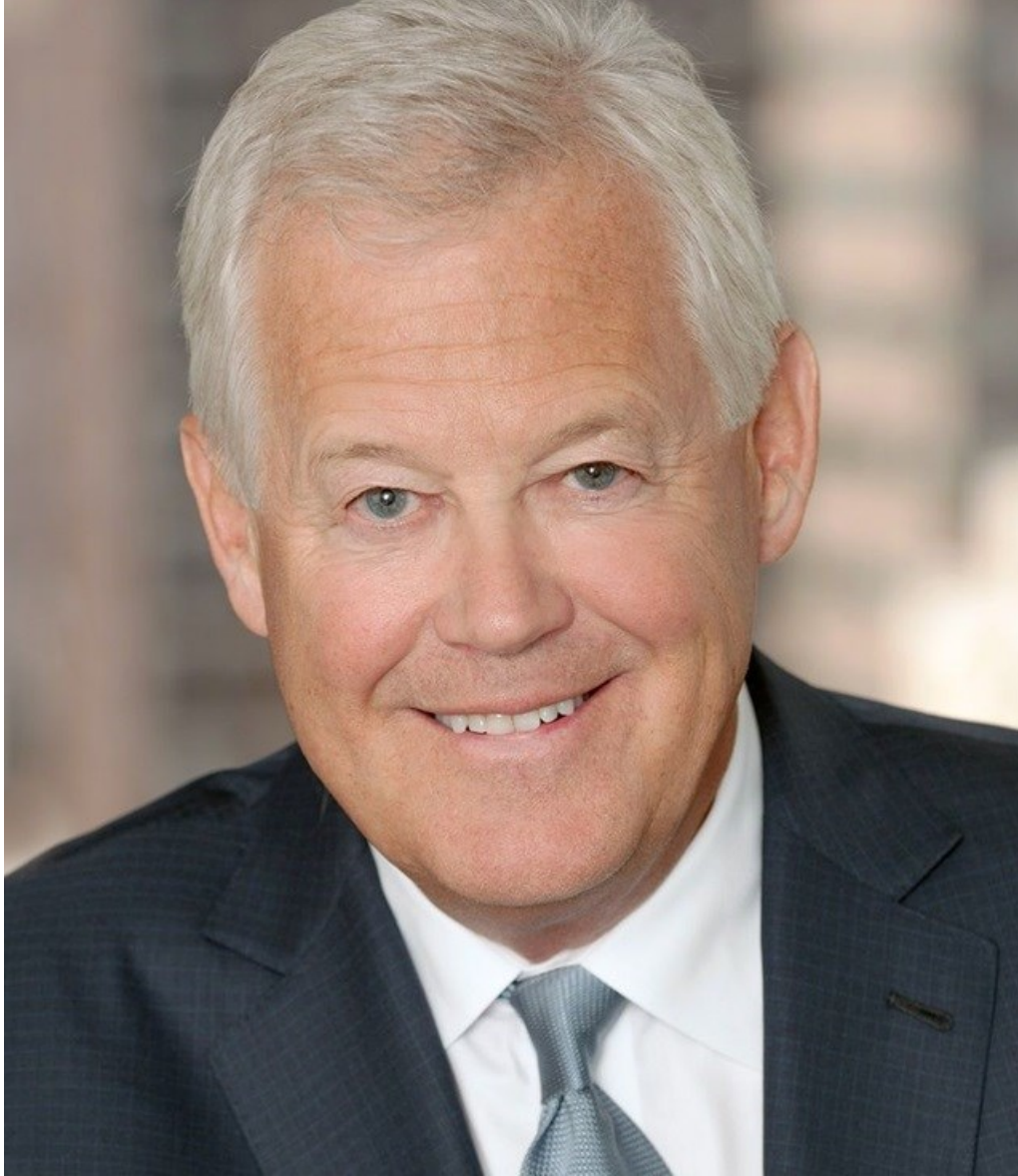


Jack Leslie on why this is Africa's time

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

16 Apr 2018

All the economic indicators, as well as other portents are in place for unparalleled Africa development, according to Jack Leslie, chairman of global marketing communications firm, Weber Shandwick. Leslie visited South Africa and Kenya recently to open a dedicated office in Nairobi.



Jack Leslie, chairman, Weber Shandwick.

As chairman of [Weber Shandwick](#), Leslie, has worked for several presidents in the United States on Africa development. He was appointed by President George W. Bush in 2003 to serve on the Board of Directors of the US African Development Foundation (USADF); and in 2009, President Barack Obama appointed him to the USADF Board, which was re-confirmed by the US Senate in 2016. He was also appointed to the President's Advisory Council on Doing Business in Africa in 2016.

He spoke to Bizcommunity.Africa on marketing insights for African brands and agencies, the future of brand engagement within the African landscape, as well as the myriad of opportunities on the continent for brands.

"There is a huge sense of optimism around Africa. My first trip was in 1991, shortly after Nelson Mandela was released, and it feels like that now, again. The stars are beginning to align for Africa... There is a great sense that this is Africa's

moment.

“In Asia in the 1960s and 70s, they made real progress early on in agriculture and began to feed the population. It was as if someone turned on the light switch and there was this incredible growth across Asia.

“Those economies were as poor as the poorest African economies today. South Korea had the same GDP as some of the laggards in Africa today.”

“ *There is a huge sense of optimism around Africa.* ”

Leslie continued, saying that there was a sense that all the elements required for economic growth across the African continent were in place. This was key to Weber Shandwick’s decision to increase its presence on the continent.

“Governance is getting better. It is not great everywhere, there are good and bad examples, but it is improving. Infrastructure is improving; there are leapfrogging technologies like Mpesa in play; and most importantly, from the standpoint of marketing – there is that huge bulge of middle class consumers coming into the market.

“These are all things that our clients look too for expanding into Africa. The signals are now pointing up for them.”

Investment

Leslie cited, by way of example, the financial services space in Africa, where American companies have moved into and opened up operations on the continent.

“There are now more American companies beginning to look at Africa – clearly China and Asian multi-nationals are now also looking more and more at Africa. The largest consumer packaged goods companies have been here a long time, like the Nestles and the Unilevers, but the newer technology brands are expanding rapidly here.

“They all see Africa as a growth opportunity. These big multi-nationals have to grow to keep their share prices up, so a new, fast-growing market like Africa is key.”

Weber Shandwick, which is a leading global communications and engagement firm with a presence in 78 countries and a network extending to 129 cities around the world, recently expanded its footprint in Africa, precipitating Leslie’s most recent visit to the continent.

It’s fully-owned Kenyan office was opened in February, in Nairobi, to meet growing demand from domestic and multinational companies for marketing and communications expertise in the region. Allan Kamau was appointed managing director, Weber Shandwick East Africa, to expand the firm’s reach across East Africa.

“Africa’s growing economy is one of the most significant and energising trends of our time. The continent’s consumer and business spending is estimated to be worth \$4 trillion between now and 2025, and more than 50 million new middle and upper class households will emerge in the next decade,” said Tim Sutton, chairman, EMEA and Asia Pacific, Weber Shandwick. “A global firm such as Weber Shandwick can help clients navigate – and succeed – in such a rapidly transforming market.”

Weber Shandwick has a broad footprint across Africa. The firm works with diverse clients across a range of sectors, from technology and consumer marketing, to healthcare and social impact. Over the last three years, the agency has garnered industry recognition for work implemented across the continent. International and regional honours include an IPRA Golden World Award and multiple African Excellence Awards.

Entrepreneurship

What has surprised Leslie about Africa, is the incredibly high level of entrepreneurship that exists in Africa.

“Africa was rated as the highest in terms of entrepreneurship and attitudes towards entrepreneurship. Africans have the highest risk tolerance. They were more willing to start new businesses than even Americans and Europeans.

“I can see that through my other organisations. I’ve had an opportunity to work in Africa outside of my marketing hat. USADF’s mission is to encourage social enterprise.”

Leslie also sees Africa finding new ways of distributed energy models, rather than large scale energy grids and taking the lead in this.

He agrees that there remains an appalling level of ignorance in the United States about Africa. “People just refer to Africa as Africa, not recognising the scale of the continent and how different all of its countries are and where they are and their own stages of development.

“I think so much of it stems from that kind of ignorance and the way Africa addresses it, is through examples. Over time, as consumers in the rest of the world see African brands and African technology, it will chip away at that image problem. Candidly, it’s not going to go away overnight.”

Expansion

Over the coming months, Weber Shandwick will focus on further expanding its client base in the region and building its consulting team.

“Nairobi is the economic powerhouse of east Africa and increasingly the location of choice for multinational organisations looking to tap into regional opportunities,” Kamau said. “With its new capabilities in East Africa, Weber Shandwick is well placed to serve these companies.”



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Leslie added: “We have had a very vibrant fast growing office in South Africa, but when you look to the continent, how vast it is, you really have to look at it in the media landscape, regionally, and then on a country-basis.

“We need to have a strong pan-African ability, with resources for our clients in Southern Africa, East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda), and in West Africa and French-speaking Africa out of Dakar, Senegal. Then you have

Angola and the Portuguese-speaking Africa. We have offices in most North African countries.

“So we are focussing on building a regional network in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the focus areas will be technology in the Kenyan office. Technology, healthcare and telecommunications are some of the biggest growth areas we will be focussing on.”

Leslie said the bottom line was that the marketing communications industry was undergoing a transformation, primarily because of digital technology advancements. “It has real implications for who we are talking to and where we are talking to them and the kinds of messages we are using. The ability to engage different stakeholders across so many different platforms gives us huge opportunity.”

ABOUT LOUISE MARSLAND

Louise Burgers (previously Marsland) is Founder/Content Director: SOURCE Content Marketing Agency. Louise is a Writer, Publisher, Editor, Content Strategist, Content/Media Trainer. She has written about consumer trends, brands, branding, media, marketing and the advertising communications industry in SA and across Africa, for over 20 years, notably, as previous Africa Editor: Bizcommunity.com; Editor: Bizcommunity Media/Marketing SA; Editor-in-Chief: AdVantage magazine; Editor: Marketing Mx magazine; Editor: Progressive Retailing magazine; Editor: BusinessBrief magazine; Editor: FMOG Files newsletter. Web: www.sourceagency.co.za.

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