

Millions of people, many empty billboards

 By [Tatenda Chiweshe](#)

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On a recent audit of billboards in Johannesburg townships (high density, predominantly low to middle income areas) it was surprising how many empty boards are held by dominant players in the market. Coming from a logical expectation that these companies would have the insights and financial might not to waste time and their own resources by creating redundant assets (you would think) what are the media owners missing?

Their challenge is two-fold. Firstly, their local sales strategy seems incoherent. Let's consider the landscape in Soweto, South Africa's largest and most renowned township. There is a plethora of empty smaller boards fighting for the national brands' budgets. Yet, on the other hand, there are so many localised businesses (including substitute brands) that could use this very situational media productively.

The disconnect

The disconnect is that the media owners are focused on selling to large brands whose media planners and buyers sit outside of the townships and have limited knowledge of, and sometimes interest in, the township landscape.

The real question is whether it is possible to fill local boards without local business participation. Our audits in the rest of Africa suggest that the answer is a resounding "No!"

Market intelligence often not strong enough

Secondly, the market intelligence is often not strong enough to build a compelling case for media planners if the media owners continue to overlook local businesses. Frankly, one photo of a township board looks pretty much like any other.

As one media planner said, "Outside of the major logical touch points such as taxi ranks, hospitals, and motorways, I will not risk buying in townships that I do not know and do not have the time to get to know. I seldom have enough to take to my client with justified conviction and belief".

The media owners know that the townships offer untold opportunities not just for themselves, but also for their clients. It will be interesting to see how each player will choose to unlock this potential.

ABOUT TATENDA CHIWESHE

Tatenda Chiweshe is the CEO of Media Trace, a specialised outdoor media insights company operating across Africa. Contact Tatenda on +27 (0)74 839 7440 or email him on [tatenda@mediatrace.co.za](#)

Chiweshe@gmail.com

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