

In defence of the advertising generalist

By [Garikai Nhongo](#)

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I got into advertising purely by accident. Somehow, on my way to becoming a lawyer I waddled into the advertising pool and never got out. Don't get me wrong, even though I came upon this profession accidentally, I love it. I love it so much that now I own my own firm with offices in three African markets.



Garikai Nhongo.

The way in which I got into the profession left me no choice but to become a generalist. When I look back, specialisation was never really an option available to me. I went to meet a man who owned an advertising agency and I'd been told that there was no vacancy but he was interested in meeting me. The meeting cum interview was an hour of me declaring that I could do anything he needed just to make sure I got the job. Since I write poetry, I told him copywriting was doable. After all, it's writing. Since I like talking to people, I told him account management would be a walk in the park. Needless to say, he called my bluff and hired me as an account executive/copywriter.

Being a sucker for punishment, I wrote a proposal a few months later on how the agency could attract more business and streamline structures to become more efficient and accountable. Once again, they took me at my word and promoted me into what they called a 'business development' role. So, six months into that job and into the advertising industry, I was doing new business acquisition, client management and copywriting. I also did all our presentations. Without getting into more detail, courses in web design, social media management and graphic design made me the ultimate generalist.

I realised a couple of years down the line that while you are employed, being a generalist can be great for the organisation, especially if you are above average in a few of the disciplines. You save the organisation money and you bump up their efficiency. What I hadn't bargained for was the complexity of finding new work as a generalist.

The employment market has a strong bias towards specialists and with good reason. Specialists are more predictable. You know what they know and what they are good at and what you're getting. Generalists can sometimes be a gamble that will be hard to place in an organisation. It's so much less of a gamble to take a specialist than a generalist and no employment agency wants to gamble on a jack of all trades.

They assume that a generalist has only basic knowledge of things but not enough to execute at an expert level. A good analogy is like thinking about an accountancy teacher. You can trust them to teach your child accountancy but not to do your business' books.

Demand for generalists

Much as I understand the limitations that generalists may have in traditional advertising agencies, the modern advertising landscape has created an unprecedented demand for generalists. The new forms of media and the conscious millennial consumer have changed the way in which brands communicate with the market and the way in which advertising is consumed.

In the past you could get away with silos within advertising agencies largely because your market was predictably loyal to a media choice. Therefore, you could afford to segment your specialists. Now, the millennial consumer is a seamless multiplatform consumer whose take on media is not so broken down but more connected. Therefore, modern advertising agencies are looking for people with a deep understanding of numerous disciplines to bring it all together and respond appropriately to the new consumer. That person is the generalist.

Moreover, as an entrepreneur intent on setting up your own agency, survival demands that you become a generalist or at least work with one. I can assure you that after a quarter of zero billings, you are unlikely to want to turn away a client because you only work on above the line media and can't do their below the line work. The start-up or entrepreneurial organisations requires people who are adept in various disciplines in order to be able to satisfy the requirements of clients before they are able to hire specialists.

Believe me, I learned this from experience. Interestingly, generalists usually end up in senior management as organisations grow because of their ability to see a broad picture more clearly. This means they can connect what may seem to be unconnected dots to create patterns that define modern marketing mixes.

Job obsolescence

One thing that people turn a blind eye to is the possibility of jobs going obsolete. It's an uncomfortable thing to think about but if you've been around long enough, you would know that it's a reality that may happen and is happening faster than most people realise. If you think about it, mailrooms hardly exist anymore but every reputable organisation had a mailroom at the turn of the century. In just under 20 years, few people remember what that was.

Closer to home, printing firms used to have colour separators who would digitise artwork for printing. This was so specialised that at a point Africa had under 50 colour separators on the entire continent. Now with digital platforms, they are spoken of just like the dinosaurs.

I'm not saying your job will disappear but how sure are you that it won't? With all the talk of artificial intelligence, chatbots and big data, where do you fit in all this? The advantage that generalists have is that they often find relevance in one or more roles that they already work in. Furthermore, they are adaptable because they have had to be all along. Survival is reason enough to be a generalist.

Just to make sure that I'm not misunderstood, I must stress that being a generalist doesn't mean you're a jack of all trades and a master of none (gosh I hate that phrase). A generalist can specialise in one discipline and still have the capacity to develop a working knowledge in a few other disciplines. As an example, I have specialised for several years now, in reward systems and am one of very few people on the African continent with the ability to design and implement effective reward systems across various industries.

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At the same time, I still take on strategy, planning, web design, graphic design and client management and copywriting on the rare occasion within my firm. The demands on mental and learning capacities are much higher on the generalist but it doesn't need to mean that the generalist has no speciality. It simply means that we have developed the ability to learn quickly, broadly and over a short space of time. We have also learned to create relationships among things that seem unconnected. This is a valuable modern skill.

My defence of the generalist is not blind. I must caution anyone who wants to be a generalist to ensure that they have more than just a surface knowledge of the fields they want to enter into. One must be competent enough in each field to advise clients professionally and effectively. This means being a generalist in advertising is more work and more learning than being a specialist. Therefore, it isn't something to be taken lightly.

The signs are clear and the new creative economy has more space for the generalist than ever before. Being a generalist comes with the need to prove oneself consistently but that is the price to pay for owning the future.

ABOUT GARIKAI NHONGO

Garikai Nhongo is the managing director of KG&A Advertising in Rwanda and he is the group head of strategy for the global firm. He is also a blogger at www.thinkingentrepreneur.gq and www.garikainhongo.blogspot.com, an entrepreneur and a poet.

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