

Christopher, the future of AI in Africa

 By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Tokologo 'The Commodore' Phetla, founder and managing director of [Christopher Africa](#) shares insights into the platform that offers brands the opportunity to tap into consumer micro-moments and conversations on social media, using Artificial Intelligence to deliver mass personalisation in real-time.

■ Who or what is 'Christopher'?

Christopher is an artificial intelligence software that serves real-time brand responses to relevant conversations on social media as they take place, delivering mass personalisation at scale to drive qualified engagements and impressions.



■ What sparked the idea?

I realised that consumers increasingly spend most of their time on social platforms - interacting and engaging with each other and brands. However, the only mechanism brands had to reach their consumers was via sponsored/promoted posts. But the true power of social media lies in conversations.

Consumers are there to have authentic, genuine conversations which brands could not participate in meaningfully. So we conceived Christopher, the AI that would help brands detect relevant consumer moments and communicate their brand messages in a relevant manner which adds value to their consumers on social media.

Instead of "push marketing", where brands advertise based on their own marketing schedule without the consumer's input, we created a mechanism of "pull advertising" where the consumer creates the opportunity for the brand to advertise, i.e. where the brand advertises only when it is most convenient and relevant for the consumer; not the other way around.



Tokologo 'The Commodore' Phetla, founder and managing director of Christopher Africa

■ ***When, how and why did it get started?***

Christopher has been in development since 2010. Starting off as a basic social listening tool, it morphed over the years into what/who it is today. Although Christopher has been in the market since late-2017, we really took it aggressively to market Jan 2019 when Ad Colony and Nifnity Media Group came on board as sales partners and shareholders in the business.

■ ***What is the purpose of 'Christopher'?***

Christopher as an AI (artificial intelligence) technology exists to provide brands with the ability to advertise to consumers when it is relevant to consumers by tapping into relevant social media conversations in real-time. As a company, Christopher Africa exists to bring cutting edge AI technology to Africa, borne out of Africa - the so-called 'dark continent.'



There is so much beauty and unrealised potential on our continent which we believe can be unlocked by the introduction of smart technologies such as Christopher.

“ Our mission is to continue to introduce such technologies which add value to our clients and their consumers in a major way. ”

❏ So much has happened over the last few months. Where is 'Christopher' now?

The Covid-19 pandemic has emphasised the need for organisations to be visible on social and digital platforms, in order to keep connected with their customers and drive online sales.

We are pleased to see Christopher playing a vital role in assisting our clients to achieve exactly that. In more direct terms, Christopher is also working with the Presidency, through GCIS (Government Communications and Information Systems), the Gauteng Department of Health and the NICD (National Institute of Communicable Diseases) to deliver relevant Covid-19 related information to South Africans on social media by addressing their queries and concerns in real-time.

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■ ***What are some of the challenges you've had to overcome since starting out?***

Well, the first challenge is actually developing the technology to market readiness. This comes with its own challenges - financial, technical, bugs in the code, arguments you name it.

Writing the code from scratch means we had to come up with really original ideas about how we are going to go about achieving certain software functions. Fortunately, we had many years to perfect it since 2010 and years of youth on our side :)

The second challenge, once the technology was market-ready was to formulate a go-to-market strategy. It is incredibly tough to get the market to accept and use a new, untested technology built and introduced by young, unknown people. Getting credible shareholders on board such as Nfinity and Ad Colony really helped bring credibility to the technology and a willingness to use it from the industry.

▣ **What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?**

Firstly, I would say, get started! Too often, aspiring entrepreneurs wait. They wait for funding, wait for 'the right time', wait for a cheerleader, wait for validation, wait until 'they are ready.' In my experience, getting started is the best action you can take especially in the early phases. Getting started commits you to the idea, and somehow when you get started, the world seems to open up to you.

Secondly, have a willingness to learn. We are not the first people in the history of the planet to come up with great ideas, and certainly not the first to implement them to huge success and prosperity. Therefore, learning from others who have done it before is so crucial to help you develop quicker by avoiding the same mistakes they made. And learning does not only have to be in the form of physical mentorship - you can buy books of the entrepreneur you admire the most and learn from that content or watch YouTube videos of their interviews and/or documentaries to gain an understanding of how they think, how they see the world and how they started their successful businesses.

▣ **What has been your proudest achievement thus far?**

Seeing Christopher Africa grow into a sustainable going concern which provides sustainable jobs to the unemployed, but talented youth of South Africa. This has by far been the most fulfilling aspect of running the business. And thanks has to go to the media industry as well for making this possible by believing in AI and entrusting Christopher with their brands.

▣ **What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?**

I do not have control over how the future turns out in general, except maybe to some degree over my own future. So I can only speak of what I hope the future of entrepreneurship looks like. Generally, I hope that entrepreneurship starts getting taught in school from basic education (primary level) - setting up a business, managing finances etc.

“ I feel this will help give rise to even younger and wiser entrepreneurs who do not have to always learn from making mistakes. ”

I hope to see the government take more risk in terms of funding entrepreneurs and reducing the red tape of requiring business plans and collateral which many aspiring entrepreneurs do not have. And lastly, I hope to see more responsible entrepreneurship where it stops being a 'buzz' and aspiring entrepreneurs actually try to add value to society through their businesses (by employing people, offering useful solutions etc.) rather than doing it to become public figures/mini celebrities, without actually building a real, sustainable business.

▣ **What do you think is the importance of startup accelerator/incubator programmes?**

The opportunity to learn in a structured and supportive environment. Learning is so crucial to being an entrepreneur. Usually, the success of the business also relates to the quality of the entrepreneur you are.

In this sense, it is more useful to describe entrepreneurship as a skill, more than a state of being (i.e. something you are). The more skilled you become at starting businesses, managing finances, making good real-time decisions, the better your business will do. And all of this can only come from learning.

▣ **What would you like to see changed in the South African startup landscape?**

I would like to see us emphasizing more responsible entrepreneurship. As I mentioned in my comment before of the future of entrepreneurship. There is a certain culture associated with entrepreneurship where too many young people are focused on the status instead of building real, valuable businesses. There are recognition awards for everything and publicity is somehow seen to be a requirement to run a successful business. Obviously this is not true. But it does give rise to young people who are more focused on being celebrities and instant gratification rather than being focused on building truly meaningful businesses in the long-term.

I also have some trouble understanding some aspects of our current VC funding landscape. I think VC funds are a useful initiative, giving birth to many startups (particularly in tech). I am just unsure how much they focus on profitability. I know of so many tech startups that almost rely on VC funding for the sustainability of their business. They borrow and expand, borrow and expand, borrow and expand while in the meantime the businesses show hope but not profitability.

In my view, the aim of VC funding should be for a business to start up or grow, until they reach revenues where they can appropriately service their debt and turn a profit. I am unsure about what is happening with most startups in South Africa, so my opinion is only based on the few startups that I know of which have received VC funding. I would only hope that is not the case in general.

■ **What do you believe are the traits an entrepreneur needs in order to succeed?**

In order of priority, I would say: Have a clear mind and objective. Secondly, have a clear plan and strategy of how to implement and run the business so it is profitable. Thirdly, have the will to see it through. Entrepreneurship is not meant to be a guessing or hope game. We try to make the best decisions possible given the information we have.

“ There is obviously a level of risk attached to that as we are unsure how things will turn out, but the maths and science of it has to be checked out before anyone ventures into being an entrepreneur. ”

■ **Tell us about your biggest struggles as an entrepreneur, as well as some major highlights.**

I started my first business when I was 19. I was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug and without much wisdom. So from my point of view, the biggest struggle was overcoming and managing myself - my expectations, assessing if my plans will actually work for the long-term etc. I am an extremely optimistic and hopeful individual so that did not help. I would usually only realise that I made a mistake once I hit something very hard, so I would say knowing and managing yourself is one of the most important struggles to overcome in order to be a successful businessperson.

In terms of highlights, I get those every day. Increasingly seeing major, international brands entrust Christopher with their reputations and campaigns never ceases to fulfil me. It is such an honour to be one of the first companies in the media industry to introduce really advanced AI and see it being embraced.

■ **Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?**

I don't think I would necessarily encourage or discourage it. Much like any other career, it is a personal, intimate choice one has to make for themselves - hopefully not because they just want to be one, but because they actually have a sustainable business idea they would like to try out and implement. I view entrepreneurship as a result of that, and not as a direct choice one makes.

■ **Where would you like to see 'Christopher' in the next 5 years?**

We are currently on a push to grow into international markets with a more aggressive focus on African markets. I would love to see us succeed in this over the next five years and really become established in these markets.

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