

How culture influences marketing in Kenya

By [Esther Karuku](#)

23 Sep 2010

It is said, you will never know where you're going until you know where you've come from. This is a common saying reiterating the importance of origin and culture in an individual's life. Culture is defined as a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs and attitudes that shape and influence perception and behaviour. It's most visible in a society in the form of art, music, language, dressing among other overt practices.



In order to mount a successful marketing campaign, the first thing you must do is have a thorough understanding of your target market and all the dynamics around it. This goes without saying, but it's amazing how many products are launched into the Kenyan market without proper market research. What I'm talking about goes beyond superficial figures and general buying trends. I'm talking about data that takes into account qualitative factors like cultural practices that may negatively impact your brand. A consumer's culture influences their behaviour. Therefore it is in your best interest as a marketer to understand why your consumers act in the way that they do.

Creating perceptions

When you think of Africa, what's the first thing that comes to mind? Your answer to this is largely dependent on whom you interacted with first: international news media or tourism marketers.

If it was the latter, then picturesque images of sun and sand, rich culture, wildlife and nature at its purest form, come to mind. Tourism agents brand country destinations based on their culture all the time. This worldwide phenomenon is more aggressively practised in African countries. It's not surprising since the cultural experience is a key selling point. And our local Kenya Tourist Board has not been left behind either. A brief look at CNN adverts is a testament to this.

Unfortunately, if your first encounter with Africa was on international news, chances are grim pictures of starving children, strife and ravaged villages first crop into your to mind. To help counter this negative perception, several African countries have set up national brand boards. According to its website, the Brand Kenya Board is tasked with the responsibility of identifying and refining key attributes about Kenya that contribute positively to the image and reputation of the nation.

No blanket solution

Now that we have seen that culture does play a pivotal role in the success of a marketing campaign. How does a marketer use a consumer's culture to her advantage instead of viewing it as an obstacle? One pitfall that one must always avoid is giving a blanket solution. Multinationals often fall into this trap by having the same product offering across different countries.

Case in point: the introduction of Malta Guinness in Kenya. After its run-away success in Nigeria, Diageo was quick to launch Malta Guinness, a non-alcoholic malt drink, into the Kenyan market but with appalling results. On the bright side, this paved way for a non-alcoholic drinks market dominated by EABL's Alvaro and Coca-Cola's Novida.

Narrowing down on cultural information that is relevant to a brand can be a daunting task. The trick is to localise the data and make it very specific. This is even more important on a continent like Africa with a multiplicity of cultures. In Kenya alone, we have more than 40 ethnic communities all with different norms, languages and practices.

Blend into culture

Culture is a factor that one must consider when crafting a marketing communication strategy. This reminds me of the stiff resistance Trust condoms faced when they first advertised their products in Kenya. Being an 80% "Christian" nation, the thought of openly promoting a product that allegedly encouraged promiscuity was unheard of. Nevertheless, Trust won the battle by focusing on the endemic number of people who were contracting HIV/AIDS.

It is said that brilliant advertising is so in sync with the target market that the brand slogan immediately becomes part of popular culture. Among brands that have accomplished this feat, the following immediately come to mind: Dura Coat paints with Marangi, Zain with Vuka, Equity Bank with Mimi ni Member and more recently, Pesa Pap by Family Bank.

Another effect of culture is the ever increasing number of vernacular radio stations in the country. With its proliferation, vernacular radio is a cost-effective way to reach the large number of consumers in rural areas.

As much as developing economies such as Kenya are quickly adopting technology, consumers are not in a hurry to abandon their customs. How else can one explain Mpesa (Safaricom's mobile money transfer service) being used to pay bride price? Or the immense popularity of vernacular mobile phone ring tones and ring back tones? The lesson here is to blend your product attributes with the consumers' cultural needs.

360 degree perspective

From market research and product development to channel distribution, a marketer must always keep cultural influences in mind. Maybe that might be the reason why sanitary towels are packed like some form of illicit drug upon purchase in Kenyan supermarkets.

As with all other environmental factors, culture does change with time and one must keep up with the trends to remain competitive. One way of doing this is to enrich your market research by adding an anthropology approach to it. On the flip side, if you face cultural opposition against your brand, even after carrying out adequate research, first understand the root of the resistance. In this way, you will approach the situation with a 360 degree perspective and resolve the issue much faster.

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