

Is it wise for brands to insult black township consumers who are worth R100bn?

 By [Bandile Ndzishe](#)

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The township economy is worth R100bn, while the stokvel industry is estimated to be worth around R70bn. This is according to the Gauteng MEC for economic development, agriculture and rural development, Lebogang Maile.

In an [interview published by the Mail & Guardian](#) last Thursday, Maile said this month will see the launch of the country's first Township Stock Exchange.

Can big business, all retailers and brands, afford to lose a share of this lucrative R100bn market by alienating and offending township consumers

Last week's episode of eNCA's *Checkpoint*, an in-depth TV news report which can be viewed on the video below, featured one of the biggest shopping mall developers in South Africa, a company which also manages and operates malls in both the suburbia and the townships, engaging in an act which seem to discriminate, patronise and insult township consumers. What is most disturbing is that township consumers who are patrons of township shopping malls are charged a fee to pee – toilet tax – for using public toilet facilities in the township shopping malls. The same company does not charge suburban consumers who are patrons of suburbia shopping malls fees for the usage of public toilet facilities.

The *Checkpoint* TV programme begins with an opening remark which says, ***"Paying depends on where you pee, it seems!"***

How can this be? Why do malls in predominantly black areas charge consumers a fee to pee? The argument is that township consumers vandalise restroom facilities and those in the suburbs do not.

I beg to differ and refute this flawed argument strongly. Vandalism is a form of human behaviour which knows no colour, suburb or township. The deliberate acts of damaging public toilets and other public properties happen everywhere, without borders and boundaries, by all races. As a retail marketer I'm a frequent patron of all South African shopping malls, in all provinces, townships and suburbia, and what I have observed is that suburban shopping malls such as Sandton Square, Cavendish Square, Century City, Edendale Mall, Menlyn Park Shopping Centre, et cetera, have watchful restroom service guards.

Furthermore, there are visible security guards strolling up and down the malls and near the toilets to ward off any mischievous behaviour such as vandalism, armed robbery, etc.

On the contrary, most township shopping malls do not have vigilant restroom service guards. These watchful eyes are not around to intimidate various acts of vandalism in township toilet facilities, before they even begin. Security guards are very few and far in between. They are definitely not as pervasive as in the suburbia malls. Dangers of armed robbery remain the same in all the shopping malls, if not even more in the township malls.

Conclusively, acts of vandalism are not a valid reason for charging township consumers money for using shopping mall toilet facilities. The absurd lengths of this situation is made even worse by the reality that in the suburbia, consumers do not lose a single cent for using bathroom facilities in their shopping malls. Shoppers interviewed on unedited version of *Checkpoint* said they felt, "Violated. Insulted. Their privacy infringed upon. Their human dignity trampled upon."

My objective with this article, as a marketer who supports big business, retailers and brands up not down, is to caution brands about the dangers of committing the deadly sins of township marketing. Insulting and patronising township markets will only make brands *personae non gratae* in the townships.

Retailers and brands cannot afford to alienate themselves from trading in the lucrative markets of the townships.

When segmenting, differentiating and penetrating the township markets in an effort to gain traction and retention brands must take the necessary measures not to transgress the following immutable principles of township marketing, advertising and branding:



1. Retailers and brands must avoid being impudent and insulting. They must guard against offending township consumers by understanding what it is that offends and what the insults are.

Last November, the *Sunday Times* had a special feature titled '[From ad to worse: the retail duds that make SA cringe](#)'. The article uses empirical evidence to chronicle advertising campaigns that backfired for using ethnic profiling, being sexually explicit, offensive and downright racist in the eyes of South Africans. One example of the companies that came under fire was Woolworths. The article states that one of the retailer's store displays appeared to portray a slavery scene in which black mannequins were tied together with ropes. The retailer apologised for "the distress caused by an incorrectly assembled in-store installation," and removed it. Some of the companies which are featured by the article include Swedish fashion brand H&M, Cell C, Santam Insurance, McDonald's, etc.



Image credit: timeslive.co.za/Sunday Times

Here are some of the insults and offensive deeds that will definitely enrage township consumers:

- Brands must not compromise quality and service, only because "those goods will be sold in the townships". Township consumers travel between the suburbs and the townships and a great number of them are domestic workers in the suburbs. When inferior products that aren't eligible for the suburb markets are dumped in township markets, township consumers take notice because they have seen superior products in the suburbia. The end results for this act cannot be good for any brand or retailer.
- What's good for the suburbs is also good for the townships. Consistency is a key factor for brands operating in the townships and suburbia. For example, brands and retailers cannot charge township consumers for using shopping mall toilets if they do not charge suburbia consumers for using the same toilet facilities.
- Brands should not play on unfair stereotypes. They must not use repulsive stereotypes, both the accurate and the inaccurate, to judge or make assumptions about township shoppers. Township consumers are not gregarious birds who feed in flocks and fly together. Instead, brands must connect with each and every consumer as a unique individual, special in his/her diversity, not a flock or stereotype.
- Be sensitive to township cultures, traditions and traditional customs. A very good example of a black culture which crosses paths with white culture is referred to as 'ladies first'. When a white man walks with a woman or women, he will allow or give way to women to go into an office or building first. In South African black culture, a black man walks in first or into a building or office first. Not a woman. The wisdom and logic in this is that if there is danger ahead, it must be confronted by a man first. Because a man is a protector of women and families. Most of our white colleagues perceive us, black men, as rude when we lead a way rather than letting women go in first. Another example is eye contact. As a sign of respect black people are not supposed to look at elders, superiors or their bosses in the eyes when talking to them. To do so is a sign of disrespect. In white culture if you do not look at someone in the eyes you are perceived as lying to them or being deceptive. One more example, you cannot pass another person without

greeting and acknowledging them. To do so is offensive, rude and arrogant. There are many black cultural DO's and DON'Ts which must always be observed when dealing in the townships.

- Brands must take care not to disrespect township consumers in any way possible. The 2014 Yellowwood White Paper, titled, [Building brands in a rapidly changing market: Lessons from South Africa](#) reports that “*South Africa has a dark, terrible history in which human rights were ignored and people were treated with utter disdain. The psychological scars of this period are still with us, and as a result, many South African consumers are particularly sensitive to being disrespected. Unfortunately, feeling respected by a brand is still frighteningly rare – especially amongst lower income consumers, but with many middle-class consumers, too. Brands would earn enormous loyalty from simply treating their customers with a more ‘human’ respect. It is one of the major drivers of brand affinity for brands like Shoprite, Pick n Pay and Pep – they treat their customers, some of whom may be people who are unaccustomed to being treated well, with respect*”.
- Marketers and their advertising creatives must avoid using uninformed, ignorant and untrue depictions of black consumers, especially when such depictions are demeaning. Wrong portrayals resulting from thoughtless and uninspired creativity mean that no time was invested in getting to know township consumers by spending time with them, studying them, their behaviours, buying patterns and characteristics, in a thorough and engaging manner. When you truly connect with someone, you get to know that person better, what insults them and what offends their sensibilities.

2. Before goods and services are sold in the townships, they are first planned and discussed in the workplace. Does your marketing, advertising and creative team have enough black township employees who live and breathe the township culture?

This helps guard against offending township consumers, because when you mingle with them and have meaningful conversations with them, you will have a strong understanding of township consumers.

- Are your black female employees allowed to wear headscarves, doeks, head wraps or turbans as representation of the ‘township women’ culture in the workplace?
- Is kwaito, hip hop, house, *umbhaqanga*, *amagwijo*, *izitibili* and *iingoma zakwantu* music played in your workplace?
- Do you have dedicated special annual leave allocations in your workplace for *ulwaluko*, *amasiko*, *imbeloko*, *ukutyisw’ utsiki*, *ukuthomba*, et cetera?
- Is upholding what’s widely considered to be “normal” workplace culture actually making township employees feel uncomfortable as black persons at work?
- Are your standards of professional dress codes easy for many township people to follow? Is your expectation to make them look like someone other than themselves in order to do a job they are perfectly capable of succeeding at while they like themselves not a hindrance to productivity, creativity and innovation?
- Natural hair plays a significant role in expressing the black pride in the identity of township communities. Natural hair is a great symbol and signifier of blackness. Personally, because of this, I have very long dreadlocks that are down to my popliteal fossa. Are culturally-specific natural hair styles – cornrows, afros, and dreadlocks – that differentiate black people from a Eurocentric standard of appearance allowed in your workplace? Black professionals who wear natural hairstyles are not prepared to take time, put in money, and endure pain to permanently change who they are by altering the texture of their natural hair through chemical straightening. Are such black professionals welcomed and embraced in your workplace?
- Does your office use racially coded phrases such as “He’s a coconut? She’s an Oreo”. Is it really a harmless joke to describe someone as “black on the outside but white on the inside”? This is an unfortunate food comparison which gives praises and approval to someone for having and displaying qualities which are not typical of their race.

3. Speak the languages spoken in the townships

- An interesting article titled ‘SA consumers and their dark linguistic secrets’ starts with a very thought-provoking question: [African-language adverts are warm and persuasive – so why are they so scarce?](#) So asks the author, Dr Tessa Dowling, a senior lecturer in African languages in the school of languages and literatures at the University of Cape Town.

Dr Dowling researched the history of Xhosa advertising in the print media, and noted that in the 1800s, newspaper advertisements did not specifically associate Xhosa with poverty, illiteracy or a lack of education. At that time, Xhosa – like English – was used by people from all sorts of economic and class backgrounds. The language carried commercial weight, and had currency when it came to marketing.

This currency steadily declined so that even the Xhosa version of *Bona* magazine now only has 17% of its advertisements in the vernacular. Adverts marketing home furnishings, beauty and baby products and educational institutions all use English exclusively. On the other hand, building supplies and household cleaning materials are promoted entirely in African languages, added Dr Dowling.

Why? The vernacular is used when marketers and advertisers want to sell cheap building materials so that they can attract all those people who need to put up a shack quick, quick — and they also want the domestic worker to write Handy Andy on the shopping list, not just any old household cleaner.

Dr Dowling says that English is so much easier, even if it is dreary and outdated in this multilingual, multi-mad country of ours. *“If you want a break from the boredom of English advertising, tune into an African language radio station such as Umhlobo weNene (Xhosa), Ukhozi (Zulu) or Lesedi FM (Sotho)”*, she advises.

“The voice artists are superb (and you might even catch an inspired rugby commentary — the best in the world is in Xhosa)”. There are a number of lotions and potions Dr Dowling bought because the tone and warmth of the speech was utterly entrancing. She never used to think of Wimpy as a place for smart celebrations, but she found that the Xhosa advertisement for this fast-food outlet's steaks was so terrific that she planned to hold her birthday bash there. But Dowling is still loyal to Nando's, because of its fabulous Xhosa pun: *“Hlonipha ulwimi lwakho”* (Respect your tongue).

Dowling cautions that we must not buy into the idea that English is best to sell in. *“It isn't. And, by the way, has anybody ever seduced you in Sotho? It's much sexier than French,”* she concluded. I unquestionably support her statement on this. I fully agree with her without reservations. If you have any doubts, watch this Lesedi FM advert as empirical proof of Sotho's seductive powers and romantic nature:

- English fluency together with two or more vernaculars are a must if one is a marketer in South Africa, a country with eleven official languages. The majority of black CMOs, marketing directors, marketing managers and brand managers, in addition to their own individual mother tongue, have made concerted efforts to learn, study and speak English, Afrikaans and two or more additional vernaculars, in order to connect with all South African consumers and be versatile in all South African markets, especially the majority townships consumers. This means that the majority of

black marketers speak an average of six to eight languages.

- In contrast, the majority of white CMOs, marketing directors, marketing managers and brand managers do not seem to have made any efforts whatsoever to learn, study and speak South African vernaculars at all. These are the vernaculars spoken by the majority of the South African consumers who reside in the townships. This means that the majority of white marketers speak an average of only two languages – English and Afrikaans.
- It is common knowledge and common sense that if other people make an effort to speak your language, it is much easier to welcome and embrace them into your world, and this facilitates easy adoption, traction and purchasing of their products and services. Removal of language barriers facilitates deep connection with consumers, commonalities with customers and camaraderie with shoppers. It then becomes much easier to trade and do business with communities whose languages you've made an effort to speak.
- Johnny Clegg and Athol Trollip remain great famous South Africans who are fully integrated. Johnny Clegg sings beautifully in isiZulu. His songs are loved by both black and white, rural and suburban South Africans. He speaks isiZulu fluently and impressively.
- Athol Trollip speaks brilliant isiXhosa with proper Xhosa accent and super fluency. [This video bears testament](#) that indeed Trollip sounds like a Xhosa South African and his excellent delivery of the Xhosa language is much, much better than most Xhosas who are born in Cape Town and Gauteng, where the influences of other languages are prevalent and infringe upon the Xhosa language. His Xhosa is pure and undiluted from the Eastern Cape.
- These two great White South Africans are not just about words and concepts when it comes to the rainbow nation, but are true living rainbow nation symbols. They live and breathe being a rainbow nation. For that I salute them both.

4. Embark on brand activism to improve township lives

- The economics concept of stimulating consumer spending to fuel the growth of the economy is not exclusive to the suburbia and big cities. It is a well-known fact that household spending depends heavily and only on household income. When township communities do not have the money to spend, your brand's township trading will suffer. Big brands, retailers and businesses will be forced to close down and exit the townships. Without the township income, big companies' bottom lines won't be the same. Township communities need big business as much as big business needs them. Big business can create huge projects that create employment, builds happy township communities, puts money in households and ultimately stimulates consumer spending.
- Let us not have cockeyed delusions, people are more interested in the social links that come from brand affiliations than in the brands themselves. To build and maintain strong brand communities through brand activism, companies must understand the individual and social needs of community members and do everything possible to support and engage them on their own terms.

The brand's community-building efforts can lead to maximum benefits: powerful brand communities in the townships who are ardent groups of consumers organised around the lifestyle, activities, and ethos of the brand. What is a great example of this?

Look at Coca-Cola's Coke Studio. Observe how this campaign is building the South African music community and the African continent music communities. Coke Studio gives platform, physical studio space, studio time, studio sessions, mentorship and support to musicians from around Africa to collaborate and make hits. Different musicians from around Africa are given 48 hours to write, produce and perform their music hits live on television. Through this campaign, Coca-Cola has managed to build strong brand communities through brand activism.

Coca-Cola created a TV platform that extends to various online mediums, building additional online and social media brand communities in the process. The campaign's presence is integrated on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, et cetera.

- Exodus of big businesses and brands from the township can be avoided through brand activism for improving township lives. Focused and strategic township corporate social investment can help improve township lives. When I say 'strategic and focused' I mean that what the business does to help improve township lives must also ensure the survival of the business. That would be profitable brand activism. I have not forgotten that businesses exist to make money through profit.

Retailers and brands can uplift the township communities in ways that stimulate the township economy, whilst also making profit. This will translate to elevated township consumer spending. Heightened township consumer spending means that shoppers are buying more goods and services from your brands. This translates to township economic boom. The increase in township economic activity spreads to all sectors and industries in the township. Everyone wins. The township consumer is happy and shows it by embracing the brands. Profits are made.

- Economically disadvantaged and disempowered township consumers cannot support brands and retailers, buy their goods and frequent malls and stores.

Advertisers and marketers who covet township consumers with the hope of establishing long-term relationships with their brands can only generate critical township mass in their categories and build a high level of loyalty amongst township consumers at the same time by truly loving township communities unconditionally, without prejudices, unfair treatments, offensive ads and insulting marketing.

Enhance your brand's ability to grow in the townships by respecting the unique differentiating township demographic, shopping, buying, viewing, digital, and mobile trends. Making concerted efforts to meaningfully and deeply understand the various generations and gender dynamics that exist within the township population is essential for marketers, retailers and brands who want to maximize township business opportunities.

If brands and retailers thoroughly understand who township communities are, they can make products that truly meet their needs and will be able to build a lasting impact in the township lives.

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