

The untapped advertising potential of SA's transit media market

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With the increasing lack of available premium outdoor advertising space, transit media continues to become an increasingly popular form of outdoor advertising. South Africa's public transport remains largely underutilised as a communications platform, despite being used by around 17 million economically-active people on a daily basis.

"The people who use public transport are by far the most significant consumer group in South Africa in terms of expenditure and consumption," says Jacques du Preez, managing director of leading transit media communications company, Provantage Media. "Some 14 million South Africans use taxis as their primary mode of transport, another 2.8 million use buses and 850,000 use rail on a daily basis, so companies not utilising transit media in their advertising mix are sorely missing out," he says. "These people are economically-active consumers, many of whom are rapidly moving up the LSM spectrum. Despite the quality of this audience, there is a major under utilisation of transit media advertising space in this country, which currently attracts less than 1% of the country's above-the-line expenditure," he continues.

There is, in fact little change in the South African trend of investing advertising spend on print, closely followed by television and then radio advertising. Commuter or transit advertising is some way behind, with even cinema, with its relatively small audience in comparison, attracting more advertising revenue. Yet surprisingly, overseas transit media is both a well-accepted and popular way to reach economically-active consumers, as they commute, with thousands of advertisements found on and in tubes, trains, taxis and buses. "This use of transit media as a valid and effective form of advertising is due to the fact that the people who commute in this environment also work in agencies," comments du Preez. "In South Africa we have a daily mobilisation of some 17 million people who form the backbone of South Africa's workforce but almost a non-existent percentage of the people who handle media planning use our public transport system."

Du Preez says many people who allocate advertising budgets often do not understand what the average South African commuter's daily experience entails while using public transport. "Although transit media owners have done a lot in the last ten years, there is plenty of educating still to be done," continues du Preez. "There is still a significant lack of understanding and awareness of the environment and of the way South Africans commute. Even today, many media planners wouldn't be able to tell you where the biggest taxi ranks are, let alone what the foot traffic volume is moving through these centres."

This lack of understanding of transit media has had a downside effect. "Traditionally, the pricing table of commuter media was significantly lower than other mass media types," du Preez says. "It was a discounted medium because there has been a lack of acceptance. Once you set the price bar in the industry it is very difficult to climb out and get in line with other media channels."

Despite this, the medium has shown some impressive growth in the last three years. The initial lack of demand for transport advertising has also been attributed to the poor reputation that South Africa's public transport has garnered over the past few years. "Whilst this is not a first world transport system, some advertisers might still view it with some scepticism. This has however changed significantly in recent times," says du Preez. He believes that advertisers need to bear in mind how many people will see their message, as well as the fact that commuters are more receptive to advertising messages during their daily commute. "Due to the increase in media clutter people are filtering media communication constantly. New technology is allowing consumers easier access to view only what they want to be exposed to. Already marketers are seeing that audience characteristics are changing. This media desensitisation is further amplified by the growing trend of market fragmentation. commuter media is more fortunate, as it is one of the few environments where a consumer cannot tune out as they are a captive audience. That's what makes this media so understated."

The infrastructure and quality of South Africa's public transport will also be significantly increased in the build up to the 2010 Soccer World Cup. Massive media opportunities will come from the infrastructure development from the upgrading of our transport systems, including bus stops and train stations. "The industry is therefore offering a great deal of opportunities for companies willing to advertise," comments du Preez. "Fast moving consumer goods and telecommunication brands will do especially well in this space, as will financial services, especially banks."

Du Preez is convinced that the industry is changing and that it is only a matter of time before innovations, such as televisions in taxis and buses will start to yield a return on advertising spend, on both brand awareness and bottom-line sales figures.

"The message I want to send to the advertising industry is that this is not rhetoric, get involved now as there is still a huge, relatively un-tapped advertising medium out there that will directly and effectively speak to a defined target market. I honestly believe we still haven't realised the sheer volume of the commuter industry. The benefits it has to offer are absolutely enormous," concludes du Preez, "time will tell."

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