

Sibongile Sibanda of Liberty

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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Sibongile Sibanda, Liberty's group executive for brand and integrated marketing, believes that the financial services environment is an exciting space for communicators because it exists in highly emotive territory. She chats more about how trust in a well-established brand can be enhanced by technology, and that 2020 was a year of great learning.



Sibongile Sibanda, group executive for brand and integrated marketing, Liberty

■ **Why is the whole concept of a brand so important, particularly in the financial services industry?**

We're all familiar with Warren Buffet's words:

“ it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. ”

This sentiment is particularly true for financial services brands particularly because they are service-driven and therefore consumer interaction happens on a regular basis.

Building a reputable financial services brand on the basis of a solid customer experience is critical to the success of any financial services organisation because there are so many opportunities to either surprise and delight clients, or to get the service experience wrong.

The evolution of technology has also meant that customers have expectations of how brands should act, react and interact. This forces organisations to pay attention to how they deliver their brand across all elements of the customer journey at any given time.

“ Nowmore than ever, customers expect brands to DO what they SAY they will do, and again this is even more true for financial services brands from a reputation perspective as compared to some other businesses. ”

■ **Is social media a help or a hindrance to brands? Can you give us your three golden rules of social media engagement?**

It is always important to see and use social media for what it is, a potential engagement and education platform or tool that provides access not only to your current customers, but a larger audience. To this, my approach to social media is simple:

1. Educate – ensure that the brand's social pages exist to share information and resources about it for the greater good of your current and potential clients across various segments and cohorts.
2. Customer servicing channel – use social media as you would your contact centre. Use social listening tools to hear the conversation customers are having about the brand and use these to spot opportunities which can drive insights to inform your strategies.
3. Drive engagement and brand love – consumers are multi-faceted and while they have financial products with us, they are interested in many other things. Therefore, share content that is grounded in authenticity which showcases the ethos of the brand. I also love promoting our own staff members on these platforms because they are our brand ambassadors with real stories of their own to tell.

■ ***How has the pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns affected how Liberty communicates with its clients?***

The pandemic has forced a lot of organisations to rethink how to communicate with clients, and what to say to them. At the beginning of lockdown, we had to ensure that all our client touchpoints were informative and provided a sense of calm - reiterating the message that as uncertain as the world feels now, they can count on us to be there when they need us the most.

We could not pretend everything was normal, because it was not. We had to redefine the status quo for ourselves. And slowly but surely craft the new normal, however short-lived that too might have been. We used a lot of our channels and resources to reiterate our support for government's lockdown initiatives, as well as how we truly were in it with our clients. Something we at Liberty make a point of doing.

“ It is no understatement to say it has been a year of great learning, tweaking and agility. ”

■ ***What are some of the brand's most successful campaigns?***

Two years ago, together with our agency partners, we embarked on a brand repositioning exercise to bring ourselves closer to our clients and potential customers. In the process we relooked some of our business practises with the idea of bringing these into better alignment with our customer needs, as well as those of the market.

The intention was always to take the new positioning to market in 2020, and when the pandemic and lockdown restrictions hit in the first quarter of 2020, we knew that this would throw a spanner in the works for us. However, a lot of great work had happened behind the scenes and we pressed on.

All of this meant that we had some limitations with some of our above-the-line elements, launching to an internal workforce that was working remotely, and landing a message in the market during a time when people were fighting for survival the world over.

Ultimately, we delivered a campaign that was truly reflective of where the world was, what clients needed to hear and how we could show up to not only offer support during this global crisis, but land our new positioning which is the idea of being In It With You. In hindsight, the challenges provided opportunities to become part of a narrative grounded in doing good and showing care when the world was in turmoil.

■ ***Comment on the power or value of branded content as a form of advertising.***

The increase in branded content over the last few years has provided brands with additional avenues and platforms for exposure. It is a more customer-focused type of content marketing, which provides value through making an emotional connection, as opposed to direct punting and selling of products.

I think that there is great value in branded content, through its ability to attract attention to the unique values and ideals of the brand to create an affinity with consumers. Branded content seems to be well-placed in creating brand love and stickiness through relatable content that sparks interest and conversion without a hard sell approach.

It's a great addition to the traditional advertising mix of tools, each of which have a clear and complimentary role to play.

■ ***If you were mentoring a future you, what career advice would you give to aspiring young marketing and branding professionals?***

To the young and upcoming marketers, my best advice would be to:

1. Spend time building your competencies. This will serve you well as you progress in your career or branch out as an entrepreneur.
2. Learn the art of synthesis... This will help in the articulation of your thoughts; it will help you hook your audience and build the stamina of your strategic capability.
3. Lastly, enjoy the journey. Take time along the way to reflect, breath and learn.

ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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