

Why brands should behave more like entrepreneurs

 By [Felix Kessel](#)

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The future of the country rests firmly in the hands of the entrepreneurs. Tabled as the flavour of the decade, entrepreneurs are fast becoming the base of the wealth pyramid and are the people who will give rise to the mega-companies of tomorrow.

Entrepreneurs are the vital link in the chain of national success. And yet no one asks how. No one looks to understand them and their approach.

If entrepreneurs are the recipe for success in South Africa, and the world, right now, why are so few brands acting like entrepreneurs?

Entrepreneurs (and from now on this term should encompass people and businesses and brands) set themselves apart from everyone else through one single belief, they believe in the power of change.

Key elements

Innovation, changing the status quo, institutional change and novel information, are the key elements to entrepreneurial success and it's no surprise that it holds true for a brand's success too.

To simplify, what is innovation if you're a brand? Is it a new product? Is it a new way of selling the product or is it new way of communicating about the product? Could it just be a new look? The most successful brands in the world don't worry about any of these things in isolation; they worry about all of them. They place innovation at the core of what they are and constantly invite change into their world. Look at Apple, Coca-Cola and Unilever. They are massive brand owners that constantly challenge, not only the external status quo, but their internal one too.

Coca-Cola has not changed their core product essentially since inception (they took out cocaine and changed the formulation with disastrous effect in the late '80s but reverted just as quickly). They have a good thing and, "it ain't broke" so they don't fix it. But they change almost everything else. How it's packaged, how they talk about it, where they talk about it, sponsorships, real-world and online content, regular line extensions, support brands and just about anything else not core to the brand itself. They lead the world in brand ownership and stewardship because they are always the pioneers that do things first and let the world follow.

Driving their world forward

Apple and the Unilever are the same. They challenge the status quo in their own way. They set up their brands and their

businesses to embrace change, not fight it. It's so endemic to their culture that they carve off a large part of their revenue every year to ensure they own and generate novel information that will drive their world forward.

Through extensive research and development, investigation and a ton of failures, they keep learning. The Unilever Institute was created to live by this principle and it shows on the bottom line as well as in the brands they bring to market that never fail to capture both market attention and market share. They are bold enough to model their actual businesses around the need for relevant and constant change. That's primarily why their brands are successful in almost every market environment, almost every economy, almost everywhere.

We all can learn from that entrepreneurial behaviour.

The power of passion

Let's take a look at some of the behaviours that define entrepreneurs. If they are largely present, you're almost guaranteed success. Let's start with drive and energy. Sounds silly doesn't it? Yet you'll find that it's a decisive factor in the success of brands as much as it is for individuals. There are loads of clock-watchers and time bandits waiting for time to run out to get themselves permission to go and do something other than their jobs. Without passion for the thing you're doing, you're in danger of losing your energy, your drive. With passion, effort becomes enjoyment. Look at your brand team and decide if together you really love what you do. If not, go and find that thing and leave the brand to people who actually care. Think of the people who personify brand success - Richard Branson, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates. Did they ever punch a clock? Were they ever doing something they hated?

A key entrepreneurial trait is self-confidence. It's easy to spot in a person but how do we measure it in a brand? It's a tonal thing. A new kid on the block who makes themselves felt, is bold about who they are and what they stand for and unashamedly stands up to the competition. Look at Frank.net. Insurance unapologetically put into the world in a straightforward, no-nonsense way that shoulders aside the giants of the industry and stakes its claim. That is self-confidence. It's undeniable. It's attractive. It's noticed.

In control

All entrepreneurs show a high internal locus of control. What's that? Well answer this question: "Who or what determines change in your life? Is it mostly those in power above you? Is it chance? Or is it you, yourself? If you answer "you, yourself" then you have an internal locus of control. If you answer others then you have an external locus and if you answer chance then you have an abstract locus of control. Entrepreneurs truly feel that they control their own destiny. They are not beholden to anyone to create change and in fact, they are the primary change merchants themselves. Brands like this bend the world to themselves and achieve brilliance. Think Virgin or Apple. They are the masters of this.

Entrepreneurs seek out feedback. They want to learn how to do things better. Bad news or honest criticism is more valuable to an entrepreneur because it gives them an opportunity to get better at what they do. Brands who listen and learn are always more powerful than those that preach to persuade. Think FNB vs. ABSA. A bank that listens and learns vs. a bank that talks and tells. Who is the most innovative bank in the world today? The one's that listened to their customers most closely. Even their positioning asked "How can we help you?"

Using resources to maximum effect

Working efficiently and effectively is also a hallmark of entrepreneurial enterprises. They use the resources they have to maximum effect. People, cash, assets, knowledge and anything else they can find is really squeezed for all its worth. That efficiency makes brands that behave like these create "large bangs" for relatively small bucks. These are challengers who box clever. Think Amstel Lager carving out a 38% share of voice using TV content (SABC 1's Class Act Reality TV show) over classic advertising in early 2009 against a giant competitor outspending them 10+ to 1.

So with all this evidence mounting up, why are there so few brands taking heed of the forces shaping their world? Perhaps

they are too internally focused. They are certainly committed to their markets but maybe they spend too much time and effort trying to find the deep penetrating insight that will unlock growth that they forget to take action. Perhaps they are just stuck in the tangle of red tape that stifles growth and strangles activity. Or maybe they are simply too lazy to make a difference. Days of corporate complacency are over. Success demands energy and those who offer it will reap the rewards. Brands need to stop behaving like institutions and start acting like people again. Get motivated and do stuff. Embrace change and create it for themselves. They need to be energetic and make themselves felt. They need to do a little less talking and a little more doing, all the while fighting their fear. Brands need to fail. And win all the more. Just like the entrepreneur.

ABOUT FELIX KESSEL

Born a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, where writing was the only way to survive the suburban ennui of his hometown, Felix wrote his way into a strange land called advertising. Currently, he is the creative lead at WPP's agency for Diageo, TeamLiquid.

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