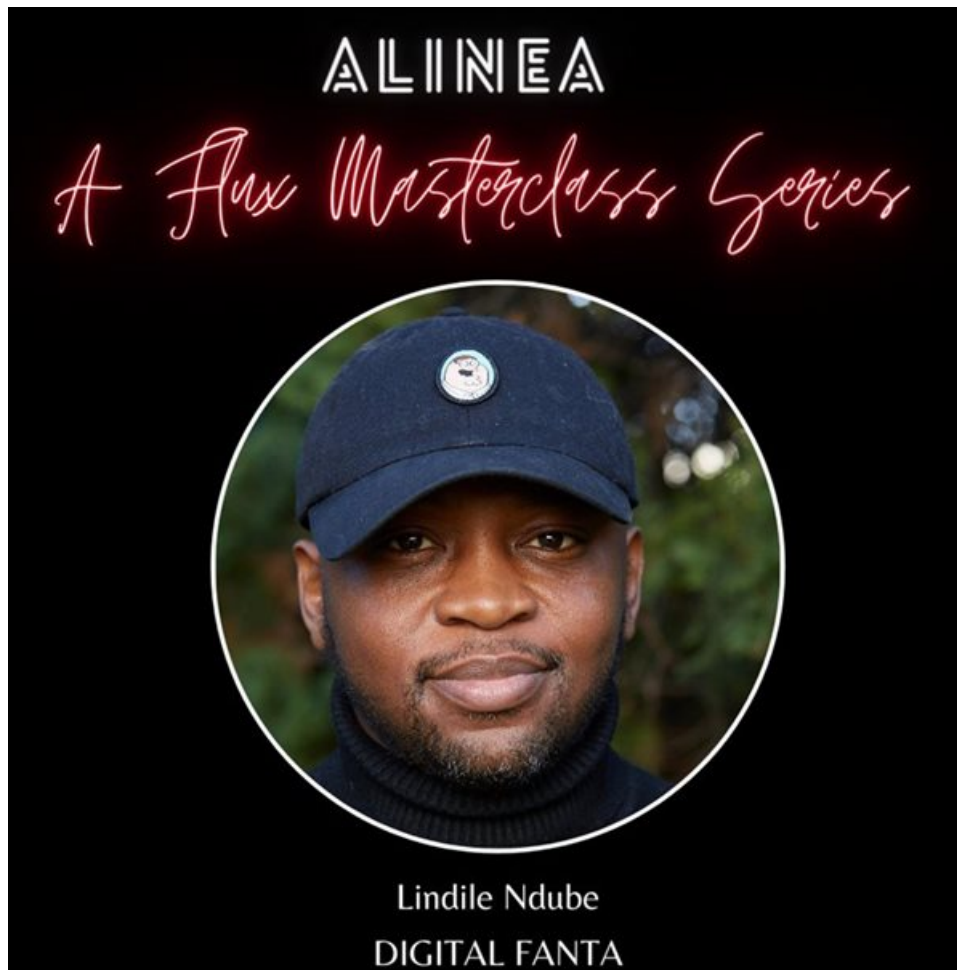


Businesses must find a balance between high tech and high touch

As part of their ongoing efforts to help South African SMEs navigate the post-pandemic "Great Staggering" back into the new post-normal, post-lockdown world, Dion Chang, founder of Flux Trends, interviewed Lindile (Li) Ndube of Digital Fanta at the Alinea Marketing Master Class to find out how brands can connect with customers in a world where trust is a scarce commodity.



Ndube has a “very particular set of skills”, skills that he has acquired over a long-ish career in curiosity. He heads up Digital Fanta, home to the largest marketing industry communities in South Africa.

He describes the work he does as “Counter Strategy” because he specialises in identifying gaps in brand’s strategies, and then bridging those gaps with alternative ideas. This is why Ndube is the perfect person to ask about how to build a brand differently in difficult times with new creative constraints.

■ *Can you tell us a little bit more about “counter strategy”?*

Insights is a big term right now. In as much as people do research, there will be instances where certain nuances are lost. That is where “counter strategy” comes in; it is my role to ask: Have you considered this? Have you considered that? I am seeing holes in what you are doing. I need to actively identify those gaps. So basically, that is what it is, I help clients spot their blind spots. And then in the end, we all walk out with a much more nuanced strategy.

■ *How can brands or businesses make sure they do not lose touch of that, that real human connection?*

So, my whole thing has always been to put people first, in everything that you do.

“ You need to understand it is always about the people. And the beauty about technology is it is such an enabler, and a multiplier as well. ”

It allows us to tap into very sophisticated ways of getting information to people in real time.

But if you do not put people first in your strategy, then all of that is lost.

Customer experience for one, that is a vital weapon, I have realised that a lot of brands are sleeping on.

I am also a fanatic about neuroscience. We have a misconception that markets do things for us (advertisers). That is not the case. People do things for themselves. So, if you can use technology to tap into what the insight is, and why is this person going to buy into this thing, I think you can bridge that gap between data and human insight quite successfully. By using data to enhance customer experiences, you add real tangible value to that person.

“ Just remember, data is especially useful, but you need to know when to use data and know when to use judgement. ”

If you are buying stock, for example, then data is the way to go; but when you are dealing with people like choosing a spouse, use judgement. And I think this is what is lacking in so many marketing strategies. People are not using judgement as much as they should. They over rely on the data to avoid blame if things do not work out as planned.

■ **What is the biggest mistake that you see brands and businesses doing with marketing right now?**

I think personally, brands are playing it too safe. This leads to you having wrong people in key decision-making roles. For example, we can look at the recent Clicks/TRESemmé debacle.

That whole PR disaster could have been avoided if the companies had tapped into diversity. This is a big problem we have in the marketing industry - lack of transformation. I suspect much of this lack of transformation comes from a place of avoiding taking risks, because people are comfortable with people who look like them and think like them. But this cultural conservatism is very costly.

Like Jeff Bezos, said your brand is what people say about you when you are not in the room. So, what are people saying about your brand? And that, for me is the biggest risk - when brands are not taking time to actually synchronise with the people on the ground, not getting the right people who understand those nuances and converting them into actionable strategies.

I think we need more balls in this industry!

“ We need to become closer with our people, our staff, and our customers, and take them into our confidence. There is nothing wrong with asking your audience for guidance every now and then. ”

It will help you dodge the bullets.

■ ***Do you not think that in the era of identity politics ahead that that brands are going to get more and more afraid of being called out or doing misstep? Do you think that is a trend that might mean brands get a little bit more conservative?***

Definitely. That is a trend ahead. But we also know, as marketers, that being conservative, is also not the right thing to do. Fear is a global problem. But the question I want to ask is, what is the risk of not doing the right thing because you are afraid? I mean, I think we have beautiful examples of fearless brands. I love Nando's. Nando's is a brilliant company, it is in tune with what is happening in society. They do bold things. And the market rewards them for that. I think we could learn from brands like that.

Sure, you still need to know how to toe the line, to avoid costly missteps, but once again listening to and engaging with diversity in your team can help you prevent making those mistakes. Diversity is scientifically proven as a multiplier of success in businesses.

■ ***It seems like globally, we are headed into a season of economic depression, never mind, recession. In tough times like these, should brands increase marketing spend or cut back? And when cash flow is under stress, do you have, or have you seen any new radical or unusual, low cost, high impact marketing strategies that you can suggest for small South African businesses?***

That answer should be treated on a case to case basis. If you are in a position where a market gap has suddenly opened up for you, perhaps as competitors are forced to exit, where you can move in, then my advice to you would be definitely: increase your visibility. There are long term residual effects of investing in advertising.

“ Also remember, even in down turns it is important to “implant yourself” within your target market’s consciousness, because people do not understand. ”

When we do research, and we look at how consumers make decisions. People have so many choices right now. So, brands have an opportunity to make that decision-making easier on people. You do that by being visible. People walk into a store and buy your brand, sometimes, subconsciously, just because you are there on the shelf, and they recognise your packaging or brand. That is the danger of not advertising - not being the “default” subconscious choice.

“ Then again, if you are not in a position where you can afford traditional advertising, you can really be clever about it. You must play with different strategies and find what works for you. ”

Hyper-personalisation is one such interesting model - here you look at automated, personalised direct marketing - e-mail marketing, WhatsApp communications - that kind of thing. Those are low cost strategies, but these days you can even embed your customised videos, where your customer's personal name would appear within a piece of dynamic marketing creative.

So, look to the technology that is available. But fundamentally, make sure you own your own client data - your own list - you want to build your own off-platform marketplace now. You want to know who your customers are, by name. You want to know what they are doing. You want to have that direct link to your customers - it is cheaper than buying someone else's media.

This interview was part of the Flux Trends Alinea Mini Masterclass Series dedicated to helping South African entrepreneurs and SMEs use trends as business insights to get back to work after the manifold challenges of 2020.

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