

## Still setting South Africa's banking Standard

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STANDARD Bank has shrugged off the challenge to its position as South Africa's leading bank posed by the takeover of Absa by global banking giant Barclays.

It retains its position as the standard by which to measure banks.

Although all banks' brand relationship scores have declined overall, Standard Bank has increased its leadership margin over its rival big four.

While trying to create a bank that's simpler, better, faster for consumers, the bank's chief executive, Jacko Maree, and his team have launched a series of consumer innovations as well as a broad-based black-ownership initiative that has been hailed as a benchmark for the industry.

In a category dominated by the big four — or rather big three, Standard Bank, Absa and First National Bank — Standard has remained the most consistent bank, returning benchmark performance for consumers and shareholders.

The past few years were marked by non-brand-building, non-consumer-oriented activities for Standard Bank's competitors, which no doubt deviated some valuable attention from their brands and business performance.

Nedbank, which lost 15% in its brand relationship score, the biggest loser among the big four, is no doubt still reeling from the backlash against its perceived non-embracing, elitist advertising campaign, "Who are these people", and advertising agency and leadership shake-ups.

Absa spent much of the time negotiating for its eventual multibillion-rand takeover by Barclays and the lack of consistency in brand leadership and innovation that marked the tenure of its erstwhile marketing leader, Santie Botha, who is now setting the pace at MTN, also hurt.

Overall, the year was dominated by the commitment to meet the Financial Sector Charter goals of a minimum 10% BEE shareholding, with the big four all setting an exemplary pace for the category.

Other than the emergence of regional player Ithala, which displaced Trust Bank from the top 10, the category remained similar to last year. However, just as in years past — either out of nostalgia, ineffective communication by the overarching brand owners, or just pure resilience — Volkskas, which together with Trust Bank (which featured in the past few years' lists), United Bank and Allied Bank merged to create Absa, continues to feature among the top 10. NBS, Perm and People's Bank are being absorbed into the Nedbank stable.

Notably, though, other than Absa and FNB, the rest of the top 10, including Nedbank, with a combined 20.5 brand relationship score — the measure of spontaneous awareness, trust, confidence and commitment in brands — are barely over half of Standard Bank, the leader at 39.5.

Standard Bank is set to continue its exponential business and brand growth with

its first-to-market initiatives such as the recent partnership with MTN to launch the country's first cellular phone bank, MTN Banking, a joint venture agreement which makes banking a phone call away for 20 million cellphone subscribers.

Not long after that, in fact 13 days later, and soon after ending its partnership with Barclays with the Barclaycard, Standard Bank announced another first, a joint venture with the country's leading retailer, Edcon, to offer South Africa's first no-annual-fee credit card.

Both initiatives effectively bring financial services closer to South Africa's many underbanked or unbanked people, and are indicative of the first-to-market initiatives that have made Standard Bank the standard by which to measure banks.

Partnerships, product innovation and consistent business and brand leadership are without doubt the differentiating secrets of Standard Bank that have made the bank the envy of its peers and the choice of consumers.

Standard Bank, which sponsors the country's number-three sport, cricket, and the national one-day international team, as well as being the official banking partner to Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates, is also ranked among the top 10 companies that have done the most for community upliftment.

In the past two years, the bank consistently featured among the most admired companies in the Top Brands survey. Says Sarah-Anne Orphanides, Standard Bank's group marketing director: "In the competitive financial services environment we strive to make branding the heart and soul of the company, of what we stand for, and to weave it into all our dealings with our customers."

Part of the bank's branding success can be attributed to its monobrand strategy, introduced in 2004, where the bank consolidated its subsidiary brands under a single Standard Bank brand.

"A strong brand forges a bond with the customer as well as creating emotional links for employees," says Orphanides.

Standard Bank is growing and strengthening its brand across all its operations in 17 African and 21 other countries internationally.

Absa, through its new partnership with Barclays, may have an emerging dominant position beyond the Limpopo and an incidental shoo-in into the lucrative European market but, in South Africa, Standard Bank is the benchmark of banks. And it is not far behind in Africa.

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