

Here's the challenge

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A diverse pool of talent will sharpen our creative resources

The parliamentary hearings in 2001 and 2002, spearheaded by communications committee chairman Nkenke Kekana, brought a sense of urgency to the marketing industry to reflect on its relevance in the new SA.

It's a sad state of affairs when the one industry usually characterised by a relentless urge to be innovative in connecting with consumers is the most lethargic about change.

As an industry of ideas and innovative solutions, we are globally competitive, among the leaders. Our performance last year at Cannes (two golds & 43 finalists), D&AD (nine entries), the Clios (one gold & 47 finalists) and the One Show in New York, and more than 2 000 entries at the annual MFSA Loerie Awards, bear testimony to our creative resources. The Jupiter Drawing Room (ranked fourth most creative agency in the world in 2001) and Hunt Lascares have long been recognised by their peers as world leaders in their craft.

But creative excellence and increased billings are no longer the only benchmarks of performance for communication agencies in SA.

While remaining creatively at the forefront, locally and globally, the body of work produced must yield positive results for clients, and the industry must become relevant to the new SA, bringing in historically disadvantaged groups (blacks, women and people with handicaps) . Not for the sake of representing groups, but because a diverse pool of talent will sharpen our creative resources and ability to connect with the diverse SA community.

Creativity must be measured against the impact it has on the bottom line of clients and how well consumers connect to the selected message and medium. And being globally competitive must be balanced by being locally relevant and connected. Cases in point are the body of work for Castrol, Vodacom and Telkom - all SA advertising and marketing classics.

The industry needs to be responsive to the needs of the market and clients, without being forced by incentives or legislation . It is the reason we're in business - to build long-lasting relationships between brands and consumers.

Beyond creativity and effectiveness, government's requirement of a minimum of 26% ownership by historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs) to qualify for tendering should not be the only incentive to reshape the industry. Blacks represent about 35% of an industry of more than 5 000 professionals, in a country that has predominantly (75%) black consumers. The picture is much the same in marketing departments around the country.

Transformation is no longer a "nice to have". It's a business imperative. Fast-tracking employment equity, black economic empowerment procurement, equity ownership and the development of HDIs is the right thing to do in SA. It may be a difficult concept to translate to foreign owners, but it's an investment that only South Africans can articulate, motivate and implement to remain locally relevant, if

the industry is to survive without legislation.

Great strides have been made by the likes of Lobedu Leo Burnett, which has parted with 51% of its equity to HDI owners. HerdBuoys McCann-Erickson and Saatchi & Saatchi led the way .

But transformation of our industry must go beyond race. Corporate governance, social reinvestment, best practices and innovation must become the daily way of doing business.

Some agencies are already beginning to work and think like proper businesses and not just hot shops. They are thinking beyond cutting-edge creative ideas, and making advertising a great career choice, exposing HDIs to the industry, creating enviable working environments and developing innovative solutions to export SA thinking.

The Jupiter Drawing Room "Ripple Effect", spearheaded by Ross Chowles, and Gordon Cook's Vega School of Brand Communication's Imagination Lab are intended to expose young HDIs to advertising and design and give them an opportunity to work on real-life ad projects. This is the type of initiative that must be multiplied. And bettered.

Net#work BBDO was the only ad agency in the top 10 in the *FM*/Human Capital Corp "Best Company To Work For" survey. Keith Shipley and Mike Schalit want to "create a damn great place to work".

The Jupiter Drawing Room has launched an ambitious project, the Duke of Urbino.com, offering creative solutions online to a global market. Why should SA agencies always import solutions from thinkers outside our borders? And with Matthew Bull of Lowe Bull, and John Hunt and Reg Lascaris of TBWA Hunt Lascaris, luminaries of the local industry, appointed by their global partners to take senior strategic positions overseas, South Africanness is spreading to other countries.

It's surely a great time to be South African. Our unique way of solving problems, local and global, will be underscored and reinforced by our transformation as an industry born out of diverse groups and experiences. The SA population is only 43m in a world of more than 6bn. No other country has made the change from one system of government to the other so smoothly. There's no reason we should want to be anything or anybody other than South African. That's what TBWA is getting from Reg and John, and Lowe Lintas from Matthew. Unique individuals. Unique ideas. South African.

If we want to keep getting what we're getting, then we must do nothing. And what the industry is getting is shrinking margins, reallocation of advertising budgets to other communication vehicles that are more effective in connecting with consumers, and questions of the relevance of the industry in today's SA.

Too much of a challenge to be asked to be South African?