

Distell's Kushilla Thomas feeds her passions for Africa, brands and people

 By [Lauren Hartzenberg](#)

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Alcoholic drinks maker Distell is successfully tapping into Africa's significant commercial potential, with the Savanna and Klipdrift owner reporting record growth in African markets for 2021. As the company's marketing director for Africa, Kushilla Thomas has had no small part to play in that achievement.



Kushilla Thomas, Distell's marketing director for Africa. Source: Supplied

Thomas likens travel to breathing, and her role at Distell has seen her pound the pavements across Africa, forging close relationships with partners and gleaning insight into consumers across 20 very different markets on the continent.

A trained pharmacist, Thomas learnt about market development while working for pharmaceutical companies Aspen and Adcock Ingram. She switched to beverage marketing when she joined SAB in 2004, spending 13 years with the company, where her focus was on both Africa and Asia. Thomas then moved to Stellenbosch in 2017 to take up her current position. She also acquired an MBA along the way, with the University of Wales in Cardiff.

A large part of her professional life has involved working in Africa and other emerging markets, a journey that she claims has taught her the art of observation and listening to understand. Working inside the markets in which Distell trades has allowed Thomas to know them more intimately. "Unless you're on the ground, how can you pick up the pulse?" Thomas asks.

Her travels have allowed her to encounter dynamic and resourceful people, capable of thinking on their feet to address consumer needs in fresh and original ways. She lists the creativity of street vendors as a case in point.

We engaged with Thomas for Women's Month to understand more about her career journey and how female consumers are influencing innovation and trends in her industry.

📊 **Kushilla, as marketing director for Africa, what do you love most about your work at Distell?**

At Distell, I get to do two of the things that I hold most dear...working with amazing brands and amazing people.

Our brands are some of the most valued and loved in both SA and the rest of the African continent. We have a full portfolio that appeals to a growing demographic and we are still set for amazing growth across the continent as our innovation pipeline unfolds.

In terms of the people, the friendships and relationships that have been forged at Distell will endure for years to come. Despite having some of the most intelligent and outstanding subject matter experts at Distell, the stand-out qualities of these individuals are respect, humility and optimism.

These values are what underpins this business. The achievements and accolades speak for themselves. I also have the privilege of traversing the continent and feeding my passion for the continent's vibe and her people. Again, some of my best friendships have been borne in this way and I get to do it all in a day's work. How privileged I am to do this!



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📊 **Any pertinent lessons on life and business you've learned working on the ground across Africa?**

“ My 18 years of working on the ground across the African continent have shaped and moulded me as a person. ”

Starting out 18 years ago, travelling in Africa was not smooth sailing and as a young woman on my own as well. In hindsight, it took courage and trust to set out on that road. Some of the lessons I hold dear from this journey:

- The power of listening to understand – for that which is said and not said especially when you are operating in different cultures
- Relationships – the power of nurturing your relationships and the quality of your network
- Respect or rather mutual respect – of your job and your corporate your colleagues and you having the respect of them too. If it's not mutual, what are you doing there? Respect the markets, the cultures, the nuances, the opinions and in that way, you build trust and ultimately become a colleague that people want to do business with.
- Integrity – always and without compromise
- Compassion and passion – having compassion to enable those enduring conversations whilst maintaining passion for

what you do - it's only if the passion is there, that you will be able to give your best.

- Gratitude – for having worked with the two things I am super passionate about: some of the world's best people and some of the world's best brands



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■ **Could you share your tips for climbing the career ladder in your field, particularly as a woman?**

- First and foremost, remember to feed your passion – If you are passionate about what you do, it will not always feel like work
- Own your voice – you don't have to be the loudest but don't compromise on your own thoughts or words
- Foster an environment of trust and honesty where colleagues can share openly
- Integrity always – be the beacon of light that is difficult to question
- Be consistent – with all your stakeholders and be known for it
- Do the work – rigour, data, conversations, time on the ground in the markets. Whatever it takes – know your craft
- Own your vulnerability – this is what makes you unique... a signature presence
- Play – don't forget to laugh and grab a coffee.... the simplest of acts adds flavour and energy to any workday
- Self-care – fill your cup...to be of any use to yourself, your family, and your business

■ **Do you feel there is enough of a female voice in the alcohol industry?**

We have made significant progress from 18 years ago when I started out. I do believe that we are a female force to be reckoned with however we still have a long way to go.

Across the African continent, I am seeing more of my female colleagues occupy both technical and commercial roles in the alcohol space and really bring out diversity in thinking and approach to commercialisation. In some markets, the female presence is growing faster than others and already the changes at an organisation level are evident in the broader outlook of the organisation.

■ **How are female consumers driving industry trends and innovation?**

Across the continent we are seeing that fast-growing demographic being the LDA female.

“ With women playing a more active role in the purchasing power, they are stepping out of the traditional drink choices and are experimenting with tastes. ”

There is an increased interest in wine – understanding of the category and appreciation of the category nuances. Convenience and small intimate gatherings are driving packaging innovations like wine in tetra paks, while flavoured RTDs in cans and cocktails and spirit coolers and sparkling wines are feeding the trend to indulge and appreciate 'me and my

girls'.



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■ ***Are there any particular initiatives that Distell engages in that aim to support and empower female employees and/or women in society at large?***

In the Africa business we are addressing this on four levels:

1. Talent acquisition – Actively targeting diversity hires, including the appointment of females in roles that were previously seen as male dominate
2. DEI&B Learning and Development – Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging training for our leadership teams to understand concepts such as psychological safety, unconsciously bias and stereotyping
3. Employee experiences –
 - Various initiatives like Connect sessions for Women
 - Create an environment that promotes the development of women to harness the gender diversity
 - Celebrate women as key contributors to the success of Africa
 - Provide a sustainable platform to enhance the visibility of women and exchange experiences. i.e. through coaching
 - Develop and strengthen mentorship programmes for women to support in their development and growth through programmes.
4. Community initiatives – For example, recycling initiatives to support the entrepreneurship of women in Mozambique

■ ***In hindsight, if you could give your younger self one piece of advice, what would it be?***

In hindsight, I realise that I have been quite courageous in my feat across the continent, and although I have worked hard, I have also played hard and found an appreciation for doing that.

To my younger self, who was a serious student, I would have said “throw caution to the wind earlier; dance more like no one was watching. Don't be afraid to fall; it is so okay to be vulnerable and don't stop being curious.”

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