

Are we moving fast enough?

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The race between agencies and culture in the connected age



As we approach the fourth decade of the 'job bag', it's no surprise that the advertising industry is being disrupted, but are agencies doing enough to keep up? To find out, Keke Mahlelebe, senior strategist at M&C Saatchi Abel attended RISE - the largest tech conference in Asia featuring 760 startups, over 300 speakers, and attendees from over 100 countries.

He shares some of the key insights he gleaned below:

"Maurice Saatchi once said: "Sometimes I feel as though I am standing at the graveside of a well-loved friend called advertising." As agencies, we've been slow to adapt and are held back by our own processes, while startups thrive on agility and collaboration. In the digital world, all the doors are open, decentralised technologies are empowering the individual, and being in beta is the only way to stay relevant.

In the connected age our biggest competitor is culture. Netflix went from selling DVDs in 2008 to currently being the world's biggest streaming service. Airbnb shifted from booking agent to travel brand with its experiences platform, and Amazon went from selling books, to a far broader e-commerce offering, moving into software with Amazon Prime, and hardware with Kindle and Alexa.

The key to Tinder's initial success is how the app removed the element of rejection. Right now, their focus is on using AI to integrate voice into the app to help users match with the people they're looking for quicker. Nike is focused on building swifter direct-to-customer relationships by taking the solitary act of running and turning it into a community activity with the Nike+ Run Club app. Being agile and adaptive in a world that's constantly changing is the only way to win. Agencies and brands that understand this will see rapid growth over the next 5 to 10 years.

The most talked about technologies are those that are evolving at lightning speed. Artificial intelligence (AI), voice and blockchain - the RISE 2018 trinity so to speak - are shaking up industries around the world. The machine-learning breakthrough in AI means that algorithms are learning faster than ever. Apple is using facial tracking on the iPhone X with Animojis to turn your smiling poop and unicorn videos into data that can analyse human emotion and start predicting how you feel. Amazon has made Alexa open-source to use voice as a way of automating most human functions like switching on the lights in your home or making playlists with your favourite songs. IBM is using blockchain technology to help businesses empower consumers and build trust by being more transparent.

So, how are startups using some of these technologies to keep up with culture? Bill Gates speaks of having the ability to constantly rethink, reinvigorate, react and reinvent as being critical to success. It starts with aligning to an ambition, having the desire to create something meaningful, and delivering on it with cross-sector collaboration and thinking.

At M&C Saatchi Abel, we believe that in order for brands to stay relevant, they need to constantly evolve, adapting to moments in time whilst remaining distinctly themselves. Nando's, a brand built on tone and a powerful understanding of the South African zeitgeist acts as a voice for the people, shining a light on the issues we face as a country. When the cabinet was being reshuffled, tax money being spent on swimming pools, and pastors were spraying Doom on people's faces, we created a film called *We Can Fix Our Sh*t* to show South Africa that we've been through a lot already and we can get through it all again. The closing scene of the ad shows the Gupta brothers loading up a Range Rover with all the money they stole from the country and making a run for it. Our spot flighted in December and just two months later the Guptas

made news headlines by fleeing the country as we predicted, entrenching Nando's as an iconic brand with its finger on the pulse."

"As brands are being shaped at the speed of culture, the next disruptors of ad agencies should be ourselves. We need to relook, rework, and rethink our own processes internally to drive efficiency and evolve. What role could AI play in the creative process? Could voice help traffic with managing diaries? How do we use blockchain to discover new talent? The rise of technology means that the world is getting more complex and only the simplest ideas, messages, and products will make the cut. An unnamed artist was once asked about the difficulty of sculpting an elephant. The man answered 'I just chip away everything that doesn't look like an elephant.' The challenge we will face as an industry over the next few years will not only be to strip away everything that isn't necessary, but to get there as quickly as possible. That is how we will stay relevant," concludes Mahlelebe.

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