Business of Design Spring 2015: What you missed

By Leigh Andrews   23 Oct 2015

The impact of Gen Z on the way brands treat consumers, the rise of Afrofuturism and the real reason many brands fail at cracking the African market were all hot topics on the first day of this design business-centric conference...

The Cape Town Spring edition of Business of Design 2015 was the third edition of this inspirational two-day conference, held again at the Inner City Ideas Cartel. It kicked off with head of programme Tracy Lynn Chemaly speaking of the importance of marrying business and design. She introduced Trevyn McGowan, co-founder of Business of Design, as well as director of Southern Guild, Source SA Design Export, programme director of Design Network Africa and curator of Watershed.

McGowan's welcome address explained her process of introspection in looking back at the past decade to what the next decade may hold. In any design business it's important to focus not just on the creativity aspect but also on how to be profitable and address common business concerns. From her personal experience, she pointed out that as a business gets older, especially creative business, growth stems from doing what you love. Many in the industry claim that they do it for nothing and that getting paid is a bonus - that changes when you have staff and you become responsible for the people who work for you. Then, your currency is time.

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The art of curation

The first speaker of the day was Cathy O'Clery, creative director of Platform creative agency and programme director at 100% Design SA. As cofounder of Business of Design, O'Clery spends lots of time curating exhibitions, and so explained that the rationale of doing so is to engage people and to think about design in a different way. She said while the process of putting exhibitions beside each other is complex, it can be applied to anything in business. It all boils down to having a clear rationale or reason for the project. Then, in speaking of curating a brand, O'Clery said you only really know a business when you look at it from inside. This means you need to define your brand clearly internally, so that it's easy to understand what it's about from the outside.

"Become your own curator using industry know-how and have confidence in what you're doing; curate the content and context of what you do," says O'Clery. To stand out from the rest, you need to do business based on your experience and present it in new ways.

Brands: Serving tribes, changing lives

Next we heard from Chris Reid, trend specialist at the International Trend Institute, on trends to track in 2016. He whizzed through examples from the fast-paced realms of social, design, brand and tech, all packaged as a snapshot.

Explaining the importance of paying attention to trends, Reid said: "With the world we live in, realism isn't always up for the task, thankfully science fiction is there to save us." He further explained that technology is no longer a distinct thing, it is now merging and becoming a key part of all modes of being. It's no longer merely a part of life, it is life. Linked to this, entertainment is becoming immersive, and brands need to wake up to this and find a way to stand out in a way that can't be replaced by robots.

On the topic of consumers, Reid pointed out that Gen Z are realists. They grew up with constant reminders of what's wrong with the world and what needs to change. He suggests that brands become aware of this shift from 'me to we thinking', and the linked changing ideas of identity, loss of ego online and trends like collective consumption. He shared the example of UberCommute in China, where the thinking is 'more people in fewer cars' as you share the ride with others travelling a similar route.

It's clear that new ways of being are opening up as the traditional concepts of gender become more fluid. With the rise of the non-gendered (pink or blue) product comes encouragement for consumers to build their own identity rather than fitting into a pre-existing box. Reid linked this to the rise of Afrofuturism, meaning brands need to express themselves through their own homegrown point of view and not trying to adapt what works in the Western world to the continent. Reid concluded by echoing O'Clery's point that brands need to ask what their actual purpose is, what tribes they serve, and how to define their difference in a way that stands out. Use the lens of possibility rather than the lens of history.

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Africa: The market paradox perspective

Another highlight on the day was Terry Behan, a social entrepreneur and brand builder with a strong Irish accent. But don't let that put you off - he's a global business executive often tasked with launching product in a new territory, like the whole of Africa. He thus spoke of the growth of Africa from the paradox perspective of trying to understand the market continent as a whole, on the one hand, and the distinct advantage of designing continentally, on the other.

"We can't even agree whether Africa comprises 52 or 54 countries," he said. Most Western business people who 'do business in Africa' only see the inside of boardrooms and aeroplanes, relying on the media to consumer information instead of actually stepping foot in to the marketplace - little wonder then that a skewed view persists.

He used the 3 'A's to describe the continent. The first of these is ambiguity. Many simply can't decide if it's a land of wealth or poverty as it's so hit by contrasts. The second is aspiration. Many see the African consumer as 'aspirational', but look at successful brands like Woolworths and Levi's which just couldn't cut it on the rest of the continent. Just because they're aspirational doesn't mean they aspire to *your*brand. The real reason many brands don't land a strong footing in the rest of Africa is that they simply don't do their homework and understand the people they are marketing to. Behan also spoke of the rise of the 'NSFMCG' category - the not so fast-moving consumer goods. We don't necessarily need well-meaning global brands to come in and 'save the continent'.

Behan says to make sure you know size of market and how to play it, and points out that an absence of empathy affects any design process. You need to get the market's attention by working with what works for them. Keep this in mind when designing in South Africa. "European design is great but you miss the playfulness and energy inherent to Africa. Play on that as that's what will carry us through," he concluded.

Many other pearls of design-business wisdom were shared over the two-day conference. Click here for a reminder of my highlights from Business of Design Autumn 2015.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MIlkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.
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