

Nedbank IMC speaker Sydney Mbhele

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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Sydney Mbhele, chief executive: Brand at Sanlam, a member of Exco and chairman and board member of the Marketing Association of South Africa (Masa). He is also the co-founder and chairman of Mentor A Boy Child.



He is going to be speaking at this year's Nedbank IMC on the topic of 'Building True Romance When Marketing in Africa'.

Mbhele is a chartered marketer (SA) with a proven track record in building brands and markets. He's worked in financial services (banking, insurance and investments), FMCG, telecoms, marketing, communications, sales and corporate affairs and led major brands for organisations, such as Unilever, SABMiller, Nedbank, Liberty and Cell C.

Here, we find out more about what's really behind his mask...

■ **Sydney, comment on your involvement in this year's Nedbank IMC?**

My storytelling will be about 'Building True Romance When Marketing in Africa'. It is an exciting topic, as this continent is a continent of humanity. Its distinct features and those of its people are alluring.

“ Brands are like people. They have a personality. They have an incredible opportunity to relate as people when they embody the relatable principles that are congruent with building true meaningful relationships with their targeted audience. ”

■ **What are you planning to speak about, why and what are some key talking points you plan to discuss?**

Well... if I tell you everything now, there will not be any need for you to attend the conference. I plan to take you on a journey of discovery of Africa's people, their aspirations and the nuggets that drive affinity and emotional bond to brands.

■ **What are you looking forward to with regard to the event?**

I am looking forward to learning from so many greats with illustrious careers, and of course sharing my perspective on the chosen topic.

■ **Tell us about your role(s) as chief executive brand at Sanlam and chairman of the Marketing Association of South Africa?**

Sanlam is a business that operates in 45 countries globally, and 34 on the African continent. We exist to empower generations to be financially confident, secured and prosperous. I lead the brand, marketing and communications function to orchestrate internally and externally the building and maintenance of our image and reputation. I am therefore the business champion for inspiring our people and customers far and wide to 'live with confidence'. Not just any other kind of confidence, but financial confidence. That is our promise.

In my deep sense of belief about the role marketing can play in building brands and business, and therefore its ability to create and extract value for shareholders; I joined Masa about five or six years ago, and was elected chairperson at the last AGM. I lead a board of very experienced achievers in this field, and as an organisation we exist to elevate the professionalism of marketing and we represent and protect the business interests of marketers.

■ **You're also the co-founder and chairman of Mentor A Boy Child (a non-profit organisation) focusing on helping young boys become better men for society.**

Yes I am. I am passionate about the emancipation of the boy child, who has been significantly neglected by the social development programs in the past. Men stand as the majority culprits in committing social ills, and to solve that problem we need to go back to the source...where we still have an opportunity to shape their future aspirations and character.

It is estimated that only 35% of boys grow up with their parents, and that does not even mean all those parents are fully involved in their growth and development. Therein lies the beginning of issues with long-term implications.

■ **You've worked on some of the country's top brands. Tell us more about your experience and any career highlights to date.**

I am a chartered marketer (SA) and I have a passion for building brands and markets. My experience stretches across industries that include FMCG, whose highlight are roles at Unilever locally and internationally as global category marketing director for deodorants; and SAB Miller (now AB INBEV) as head of global brands. It also includes financial services, whose highlight were senior leadership roles in marketing at Nedbank, Liberty and now Sanlam.

I also had a three-year stint at Cell C when the organisation was launched. My roles have included the marketing, communications, sales and corporate affairs oversight.

■ ***How has the pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns affected your work?***

The pandemic has reminded us how important it is for our brands and organisations to be purposeful. The accelerated pace of change in how we communicate our value propositions and the increasing in the shift of channels we use, has forced us to be nimble and to be more scientific in driving 'cause and effect'.

■ ***What's really behind your mask - literally and figuratively speaking?***

Literally, a connector, passionate, decisive and forthright person. For many, a mentor and collaborator. And figuratively, definitely the life of the party. LOL.

■ ***Growing up, what did you want to be?***

A chartered accountant.

■ ***What did you study, where did you expect your career to take you, and how does this measure up to your current reality?***

I studied an MBA at GIBS, a MAP from MIT, Strategic Marketing from Stanford University, and did my undergrad at UCT. I only figured I wanted to be in marketing after I had already started working in a sales environment. Before that, I was just going with the flow (please don't judge, LOL).

■ ***What is your 'secret' to success?***

I punch above my weight and I am very resilient. I have a deep connection to self which allows me to lead and engage with people empathetically whilst having a logical side that is very vigilant. This combination of logic and heart gives me the rare ability to nurture relationships with people who sit at different personality ranges.

I am daring and I have very heightened levels of intuition. All of these are self-trained or learned from inspirational leaders I was fortunate to work with or for. I didn't have all these traits when I started working.

■ ***What do you love most about the creative industry?***

I like the incredible opportunity to shape narratives and the social discourse, of course, even better when you do this for good. We can truly inspire and impact the tone, sentiment and betterment of life.

■ ***What's your typical workday routine?***

Very varied. Office, meetings, calls, travel, lunches and dinners.

■ ***When you're not busy working, what do you do? How do you socialise these days?***

Watching soccer, catch-ups with friends, family weekends and holidays. Lately, audiobooks.

■ ***What are you reading/listening to/watching at the moment?***

I am listening to an audiobook entitled: *No Self, No Problem: Awakening to Our True Nature* by Anam Thubten.

■ ***What's the first thing you plan to do when things go back to normal?***

International travel, no doubt!

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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