

Brands that establish emotional connections earn the right to own the heartland

By [Bill Stephens](#), issued by [M&C Saatchi Abel](#)

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In today's high-tech world of product parity, media proliferation and fickle brand loyalty, it has become increasingly difficult to win a majority share of the consumer's head and heart. Consumers are faced with a multitude of choices in every conceivable segment of the market. From cars to computers, appliances to apparel, fast food to fizzy drinks, the choices are endless - making price and product intrinsics difficult to discern.



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Accelerated by the pandemic, consumer shopping habits have been turned on their head. We now prioritise convenience and accessibility. The internet has become our best and most indispensable friend. And with it, a product's features, benefits and prices are available at the touch of a button.

The consequence of all the above? Brand loyalty has been severely eroded.

So how do we, as marketers, mitigate that erosion? How do we embrace this rapidly changing, complex consumer world in a way that creates a discernible advantage for our brands?

The answer lies in building an emotional connection with the consumer. A connection that is based on universal human emotions of love, trust, charm, forgiveness and loyalty.

"If humour and emotion are the two things that travel the most virally, why is advertising so devoid of it these days?" asks Ryan Reynolds, Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity 2022. And he's dead on.

Based on economic challenges facing the world right now, consumers are naturally being pushed back to a place where substance and deep interrogation of a brand's value proposition matter. Customers want to know what they're paying for. Marketing fluff like badges or catchy images no longer work. Instead, people want substance and a product that prioritises what's really important. Par for the course when it comes to an economic recession – when we take stock of what's real and what's fake.

Make no mistake though, establishing authenticity is no quick and easy fix. Building an emotional connection between a brand and the consumer takes substance, time, consistency and most importantly, a crystal-clear north star.

Take Volkswagen, which occupied the emotional high ground in South Africa's automotive segment through the '80s, '90s and early 2000s. Thanks to a groundbreaking marketing and advertising campaign, VW won the hearts of South African consumers. VW employees and retailers united and publicly committed to build and service People's Cars to meet or exceed consumer expectations. The advertising campaigns carried this commitment in an authentic, charming and sincere manner. VW took ownership of the emotional heartland in the segment. VW built a loving, forgiving and loyal bond – and infallible brand loyalty – with the car buying consumer. Sales and market share gains followed.

As VW discovered, the key was to get the right balance between emotional connection and product intrinsics. It's the reason those elements have started to make a comeback as we begin to see work that centres the product and its benefits in an emotional way that resonates with consumers.

Financial services is a good example of a space getting it right. Over the past two years, it's become common to hear of customers saying they've 'kind of fallen in love' with a banking brand because of how they've been cared for and helped

through recent tough times. This is no coincidence. It comes from these brands claiming the emotional high ground. Tech brands like Apple are following suit.



In a segment that is as competitive as the automotive one, the space is wide open for a brand to own the heartland space that VW vacated as they have moved into new and different spaces. Brands well placed to lay claim to this potential segment high ground include Ford, Hyundai, Kia and Toyota. All have been highly successful in the volume segments of the SA passenger and light commercial vehicle market over the past 10 plus years.

The obvious question is which of these broad appeal, high volume brands is going to seize the moment? To lay claim to heartland status in any segment, key prerequisites are volume or share of market, heritage, reputation, image and product substance. A 'johnny-come-lately' brand with superficial offerings will never occupy the segment heartland. In the words of one of the doyennes of advertising, David Ogilvy, "The consumer is not a moron. She is your wife. Don't insult her intelligence." The holy grail of heartland must be earned. Just as respect must be earned.

Once a brand has earned the heartland, consumers will be inclined to be forgiving. It will be less beholden to new product rollouts from competitors, or the life cycle factor because their customers are so in love with the brand, they'll wait years for the new model to roll out.

The opportunity to earn and occupy the vacant heartland exists in many market segments in South Africa. However, the absolute prerequisites are badge, substance and market presence. And to that you must add the silver bullet – emotional connection.

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