

The ad industry needs diversity to thrive

 By [Qingqile 'Wingwing' Mdlulwa](#)

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The days when white men ran advertising agencies and set the rules for marketing campaigns, immortalised in the TV series *Mad Men*, belong firmly in the past. The advertising industry needs diversity to fuel its future.



Mad Men TV show ©AMC

A 2015 McKinsey report on 366 public companies found that those in the top quartile for ethnic and racial diversity in management were 35% more likely to have financial returns above their industry mean, and those in the top quartile for gender diversity were 15% more likely to have returns above the industry mean.



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In October last year, the UK's Advertising Association launched a campaign showing its cultural diversity, and highlighting the 'pivotal role' of workers from around the world in the UK.

Closer to home, maintaining a cultural mix of workers not only enables the industry to better serve the local market but also its global client accounts. South Africa is a complex society, comprised of 11 different languages, as well as a mix of ethnicities, religions and cultural practices. It is almost impossible to find individuals who would be able to make meaningful connections with all these different types of communities. Instead, what is required, is sufficient diversity within agencies to be able to connect with a wide range of people across the country.

Diverse teams are smarter

To stay competitive, businesses should always continue to innovate. Global research has shown that heterogeneous, culturally diverse teams are simply smarter. Nowhere is that more pertinent than in a creative environment. Working with people who are different from you challenges and may even change your regular way of thinking, enabling you to learn and to grow.

On a personal level, I have seen that there are times when I am so comfortable within my own culture, that I will miss the curiosities and idiosyncrasies pertaining to where I come from, while colleagues will readily be able to point them out. Their observations enable a new and often more nuanced type of thinking and lead to different insights. This works in the client's interests and results in marketing and branding campaigns that are truly innovative.

Enriching your employee pool with representatives of different genders, ages and ethnicities also boost a company's joint intellectual potential. It's about respecting each other's differences – and commonalities – and finding value and strength in them. The more we are exposed to other ways of thinking, the more we become aware of new solutions.



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Imagine the potential of an agency which, thanks to the makeup of its team, is able to present a client with half a dozen campaigns that look, sound and feel different, while all addressing the same problem or requirement. It's this kind of thinking that leads to sustainability and growth, especially in a tough economic climate.

The march of the millennials

Millennials are reshaping society. Still, at the early stage of their careers, they are bold and hungry, and their experience of the world is different. In the advertising industry, in particular, companies that employ a multi-generational workforce have the advantage of creating professional environments that are rich with experience and maturity as well as youthful enthusiasm and technological savvy. Millennials are helping agencies meet complex client needs in an ever-changing, non-linear digital economy.



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Beyond the superficial

Although great strides have been made to address diversity in the South African advertising sector, much of the progress made remains superficial, and the pace leaves a lot to be desired. Leaders need to commit to engaging in meaningful strategies to enable the evolution of agencies that are truly diverse, especially at executive level. It may be a cliché, but there must be buy-in from the top if we want to move beyond complacency and achieve a representative workforce.

It boils down to relevance and how well you are hitting home with your audience. The expanding universe of options and

information and increasing speed at which we all operate in today's new world explains why relevance is more important than ever. When your message resonates with the consumer and actually means something to them, the relationship will be deeper, longer lasting, and more profitable.

ABOUT QINGQILE 'WINGWING' MDLULWA

Mdlulwa, has been in the advertising industry for more than 22 years. He joined Collective ID as executive creative director in May 2017. Mdlulwa has served on all major South African advertising industry bodies, including chairing the Loerie Awards and sitting on the *Sunday Times* Marketing Excellence Council. He served as a judge at Cannes Lions and was Radio Jury Foreman of the 2014 D&AD Awards. He is also a winner of the FMAfocus New Broom Award.

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