

South African swagger won't work in Africa

 By [Michael Wood](#)

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South Africa has a lot to be proud of, our country has one of the most sophisticated infrastructure networks in Africa, our financial institutions are some of the most stable in the world, the JSE is listed globally as the ninth biggest stock exchange, and to top it off, we are one of the most progressive democracies. It's easy to adopt an almost bombastic attitude under the heady influence of such achievements, but South Africans need to realize that our country is not an Island, and there is no 'I' in team.

There are a few fundamental practices that need a fresh approach if we are going to embrace a united African economy, something that will benefit the whole of Africa and not just us.

Change our mindset: If it works here, it will work elsewhere. This is a misleading statement at the best of times. South African brands and businesses need to realize that slapping a different label on our manufactured goods before shipping them off to other African countries is archaic. We simply need to look at the rest of Africa and see the positive trade being done with other countries like China to understand that we are missing out on big trading opportunities by simply not embracing the culture of learning to make our offer relevant to the targeted customer or consumer.

Know what you are up against: Only by becoming familiar with the tastes and needs that make a market unique can we attain success; market research is essential. What worked in Kenya might not work in Angola. Africa is a collection of nations and while we bring a lot to the table in terms of establishing technical and operational support we can't change the fact that some markets prefer different products from others. However, we can learn to engage with them, tweak formulations and give those consumers products that they want. A perfect example of an 'unexpected' African flavour success is the story of Blue - a fizzy drink produced and sold in Angola, as it stands the beverage is second to none in Angola not even Coke.

Farm skills development, don't hoard it: A step up from changing our mindsets and learning about new markets is to get into skills sharing. Typically speaking a traditional businesses response to opportunities in other African countries is to take a South African and send them into that country to seek out and leverage said opportunities for the business back home. This can be a very limiting approach, this might work in the short-term, but there should be a long-term strategy? Let's invite African candidates into our companies to solidify the development of skills transfer. This means that South African businesses will now have a trained asset in place, in a regional marketing sector they are already familiar with. This approach will not only speed up growth but is a positive learning curve for both countries involved.

As South Africans we need to understand that larger African economies like Nigeria (the largest economy in Africa), Kenya, Angola and Egypt have game, and if we want to grow business opportunities across the continent and not just within

our own trade regions, a typical one-size approach is not the solution. For a while now most South African companies have been operating under the belief that if it works in South Africa it will work for the rest of Africa and this is not the case.

ABOUT MICHAEL WOOD

Michael Wood is co-founder and Director of Aperio, a business consulting company focused on accelerating growth of FMCG brands in South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Michael has many years international experience where he held the positions of Marketing Director, Sales Director and Managing Director with the Gillette company and Procter & Gamble.

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