

Why utilities need to build better brands

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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The ever-vibrant and inspirational [Thebe Ikalafeng](#) delivered one of the keynote talks at the recently concluded 2017 African Utility Week. His key message was that the utilities sector across the continent needs to start building great brands and, in turn, deliver on the promise of those brands.



Thebe Ikalafeng, brand and reputation expert, at 2017 African Utility Week

The brand and reputation expert pointed out that on [Brand Africa's 2016/17 list of the Most Admired Brands in Africa](#), only 16 originated from the continent. "70% are not from Africa," he said, "How are we going to change our continent if we don't like our own products?" Of the most admired and valued brands, none are in the utilities sector, he pointed out, and yet this is the sector that is meant to drive African economies.



Africa's top brands from Brand Africa 100

9 Mar 2017



What's in a brand?

More than just a logo, "a brand is the stuff you communicate about yourself and the stuff you communicate despite yourself," said Ikalafeng, paraphrasing former Fortune 200 CEO David F. D'Alessandro. "Be careful the promises that you make," he warned, "because it is through those promises that you are held accountable." He used the example of the complaint made against the City of Johannesburg, which was [upheld by the Advertising Standards Authority of South Africa](#). The radio advert, which promoted Johannesburg as a "world-class African city", was deemed misleading and it was ruled that it be withdrawn.

A brand also helps you stand out, he said, "You are either distinct or extinct." But how do you create a distinctive brand? Ikalafeng provided seven key ingredients:

1. Clarity: "There must be clarity about what you stand for, what it is you are delivering, and what is it you are promising," he said.

2. Communication: He advised to focus on making emotional connections between customers and products. Brands should take advantage of the number of tools, such as social media, at their disposal to help them stand out in terms of what they deliver.

3. Delivery: What drives a brand and its services, he said, is the interaction between people and the product. This interaction has been found to determine 70% of the perceptions that people have about a brand, he pointed out.

"We need to encourage customers to do in the public sector what they do in the private sector - they will [put up a billboard](#) and take their money somewhere else. The only language that government seems to understand is when we start destroying the poor goods that they've put out there... and that shouldn't be how it's done. We should not get to a situation where the people are saying out with the leadership, but that's exactly what they do in the private sector," explained Ikalafeng.

4. Patriotism: Brands need to be able to identify with their countries and with the continent, he said, pointing out that countries with the highest GDPs are those with the biggest brands.

5. Alignment: Brands must align the experience they offer with the image they project, he explained. Employee behaviour should be aligned with the values a brand espouses.

6. Collaboration: There needs to be more intra-African investment and sharing of best practice across the continent between regions, countries and industries.

7. Leadership: Strong, purposeful leadership is needed for brands to help drive the African economy.

Ikalafeng concluded his keynote with a quote from former president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah, "We face neither East, we face neither West, we face forward," he said, because Africa is the future.

The 2017 African Utility Week took place at the CTICC in Cape Town, 16-18 May. For more info, go to www.african-utility-week.com.

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