

What South Africans *really* want

 By Leigh Andrews

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The current South African aspiration crisis should come as no surprise, as consumers struggle daily with the reality of simply not being able to afford what we want. Here's what the UCT Unilever Institute's 18-month long countrywide research means for marketers.



On Friday, 30 September 2016 I attended the launch of the UCT Unilever Marketing Aspirations Report 2016 at the Sport Sciences Institute of SA. The final stop in a countrywide tour that kicked off in Johannesburg and Durban earlier in the week, marketing minded folk were schooled in insights presented by Professor John Simpson, director and cofounder of the UCT Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing; as well as Neo Makhele, group strategy director at Ogilvy Johannesburg; and research associate Martin Neethling, CMO at Pioneer Foods.

Simpson explained it's a difficult topic to broach because while aspirations form the very fabric of marketing, everyone has a different understanding of what aspirations actually are, making it a little like nailing jelly to the wall. Respected marketer [Andy Rice](#) calls aspirations "a marketing term many people use but few understand." Simply put, it's about the desire to change your current circumstance and move to a better state. Clever marketers realise this and meet those needs. Sadly, in many cases there's a mismatch about what consumers are really aspiring for, especially when marketers assume their consumers are 'People Like Us' or PLU. "South Africa is incredibly diverse; our poor and rich are literally poles apart, and our poor are not like the poor elsewhere," he said.

So when a poor person has been living in a shack without running water and electricity and suddenly receives an RDP house, their lifestyle changes completely. But there's a catch, as no one gives you the appliances you need, so those are bought on an HP or credit basis. Missing a payment then adds to the overall loan amount they need to pay back, so our poor are "asset rich but money poor," making it a hybrid situation that shows overseas marketing aspiration models just don't work here.

Moving on to how that impacts aspiration, Simpson said a large number of South Africans are heavily in debt and unable to

meet their aspirations due to lack of jobs, education and family responsibilities. While many take matters into their own hands by lighting their entrepreneurial fire and generate a fair amount of money by working in the informal sector, a 'job' to many means working in the formal sector, with all the associated benefits.

Aspirational differences across the 'have nots' and the 'have lots'



Simpson

Taking a step back, Simpson pointed out that we're driven by consumption, and while the economy grows when consumers spend, they recently stopped spending overnight as overreaction to messages of an economic depression many feared was another recession as overseas media reported on our 'junk status'. Sales performance also tends to be measured against consumer confidence – note that SA is currently ranked as far down as 128th of 140 countries on the [Happy Planet Index](#).

This can be attributed to the fact that if we don't achieve our aspirations, we enter a world of frustration that results in a sense of resignation and desperation as we move our dreams' goalposts. At the end of the day it's all about money, with a huge gap locally between the 'have nots' and the 'have lots'. The most income volatility is in the middle of the spectrum, with the new 'missing middle' class having studied but not found a job. So while the world of the 'have nots' is filled with uncertainty and many ups and downs, for 'have lots' it's about following a fairly predictable life path of getting a better job, having a successful career, then focusing on family and enjoying a comfortable retirement.

Simpson said their next research study will focus on marketing in Africa and the danger of imposing Western models on Africa, as there is no 'middle class' as the western world understands it on the continent, like Woolworths failing in Lagos a few years ago as they didn't do the required research into their potential customers' aspirations and current shopping habits.

Makhele was next, explaining that marketers are guilty of seeing consumer needs as hierarchical (hello, revisited [Maslow's Hierarchy of needs](#) meme). This is why advertising that used to try sell archetypes of an aspirational life didn't prove that popular, and advertisers have woken up to the reality of the tri-component aspiration model. Consumers want to **be free**, want to **do better** and want to **have** – these basic aspirations exist in all of us at any point in time.



Makhele

In addition, there are eight key aspirations that differ between 'have nots' and 'have lots' despite a number of similar nuances:

- 1: **Stability** – mainly financial security for your family
- 2: **Freedom** – 'Millennial attitude', independence to be the boss of your own time
- 3: **Respect** – cultural variance, based on education, owning assets
- 4: **Health** – this ranges from access to basic healthcare to prevention and wellness.
- 5: **Comfort** – we all want better quality products and experiences
- 6: **Belonging** – based on subculture, peers and brand communities
- 7: **Experiences** – including adventure and excitement, like #Instameets and bucket lists
- 8: **Giving back** – motivations for upliftment range from 'black tax' to guilt and altruism



Neethling

Neethling ended the presentation by pointing out that aspirations change depending on life stage, so as we get older and richer it becomes a move from 'stuff to significance', and from 'have' to 'be'. Advertising fails if not enough research is involved in determining who is aspiring to be like who, or if the pitch promise is simply too far from the consumer's current situation and seems unrealistic. Think of Nando's and Coca-Cola as examples of advertising that matches most consumers' aspirations – it's inclusive, local and relevant.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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