

: Getting the township and people to talk



By [Jason Stewart](#)

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As outlined in previous articles, we are all influenced by peer pressure. We take cues from people we respect as 'experts in any given field' - whether it's our mom for household goods, our uncle the mechanic regarding what car to buy or our best friend, the style diva on what clothes to wear. We also look to high-profile people - those who get a lot of attention who could be national celebrities or else just well-known individuals. We are constantly absorbing what others are doing. (video)

Find the influencers

It is therefore important for a brand to identify such individuals who are the predominant influences in a target market and in specific areas. Identifying Influencers online is very easy as you can quantify placement and scores based on tracking. However, it is more of an art to identify off-line influencers.

We have a process we go through and certain criteria against which we evaluate a person's influence threshold (which is protected IP) and this is different for almost every brand we work with as there are different indicators per category and brand objective.

It is the brand's prerogative to find ways to engage with these influencers, to build relationships and to ultimately turn them into natural brand advocates who drive word of mouth, brand endorsements and spread recommendations.

Getting people to talk

Every community has a place where they come together to bond, talk and interact. At the office, it is the canteen, outside of work we gather with other like-minded individuals who have shared interests and with whom we identify as peers at specific venues. These places of gathering are incredibly important for word of mouth, as this is where major story sharing takes place.

People come to these places with their own stories. People barter and swap their stories for those of others in what is essentially a market place of stories. They leave with even more stories to share with others, and those stories get spread even further.

Within the township, these places range from stokvels to taverns to street corners to the living room in people's homes, among others. They are varied and always different, but it is the brand's prerogative to identify which conversation hotspots are relevant for them, and then how they can offer value to those spaces in a way that they are able to stimulate conversation.

Research shows that 20% of all our conversations are about brands and the average length of such a typical conversation is about 10 minutes. Women speak an average of 20 000 words a day, using approximately 4 000 per day to speak about their experiences with brands, compared to a daily average of 7 000 for men, who use roughly 1 750 to chat about their brand interactions.

Brands need to get more involved

While we know through exhaustive research findings that word of mouth is more powerful and effective than any form of advertising, it is unnerving to realise that so much is being said about brands - with brands generally doing very little to influence *what* is being said. Most of a consumer's conversation is based on experiences with the brand, including how the brand engages with them, how the product performs and how they were served by customer service.

Consequently, brands need to get more involved in the consumer's experience. Customer service is the easiest, cheapest and most effective way to build consumer loyalty, drive sales and increase brand strength. However, in South Africa, marketers and ad agencies score poorly in this area, confirmed by an Accenture study that rated SA's general customer service as one of the worst in the world.

We need to create stories that people will talk about and pass on. This is much easier said than done, but we can become

more adept through research, testing and listening. Many agencies and brands have tried to create a system or structure to create a memorable story that will be passed on. In our experience, however, the boardroom is never able to match the street.

The best route is to always ensure that there is a story to be spread, from the initial communication, to the offers, to the way the customer is served. We need to start viewing customer engagement as an opportunity to tell stories. Once we have nurtured this mindset and crafted the right stories, it is important to monitor what is being said, and adjust our stories to what is of highest interest and what is getting the most 'volume'.

ABOUT JASON STEWART

Jason Stewart is the co-founder and MD of HaveYouHeard (www.haveyouheard.co.za), a communications agency immersed in culture to influence it. With 11 years' trading experience and offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and London, HaveYouHeard uncovers unique insights to create innovative ideas that influence the audience by bringing the brands it partners with to the centre of culture.

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