

How to build a strong agency network in Africa



By [Graham Cruikshanks](#)

7 Oct 2015

What makes a strong and effective African network? Is it the number of partnerships that have been established with local agency businesses in Nigeria, Kenya or Ghana? Or the number of agencies that have been acquired in Zambia, Zimbabwe or Botswana? Or the long list of agency contacts in multiple African cities...

A robust and fully operational network in Africa needs to be more than a map full of dots on the latest credentials presentation, or a directory of cross-continental contacts. Each of these needs to be underpinned by real working relationships, consistency, cross collaboration and a shared agency culture.

The scramble to benefit from Africa's enormous growth potential - and to boast a solid network and intimate knowledge of the continent - has moved up a gear. The resultant relationships are, however, often tenuous and quick to crumble when it comes to delivering effective work.

TBWA\ Africa has identified six key fundamentals it believes are critical to building an effective African network.

1. Build real relationships

Building genuine relationships and a deep understanding of what each agency can or cannot deliver is fundamental to being able to offer capability to clients. This cannot be achieved exclusively via emails or Skype calls from a Sandton office. Time needs to be spent on the ground, getting to know colleagues, processes and capabilities.

2. Nurture stability

Evidence of a consistent and stable network offering is vitally important to clients. To achieve this, it is imperative to generate real, long-term value for network partners. This helps create loyalty and encourages them to remain active participants of the network. Implying that the global client list will quickly be added to the local agency roster is the most common over-promise that global networks make. While this is always the desire, many factors determine if this happens or not and therefore networks need to build value in other ways. The value, over and above a business contribution, must be tangible so that as clients come and go, the value of being part of the network consistently outweighs any desire to leave.

3. Reinforce agency culture

The African continent is characterised by constant and often fast-paced change. This means individual businesses can experience dramatic fluctuations within short periods of time. Within this milieu, it is important to constantly reinforce agency culture, vision and operational priorities. Critical to this is investing significantly in skills transfer, which drives constant reinforcement of what matters to the group. Importantly, it also provides tangible value to network partners, who generally rate it high on their list of network benefits.

4. Invest in new capabilities

Digital is one of the fastest growing sectors of the communications business. This is why it is important to invest in areas that are seen at the forefront of industry development. It is key that network partners feel as though they are keeping abreast of industry trends and ensuring they are empowered to deliver in this critical area.

5. Promote inter-agency collaboration

While it is important to facilitate collaboration between a central hub and partner agencies, it is equally vital to nurture extensive inter-agency relationships between network offices. Partner agencies need to know their network colleagues personally. They need to understand and trust their respective office capabilities. They need to be set up to pay and get paid and they need to know that, when asked, they will deliver for each other. This can only happen when an environment of trust and collaboration has been created.

6. Explore future growth

Always be on the lookout for new opportunities. Whether searching for new talent in existing markets, new opportunities in different geographies or new specialist offerings across the continent, it is important to constantly be on the lookout for ways to strategically enhance one's network.

Perhaps the ambition of having a larger agency network than anyone else does not serve clients or anyone else terribly well. The aim should rather be to build a strong and effective network that wins business, retains clients and drives excellence.

ABOUT GRAHAM CRUIKSHANKS

Graham has spent 19-years in the advertising business in a career that has spanned Asia and Africa. He has worked across multiple business sectors, worked with local and multinational companies on some of the world's most recognised brands.

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