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## CONFERENCE WHITE PAPER | NEDBANK IMC 2025

# Marketing is Business®

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ZUBAIR TIMOL

## Dear Marketer,

The 2025 Nedbank IMC reminded us that while technology is rewriting the rules of marketing, it's our humanness that defines how the story unfolds. This year's discussions cut through the hype to reveal that culture, empathy, and context are what turn intelligence into impact.

AI is no longer a distant disruptor. It's already shaping how we discover, define, and deliver our brands, influencing perception and behaviour at scale. Yet amid this change, one question echoed across sessions: how do we lead boldly in an AI-driven world while keeping people at the centre of this transformation?

In my keynote, I explored how Africa's cultural fluency, and digital agility position us to lead this next era, not by mimicking the global North, but by innovating through who we are. Meltwater's latest [Global Digital Report](#) highlights how the continent's digital connectivity and youthful population create the ideal landscape for growth. When paired with cultural intelligence, AI becomes our superpower at unlocking these opportunities.

The conference reflected this collective call to action for marketers: build with purpose, lead with culture and ensure technology amplifies, not replaces, human creativity.

Yours,

**Zubair Timol**

*Global Vice President, Culture | Meltwater*

# THEMES

- 1. OPTIMISE AI** – Future-proof your data strategy to amplify AI to maximise ROI.
- 2. INTERDEPENDENCE** – Understanding the business ecosystem enhances the marketer's ability to differentiate.
- 3. STEWARD THE BRAND** – Stewarding a business brand is hinged on investing inwardly.
- 4. DELIVER DEPTH** – Marketers must play the long game to generate worth beyond the bottom line.
- 5. DARE TO BE BRAVE** – Marketers must be brave enough to take the risks that build brands with impact.





Welcoming over 3 000 delegates from 20 countries, Nedbank IMC CEO **Dale Hefer** asserted that *Marketing is Business*<sup>®</sup> - not a slogan but a reality shaping every boardroom decision as companies navigate a competitive industry.

She reminded marketers that they have the power to shape cultural trends and influence the national narrative. The idea of marketing as business emerged as the central theme this year, as speakers explored how leadership drives marketing performance; how AI delivers real ROI and must be recognised with a future-facing perspective; and how business must remain human at its core.

**“Marketing and leadership aren’t separate disciplines - they rely on each other to drive results.”**

- Jason Quinn, Chief Executive: Nedbank Group Limited, in conversation with Khensani Nobanda, Group Executive: Group Marketing and Corporate Affairs, Nedbank Group Limited

In his conference opening message, **Minister Solly Malatsi**, South Africa's Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, emphasised that marketing and communication power every sector of society - creating jobs and showcasing South Africa's talent to the world.

Together, these opening remarks set the stage for a day that examined marketing's true commercial value - from AI and analytics to creativity and courage - proving once again that *Marketing is Business*®.





What stood out at the Nedbank IMC this year was how humanity and empathy are key to navigating the impact of AI, which is rapidly transforming our marketing communications sector. AI will shape 30% of your brand perception and is already defining what your brand looks like in search, stated **Zubair Timol**, Partner and Global Vice President, Culture at Meltwater.

He believes that AI plus culture equals your superpower and that this has deep social impact. *“It’s Afrofuturism in action: AI imagines a more inclusive world.”* However, Timol said data isn’t enough. *“We need to move from metrics to meaning. GenAI could unlock between \$61 billion and \$103 billion in additional annual economic value across South Africa. What that means is opportunity.”*

## OPTIMISE AI

Timol reframed AI as Africa's creative advantage - proof that innovation rooted in local insight can compete globally. In his presentation, *Africa's Advantage: Leapfrogging with AI and Cultural Capital*, Timol urged marketers to look at AI through the lens of people. *"AI without context, AI without culture, doesn't have the desired impact regardless of how much time and energy you have spent on it. Context matters and technology is an enabler."*





**BRYONY ROSE**

AI adoption is increasing in South Africa, agreed **Bryony Rose**, Director, Yext Enterprise, International Business. She shared that 55% of the public acknowledge they have used AI; 71% are excited about using AI; and 63% see the economic upside of using AI.

In the South African business sector, 77% are ready to adopt AI; 51% already benefit; and 92% believe it will boost youth retention. Consumers are using AI daily and many businesses say they are AI-ready. *"The conversation has exploded on AI,"* Rose added.

## OPTIMISE AI

But are marketers prepared for AI-led and social search experiences? This was the question asked by Rose, who delivered her international keynote, *Hyperlocal is Lekker! Search Fragmentation and the Rise of AI*.

Timol made the point that AI makes us think about machine learning, ChatGPT, and so on. But it is also about doing something simple with “*heart and soul*,” such as the story of the one woman and a kitchen that made the exclusive Dubai chocolate so famous.





This also means that Africa and South Africa no longer need to rely on other power centres of the world - Silicon Valley and London, for example - as the developmental ecosystem is here, Timol added. When it comes to AI and business, Africa is not behind; it is just taking a different route, and in many ways, that route is faster, he said.

The reason this is possible is because the demographic skews young (a third of the population base is below 35 years), digital adoption is high, and people are deeply engaged with products, services, and technology. Africa has the opportunity to harness that.

## OPTIMISE AI

As Timol pointed out, Africa's mobile adoption rates are staggering, as is the consumption of content via mobile internet. The average person in South Africa, aged between 18 and 26, checks their phone 30 times in one hour. What is happening alongside the data and culture being created gives Africa the opportunity to dive into digital dividends.

When you have an engaged population and strong tech infrastructure, AI is an amplifier via the lens of culture, Timol stated. South Africa, for example, has more mobile connections than people, and its mobile connections are among the highest in the world relative to total population. In addition, South Africa has the highest screen-time rates in the world, just ahead of Brazil (Meltwater's Global Digital Report). *"Where attention goes, revenue flows,"* said Timol.





Timol believes this is Africa's moment, and the world is watching, as Africa's high youth population offers digital dividends. There are unlimited opportunities for innovation on the continent, as global martech spend is projected to reach \$215 billion by 2027.

*"As marketers and communicators, it is okay to be overwhelmed. We are the first generation that is monetising social content and that's not trivial. What we are doing is defining an entire industry."* Timol explained that cultural capital is a differentiator, as data without culture and nuance is largely ineffective.

## OPTIMISE AI

But still, 43% of marketers say they don't know how to get the most value out of GenAI. *"My plea to you is this: in Africa we have an opportunity to really have a substantial impact in how we lead and shape and define the industry.*

*What CMOs should consider is: build with AI and immerse yourself in the technology,"* Timol said. This includes building data fluency, treating culture as strategy, and leading with boldness.



# OPTIMISE AI



This challenge was echoed by Rose, who spoke about the rise in AI search and how it's changing the way we search for information. The digital customer journey is changing fast with this new disruptor - AI and AI search.

The difference with AI is that you can immediately have a conversation with large language models before going to Google or a website for what you want, and she warned organisations that as soon as organic search and traffic drop, so does confidence in businesses not using AI. *"What will your website mean in three to five years' time? Will it be part of your customer journey?"* Websites will end up feeding the LLMs as data sources or consumers will go elsewhere. This is the biggest concern for businesses relying on traditional SEO. AI search will affect all of search - and it will be AI-driven.

## OPTIMISE AI

Another element is that AI search is becoming agentic, Rose said. Millennials were the first demographic to embrace streaming.

Gen Z are digital natives and are not likely to be influenced by traditional advertising (billboards, etc.); their first experience with your brand will most likely be on social media. Next is Gen Alpha - AI-natives already using AI in primary school. Their first experience with your brand will likely be via AI, Rose said.





So, what can marketers do to get data-ready when AI search is the future of reaching most of your customers? Your data must be structured so LLMs can answer detailed consumer queries. If you don't have the info, LLMs will go to Reddit to see what people are discussing - and it won't necessarily be favourable. That's when a brand loses control of the conversation. *"AI is a data scientist.*

*You can't pay to be there - yet. So make sure your data is structured properly. Future-proof your data strategy now,"* Rose warned. *"LLMs love clear data (structured data), authority of content, recency, relevance, consistency (everywhere it needs to be), and frequency (keep your data updated)." AI search is also a black box in terms of ROI. Marketers can't optimise what they can't measure - there is no dashboard, no insights, no playbook. "The best way to start thinking about AI preparedness is in your data - how it's structured and where you put it."*

## OPTIMISE AI

Still on AI, **Dr Gillian Hammah**, Chief Marketing Officer, Aya Data, asked: *“People or AI?” - the business decision facing marketers today* as they integrate AI into 2026 strategy plans. *“Many of you know this quote, ‘AI will not replace humans, but humans who use AI will replace those who don’t.’ I would like to change that to: ‘AI will not replace humans, but humans who use AI will DOMINATE those who don’t.’”* We are already seeing that as big global brands do widespread layoffs, Hammah said. Leaders are looking for employees who add value, excel, and deliver consistently. Leaders are focusing on what you bring, not who you are. AI is changing the game and levelling the workplace, and AI will replace poor performance as businesses won’t have to settle.

In the workplace, organisations will have teams who manage AI assistants and autonomous AI agents. *“It’s not if you’ll use AI, it’s how you’ll blend human and AI capabilities,”* she reiterated.



## Hammah's seven points for leadership and AI integration:

- 1 What is your business goal** (cost, efficiency, CX) and what blocks it - then ask if AI can help.
- 2 What will you automate vs elevate** (automate the tedious; elevate human decision-making in strategy, relationships, cultural adaptation, management).
- 3 Talent model:** 71% of marketing companies see massive talent-model change in the next three years due to GenAI (Capgemini, 2024). Build AI fluency, mindset, and training; culture can make or break adoption - reward it and measure it in performance reviews.
- 4 ROI reality:** One AI-enhanced marketer can deliver what five traditional marketers used to - reassess costs for human vs blended teams.
- 5 Expectations:** Standing still has a cost - competitors will move, consumer expectations will shift, and talent may leave.
- 6 Transition plan:** Start with pilots, upskill teams as AI operators, then hire hybrid-skilled talent.
- 7 Success:** Define business, technical, and user-centric KPIs.

# OPTIMISE AI

Hammah also shared a survival guide for employees: understand your new job description; become irreplaceable by emphasising strengths and upskilling on AI; upskill or risk irrelevance - *"be a sponge!"*

Ultimately, the challenge isn't AI versus humans, but how marketers use AI to build trust, not just efficiency.



# INTERDEPENDENCE



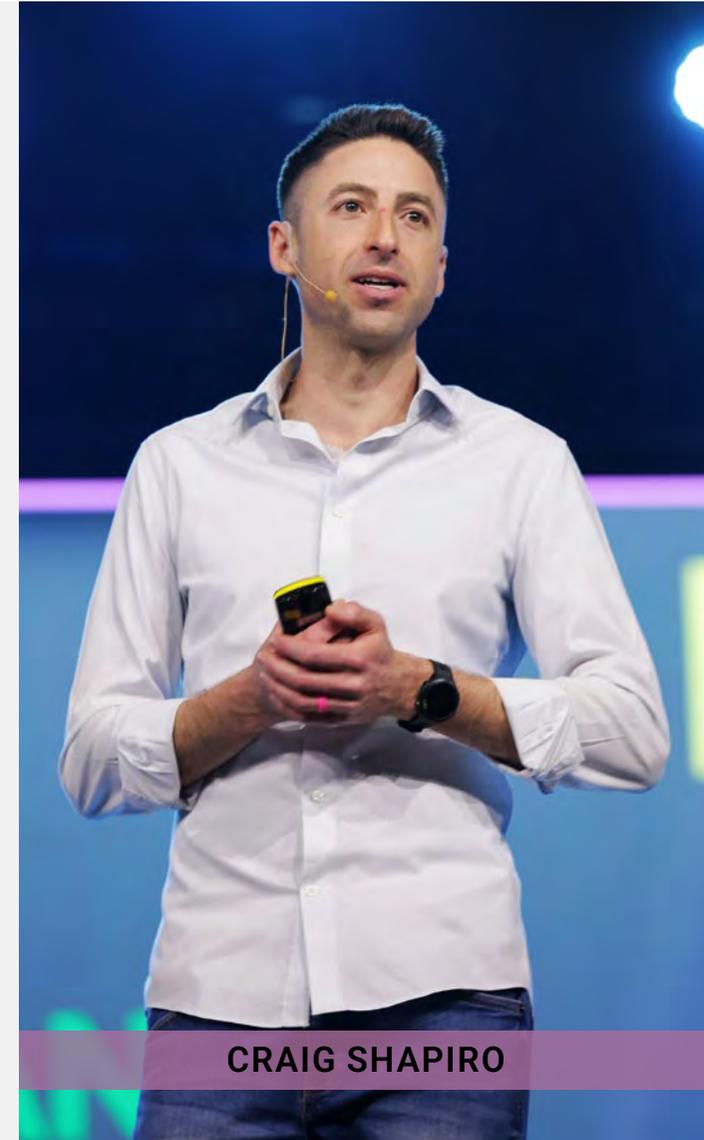
At the 2025 Nedbank IMC Conference, speakers of varying specialities demonstrated the results of synergistic collaboration.

The internal ecosystem of a business consists of different parties with varying roles that contribute to the brand offering from numerous, necessary angles. Marketers and teams within a business are mutually reliant in creating measurable business impact.

## INTERDEPENDENCE

The value of collaborative effort was conveyed by **Craig Shapiro**, Intellectual Property Executive at ENS, as IP lawyers can safeguard the originality and uniqueness that make a brand memorable. Marketers may consider the utility and hedonic value of a product, such as a Converse All Star shoe, while Shapiro showed the IP intricacies of trademarks on an All Star that bears “*over 1 500 trademark registrations.*”

He gave examples of how trademarks protected marketing ideas where IP, product design, and marketing came together to generate internationally recognised trademarks such as the red sole, the Apple iPhone screen design, and the tennis-ball scent of “*freshly cut grass.*” The more marketers understand IP, the more seamlessly it integrates into marketing strategies to deliver simple yet memorable product design that continues to distinguish a brand.



CRAIG SHAPIRO

# INTERDEPENDENCE



RYAN SAUER

**Ryan Sauer**, CEO of Redwood Analytics, enriched the value of co-dependence as he *"beautified the numbers game for creatives"* - because data matters. Marketers need to know how to measure marketing effectiveness through data, for *"we are living in the golden age of measurement."*

According to Sauer, *"If marketing is business, then marketing effectiveness is your business."* He provided five steps to allow businesses to own their marketing effectiveness and measurement:

# INTERDEPENDENCE

- 1. Be a duckling:** Align marketing objectives to business objectives. Croeser added, *“Creative bravery without business alignment is just noise,”* and Sauer believes, *“Business will understand marketing if you align every single one of your objectives to business objectives.”*
- 2. Map your universe like a Pokémon master:** First understand your world and the data that comes from it. Media and platform owners need to make data and insights accessible to marketers or risk being removed from the process.





- 3. Point at “The Point”:** *“You can’t manage what you don’t measure, and you can’t measure what you don’t see.”* The dashboard should be easy to understand - *“Dashboards don’t help you answer questions; they help you ask them.”*
- 4. Exit the echo chamber:** *“Marketers need to start making reports that have actions and insights - if dashboards ask questions, reports answer them.”* The key is concise delivery that shows results from which businesses can gain direction.
- 5. Don’t be a dumb robot:** *“Data actually informs AI,”* and marketers need to know how to utilise the tool. Understand the data in a model and ask the correct questions.

## INTERDEPENDENCE

At the 2025 conference, an unexpected nugget reinforced the importance of collaboration. In the final panel discussions, VW's Head of Marketing, **Bridget Harpur**, delivered a live brief to **Darren Morris**, Founder and CEO of Lucky Hustle, and **Mbalenhle Bhengu**, Lecturer and Founder of Mind Switch. Their real-time deliverable was a memorable piece, achieved through impromptu partnership and creativity.



MBALENHLE BHENGU, DARREN MORRIS AND BRIDGET HARPUR

# INTERDEPENDENCE

While “marketing needs to be in the cockpit, the pilot of the strategy,” according to **Vaughan Croeser**, Vice President of Marketing at South African Breweries (AB InBev), Morris further dared clients and agencies to acknowledge “shared responsibility” to produce content that will be remembered.

“We are looking to be entertained,” said **Stacy Jayne Saggars**, Commercial Growth Director at Kantar, presenting the Kantar 2025 Mzansi Barometer in TikTok style. Marketers must keep consumers entertained while nurturing reciprocal relationships.

## AUTHORS' TAKEAWAY

True interdependence in marketing requires synchronicity between creativity, data, and empathy - they cannot work in silos.



VAUGHAN CROESER



STACY JAYNE SAGGERS

## STEWARD THE BRAND



At the 2025 Nedbank IMC Conference, brand stewardship was defined beyond campaigns - through culture and the impact of a business's ethos on customer trust.

Brand stewardship begins with internal conviction. SAB's Vaughan Croeser shared, *"We all have a shot at building something that lasts."* Marketing requires belief to be built - within our teams and in the marketplace. Marketers, you are *"the temporary custodians of a brand that was there long before you and, if you're doing the job right, will be there long after you."*

## STEWARD THE BRAND

Nedbank's **Khensani Nobanda** helped marketers to mind their myopia by gaining input from younger minds.

She navigated the Youth Panel discussion with three young marketing enthusiasts - **Mukona Ligege** (AAA School of Marketing), **Nozizwe Sibisi** (University of Johannesburg), and **Micaela Wathen** (University of Pretoria). The conversation allowed marketers to hear from the rising stars in the industry.



NOZIZWE SIBISI, KHENSANI NOBANDA, MUKONA LIGEGE AND MICAELA WATHEN

# STEWARD THE BRAND



The panel shared proposals on how marketing professionals can navigate major challenges and opportunities. Wathen advocated for support for market entrants whose energetic minds may conflict with imposter syndrome and the desire to be recognised for the vibrancy they bring. Nobanda agreed: *“The more you show up as yourself, the more impact you make.”*

While there are numerous challenges, Sibisi highlighted the importance of the relationship between industry and institutions as it shapes marketing graduates. Nobanda referred to Marco Franco’s insights on the value of building a personal brand and side hustle to learn lessons that enhance preparation for chosen professions. Ligege spoke about how ageism impacts Gen Z in the workplace, where limited confidence in youth capacity hinders learning. She advised that business leaders *“should be willing to unlearn to re-learn.”*

## STEWARD THE BRAND

Both Croeser and Nobanda showed that the most authentic brand leadership begins inside the business. People need to believe in the story they're part of; that belief becomes the brand's performance advantage. **Preetesh Sewraj**, CEO, The Loeries Africa and the Middle East, challenged marketers to measure not only creativity but conscience - proving that purpose and performance can, and must, co-exist.

**Dean Oelschig**, Founder and Managing Partner at Halo, discussed how context-conscious creativity must be a lens that marketers use when creating their work. It allows the creative mind to think beyond the obvious - *"look where no one else is looking"* - and create something novel.

*"You have to be different and stand out,"* he said, *"because differentiation isn't enough. Distinction is."*



PREETESH SEWRAJ



DEAN OELSCHIG

## STEWARD THE BRAND

In his international keynote, **Charl Bassil**, Chief Brand Officer of the BBC, reminded marketers that true brand power lies in aligning head, heart, and soul - strategy, empathy, and conviction. In an era of automation, kindness and courage are commercial differentiators, he argued in *Reimagining Iconic Brands – From South Africa to the World*.

He spoke about bringing the magic of Africa to the world: *“Head, heart, and soul,”* he said, are essential as the world becomes increasingly polarised by algorithms and commercial agendas. He challenged marketers to be brave and say what they really mean; to call out negative behaviour and stereotyping of Africa. *“Kindness is a selling point for our future in a world of AI, as it will separate us from machines and societal collapse.”*



CHARL BASSIL

# STEWARD THE BRAND



Bassil urged marketers to believe in the impact of the micro-messages they send into society to shape culture:

- 1 Listen:** to consumers and stakeholders; listen with empathy and kindness; rise above the hype. “Let’s not forget to connect with people.”
- 2 Be firm:** on your true north - don’t overcomplicate; this is where marketing is business.
- 3 Have a challenger mindset:** make reality your friend. Use data and competitive context, but humanise it.
- 4 Reappraise:** reappraisal, not reinvention - be “freshly consistent.”
- 5 Balance:** legacy with innovation to allow for new ideas.
- 6 Play the long game:** team builders, collaborators, partnerships - not superheroes.

## STEWARD THE BRAND

Branding is about culture and the humans who create ideas that change society, said **Zwelakhe Lephoma**, a Red & Yellow marketing student. He spoke on *The Culture Capital Equation: Converting Influence Into Equity in the Modern Marketplace*, reiterating what other speakers said on the day: “Marketing isn’t just part of your business, it is the business.”

In most traditional businesses, marketing is seen as the final step, he said. “What’s a product without demand? What’s a service without a story? What’s a brand without meaning? Marketing isn’t just the tail end of a business; it is the spine. It informs product development, drives consumer behaviour, shapes perception - and perception shapes revenue. Marketing isn’t an accessory to success; it is the engine.”



ZWELAKHE LEPHOMA

## STEWARD THE BRAND

He referenced Rocawear, which understood something critical: people don't buy products; they buy identity and inspiration. Brands give access to lifestyles people want to belong to.

*"To steward a brand is to protect not only its image but its intent - ensuring that purpose translates into measurable performance."*

### AUTHORS' TAKEAWAY

**Marketers have been trusted with a role that steers the direction of a business, and leaders should not minimise the breadth of a marketer's reach. Future focus must be rooted in delivering at the pace of change.**





LYN BIRD

How do you manage the radical change happening in our industry - with AI and the demand from consumers for authenticity, amid the debate around human versus machine? **Lyn Bird**, Corporate Vice President for Industry Solutions Delivery (ISD) at Microsoft, spoke on ***Fearlessly Authentic: Building Relationships That Power Your Brand***. She introduced a framework for fearless authenticity, starting with your own origin story, how you apply that to relationships, and how you amplify it. *"We need to focus very heavily on scaling empathy and not noise. I find it unbelievable that mankind managed to put a man on the moon before we put a wheel on a suitcase!"*

She advised that we need to make change by feeling, not overthinking - machines think at much faster speeds. What we are left with is our humanity. Bird emphasised that authenticity is our moonshot and intelligence is no longer our differentiator. It is who you are as a human being - and daring to be different.

## DELIVER DEPTH

In his keynote, *Not Another Marketing Pep Talk: The Real Playbook for Turning Creative Bravery into Business Results*, SAB's Vaughan Croeser shared how businesses can steer creative bravery into visible results with the equation **"Ambition × Creativity × Culture = Impact."**

- **Ambition** - Dare bigger than the belief. *"Sponsor one wild idea,"* but mirror ambition with humility to enable growth and venture beyond the typical bottom line.
- **Creativity** - Give structure to harmony. *"Ambition is the fuel that keeps us reaching beyond the comforts of the brief so that we can make real impact."* Build a creative process and gain insights from experts.
- **Culture** - Don't go solo; build a choir. Croeser underscored culture's role in cohesion and outcomes. The term *"keynote,"* used by a cappella groups, sets the tone and defines the scale.

Bird spoke about scaling empathy, not noise, while Croeser showed that ambition and culture multiply impact when anchored in purpose. Both reminded marketers that humanity is a measurable business advantage.



## DELIVER DEPTH



That tone also applies to brands. **Melusi Mhlungu**, Founder and Chief Creative Officer of We Are Bizarre, shared how *“great brand platforms allow brands to say the same things in different ways, which makes them consistently surprising.”* Working well with the platform makes marketing easier for everyone on the journey.

## DELIVER DEPTH

**Major Mandisa Mfeka**, South Africa's first black female combat pilot, shared the challenges she faced mastering formation flying - *"lean in and cut the bread."* Challenges should be welcomed, not feared, as they reveal insightful lessons.

*"Challenges force us to face our resilience thresholds... by digging deep and facing that threshold, we can overcome."*





JASON QUINN

Resilience is also needed in our boardrooms. Nedbank's Nobanda spoke to **Jason Quinn**, Nedbank Group Chief Executive, in *What Every CEO Wants from Marketing but Is Too Polite to Ask*.

Asked whether marketing is central to business, he said he sees senior marketers as business leaders and wants to hear their voices on Exco. Why then is it treated as a support function in many boardrooms? Nobanda asked. Quinn said the weakest argument is the one advocating making budget by cutting advertising. His response: *"Is that the best you can come up with?"*

## DELIVER DEPTH

Quinn added: *“You don’t build trust in a brand by saying you are trustworthy. Our purpose at Nedbank is that we use financial expertise to do good. I want that known widely. I want people to believe it.”*

How will you make more money if you are not selling well - selling a good product that people want? *“The strategic part of marketing communications - how we pitch up as a company, what we stand for in society, how we bring the youth into the future and build trust with a different generation - these are things that trouble me, and this is something I want to invest in.”*



## DELIVER DEPTH



Regarding the African continent, Quinn said the first thing he learnt was that treating Africa as one market is perilous. Each market has unique challenges and opportunities. Our continent is blessed with opportunity - not just natural resources, but our people. We have a young population that is digital-first and seeks out learning and education, wants to get ahead, and is prepared to hustle.

The brand must ensure the product is continually more relevant and aspirational and can support customers on their journeys. *“Where we have to play more is our role in society and that promise that we will use our expertise to do good... That doesn’t just extend to financial education in South Africa. [We need] brave leadership that wants to stand up and deal with our purpose and express our purpose widely.”* Only companies that are sustainable will last, he added, quoting his late father.

## DELIVER DEPTH

**Welcome Witbooi**, the inspirational speaker for the event, shared challenges he faced - from becoming a gang member to going to prison - and now graduating from business school. He now speaks to the youth against gang membership and gang violence. Witbooi and his daughter advise the youth that they *“do not have to be a product of their environment.”*

### AUTHORS' TAKEAWAY

The brand should be regarded beyond sales and profit; human connection is central to providing direction to the tools we use and brings meaning to vision.



## DARE TO BE BRAVE



NOMSA CHABELI

At the 2025 Nedbank IMC, bravery wasn't framed as bold stunts or slogans - it was the courage to take decisions that grow trust, not just reach.

Marketing vision must be driven from the top, echoed **Nomsa Chabeli**, Chief Executive Officer of the SABC, who spoke on *Why a CEO Should Drive Brand Vision from the Top*. The power of brand is to inspire, give clarity, and unite employees and audiences around a single vision.

## DARE TO BE BRAVE

She reframed the CEO's role as Chief Belief Officer - a reminder that brand vision must start at the top if it's to shape culture and profit. *"We are living in an era defined by a trust deficit. Not just institutions in the public sector, but in the private sector too, where we find ourselves constantly questioned."*

*The world has changed; brands cannot be left to marketing alone. Consumers are less patient, less forgiving, and more demanding. A clever marketing campaign is no longer good enough. They want authenticity and purpose. But what does that look like? They want brands that stand for more than just transactions - that stand for meaning,"* said Chabeli.



## DARE TO BE BRAVE



Major Mfeka also walked the audience through her personal story as she sought to inspire them in *Breaking Barriers and Dealing with Pressure*. “As aviators, we are constantly navigating turbulence,” she said, mirroring the fluctuating nature of the business world that requires marketers to adjust and navigate. Mfeka received her wings in 2011 as a military pilot, becoming a Hawk Mk 120 commander in 2018. She has flown in formation for two presidential inaugurations and served as public relations officer of the Silver Falcons, showing the need for brand accessibility even at military level.

People can connect without a word through the portrayal of their personal brand, and Mfeka showed the value of marketers connecting at a human level through the inspiration she gave a young girl who hoped to become a military pilot. Remarkable relatability in what may have been an unimaginable context dissolved the *“invisible barrier”* between them and birthed a dream the young girl may not even have known she could have. Croeser, in turn, shared that *“bravery is when your belief in the idea is greater than your instinct for self-preservation.”*

## DARE TO BE BRAVE

For strong brand leadership, the CEO or CMO must signal the vision clearly and consistently, said Chabeli.

*“When CEOs lead brands, the culture is resilient because there is clarity and employees lead the brand. When those headwinds are there, your teams deliver because they believe in something bigger than themselves. CEOs are chief brand evangelists. We give employees clarity and pride. For investors and regulators, we represent accountability. As CEOs, we must live the brand as we are accountable for it. Demand that CEOs lead the brand. Without leadership, your brand will be exposed.”* Chabeli added that CMOs will demand more from CEOs, as true brand building is a partnership between the CEO and the CMO.



## DARE TO BE BRAVE

From vision to dreams, Mhlungu has dreamt of reinvesting in the local market of creatives: *“I just wanna go to the States and be a sponge, come back home and hopefully share what I have learnt.”* He headed to Miami, Chicago, and New York City where he contributed to work at top internationally recognised brands while maintaining his aim *“to be a sponge.”*

### AUTHORS' TAKEAWAY

**Marketers need to dare to believe in what only they can see - and push for the shared dream in the business, pursuing it with purpose.**





Across every keynote and conversation, one message stood out - technology is transforming marketing, but trust will always define it. We need to embrace AI, but we also need to do it with empathy - our humanity - as most speakers on AI emphasised. We must upskill our employees and ensure fears over job losses to AI are handled with kindness - and that includes our customers and consumers. Our marketing industry has been among the first adopters of AI, as have our future consumers. The overarching opinion shared on the day was that empathy, kindness, and creativity will drive our industry forward as we navigate a technology that will change society radically.

As Dale Hefer said in her opening remarks, marketers have the power to shape national narratives - a responsibility that becomes more urgent as technology and trust intersect. If 2024 challenged marketers to learn, 2025 reminded them why - because marketing is not a support function; it's the business itself.

***“Marketing and communication power every sector of society - creating jobs and showcasing South Africa’s talent to the world.”***

*- Minister Solly Malatsi, Minister of Communications and Digital Technologies, South Africa*

# Thank-You

for being part of the conversation shaping  
how marketing drives real business in Africa.

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