

Marketing

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Beyond The Garden Gates: Why African Brands Chase Scarcity When They Were Built For Abundance

I was in Addis Ababa for Africa Week this year for two truly African marketing engagements. One was the Africa CMO 100 launch, where the indefatigable Thebe Ikalafeng, who has spent a career insisting that Africa can build brands the world takes seriously, was announcing the top 100 marketing leaders in Africa. The second one was this year's Most Admired Brands in Africa report launch, which GeoPoll works on with Brand Africa. It was a week of celebrating brands and the people behind the brands - in Africa, for Africa.

It was about as much marketing authority as the continent can gather under one roof, so we sat in rooms at the heart of the African Union and discussed African brands and growth. The talk kept circling back to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the agreement that on paper folds 54 economies into a single market of 1.3 billion people. Everyone agreed it was a generational prize. And talk we did, on how to claim it, and we will claim it.

Underneath the optimism, though, there is always an anxiety that every marketer on talk of expansion surfaces. Is the African market actually big enough to build a great talk of expansion surfaces. Is the African market actually big enough to build a great brand in, or are we all fighting over a room that was always too small?

From all the ideas that were exchanged, I came out with a new belief. I have come to believe we are asking the wrong question, and the clearest way I can explain why comes from… the Bible.

The reflex of scarcity

Think about the data most of us live in: the fickle disposable incomes, the currency swings (do you know 21 out of 54 African currencies lost value against the U.S. dollar last year?), the logistics that make moving a truckload from Mombasa to Kinshasa a great heroism. Scarcity feels like realism rather than a mindset. So we behave accordingly. We treat our home markets as rooms with a fixed number of chairs, and we spend

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our budgets trying to take a chair from the brand next to us. Price wars. Poaching campaigns. The same three brands chasing the same sliver of consumers in Nairobi quarter after quarter.

Strategists call it a red ocean, and you can win in one, but you win bloodied and exhausted, and you never grow beyond its edges. The tragedy is that most African brands do not die of failure. They die of
premature saturation, having decided that the walls of their launch market were the walls of the world. Period!

They are not. And to see why, it helps to leave marketing for a moment and consider the Garden of Eden.



The garden was never fenced

You know how the story goes. God Almighty plants a garden in Eden, fills it with every good tree, and places the first man and woman in it to tend it and enjoy it. There is only one rule, one tree whose fruit they must not eat. A serpent (or Iblis in Islam) talks them into eating it anyway, their eyes are opened, and they are sent out of the garden into a harder world of toil, pain, and death. It is the oldest cautionary tale we have, and we usually read it as a story about loss.

In my meditation, I think what we forget is the instruction that came before the fall. So, I asked myself what would happen if humanity had never fallen, specifically, whether the Garden of Eden could have physically supported a growing human population. As I researched, I learned I was not the only one. Philosophers and theologians have long debated that, and the answer is profound: Eden was never meant to be a static, fenced-in backyard.

The original mandate given to humanity was to expand the borders of the garden. Humanity was meant to cultivate the wild earth outside, systematically turning the entire planet into a global paradise. The ecosystem was designed to be elastic; it was meant to grow with the population.

The other is so big that even if people were not dying, it would not be full yet. Demographers estimate that roughly 117 billion human beings have ever been born, every one of us back to the first of the species. Gather everyone who has ever lived, ask them to stand together, and you would only need a piece of land about the size of Rwanda. A single small country could hold the entire human story.

Space, in other words, has never been humanity's constraint. It only feels that way. Which is precisely the confusion at the heart of the marketer's anxiety, and it is an old confusion.

We picture Eden as a walled garden, a private paradise with a fence around it. The Bible (and other religious books that carry the same story) describes nothing of the sort. Adam and Eve are told to work the garden, to keep it, and then to fill the earth. Scholars such as Greg Beale read Eden not as an enclosure but as a starting point, a first sanctuary that humanity was commissioned to extend outward by cultivating the wild land beyond it, until the garden covered the whole of creation. The border of Eden was not a wall but a frontier, and the entire assignment was to push it.

Rearrange your idea of a market around that sentence, and something will change. Your launch market, your Nairobi or your Dar es Salaam, is not your kingdom to defend. It is your Eden (the place you begin), and the mandate was never to guard the fence. It was to move it. This is where you say Amen and send an offering.

Pushing the gates

This is where the free trade area stops being a slogan and becomes a strategy. The discipline it rewards is what we call market development, carrying a proven offer into new territory, rather than market penetration, wringing a little more out of the ground you already hold. Expanding the garden, rather than tilling it harder.

Around 15 percent of African trade happens between African countries, against something closer to 60 percent within Europe. We sit on a unified market of 1.3 billion people and behave as though each of us were confined to one nation of it. When a Nigerian fintech turns toward Francophone West Africa, or an East African agritech starts designing for Southern African soils, it is not being adventurous, but doing the plain work the mandate always described, turning wild, unserved territory into cultivated ground.

The obvious objection is that the land beyond the fence is broken. The roads, the power, the payment methods, the young and swelling population that pessimists file under "resource strain" rather than "market." How can a garden expand into soil that cannot support it?

Here I want to be careful, because this is the point at which the metaphor tempts you to overclaim, and Africa's story is impressive enough without the embellishment. Nobody's infrastructure scales infinitely. But ours has a habit the developed world never needed, which is leapfrogging. We did not wait for a landline on every wall; we went straight to mobile. We did not wait for bank branches; we built M-Pesa, and rewrote how the world thinks about money in the process. The lesson buried in that history is that infrastructure follows demand more often than it precedes it. Build the vision at the right size and the ground has a way of rising to meet it, through mobile money, through localized AI, through supply chains that route around the gaps rather than waiting for them to close.

Brands do not need replacing

There is one more idea in the Bible story worth stealing, and it is the one I find hardest to shake. The unfallen world had no death, and a world without death has no need of replacement. For almost all of human history, people bore many children for a grim reason: to offset the many who died. Remove death and reproduction simply slows.

I am talking about expansion in a business



environment. To build a market of abundance, we must change how we treat the consumers we already have. In our flawed corporate world, marketers are trapped in a frantic, exhausting cycle of "replacement births." We spend exorbitant budgets on customer acquisition, only to watch those customers leave due to poor experience, forcing us to buy new ones just to keep the brand alive. In an unfallen paradise, there is no death, and therefore no need for survivalist replacement.

Our ultimate goal should be the creation of "immortal" brands, businesses built on radical trust, deep cultural alignment, and lifetime value. When you stop treating customer acquisition as a transaction and start treating customer retention as a sacred ecosystem, your brand builds a compounding equity that cannot be eroded by economic downturns. Reducing customer trust to lifetime value undersells it.

This is a continent whose consumers have been burned repeatedly by brands that arrived, extracted, and left. Let's not add to the stats. I have run marketing campaigns in all continents, and I know this for a fact: the reward for genuine cultural alignment and patience is larger here than almost anywhere on earth. Retention is not a way to spend less. It is the thing that turns every new customer into real expansion rather than a stopgap.

Fill the earth, do not overfill it

Finally, brethren, none of this rewards recklessness, and the old story is wise about that too. Aquinas, arguing about the same garden centuries ago, held that even a perfect world's growth was meant to reach a purposeful fullness and then rest, rather than sprawl without shape. Grow too timidly, and you die slowly, defending a garden shrinking around you. Grow too greedily and you die fast, spread so thin across markets you never understood that you collapse under your own flag-planting. We know many brands that seized multiple countries at once and could not feed one of them properly.

So if you forget my sermon here, carry one thing out of this: if your entire strategy is how to win a bigger share of the market, you are still counting chairs in a room you have decided is full. Change the question. Ask instead how to build a bigger room. Another town, another county, another country, another retained customer.

That single shift is the whole difference between a gatekeeper and a gardener. Gatekeepers guard what already exists and grow suspicious as the space around them shrinks. Gardeners cultivate what could exist, and their ground gets larger the more they tend it. Africa has no shortage of gatekeepers. What it iswaiting for, what that room in Addis was really asking for, is gardeners with the nerve to push the fence out into the wild.

Is it easy to grow as an African brand? No. It was never going to be easy. But the problem was never the market, so, let us stop asking if Africa has enough disposable income or infrastructure to support our grandest business ambitions. It was the size of the lens we were using to look at it.

The African consumer is not a fixed cage of limited seats. It is a wide and hungry frontier waiting to be cultivated, and our Eden, it turns out, is not behind us at all. It is in front of us, still unfenced, still unfilled, waiting for the brands with the nerve to push the gates. So, stop trying to squeeze your brand into a crowded room. Look beyond the regional gates, leverage the brilliant elasticity of our digital infrastructure, and build relationships that last.

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