

Breaking The Curse Of Vanity Metrics

By Frankline Kibuacha

Eons ago. I was heading social media and online marketing at an early startup. A heavily funded start-up. It was only my second proper job, coming from a similar role at an old corporate where my team was doing massive sales growth week on week but digital marketing and only sales were only a tiny part of the business, and what my team and I did was, well, ticking boxes (story for another day). Here at this startup, everything I did mattered because we were a strong team of only two employees in Kenya, where the product was being launched. You know about Kenya being the cradle of mankind, and of tech start-ups in Africa.

The mandate I was given was to grow the app user base and increase Facebook followers. And so, I did what any ambitious young marketer would do - I put my heart into delivering the absolute numbers. I hustled, experimented, ran campaigns everywhere, worked late nights, and pushed that app to nearly 100,000 downloads in just five months. In Kenya, that's no small achievement. I helped build a Facebook community of almost 50,000 followers.

My performance was judged purely on volume. In meetings, my mood would be based on "How many new users this month? Why isn't the growth higher?" And I hated it when I didn't match up with the growth demands, so I hassled harder. And we were successful. On paper. On the dashboards.

But behind the scenes, something entirely different was happening. We had no idea what to do with this sudden "community." There was no monetization plan, no retention strategy, not even proper infrastructure. One week, we acquired so many users that the app simply crashed, and stayed down long enough to make the whole effort feel pointless.

Eventually, I left that start-up, burnt out, frustrated, and far wiser after months of chasing empty numbers. I felt tired, disillusioned, and frankly, duped by the very metrics we were applauding. The start-up sadly closed down not long after. It had thousands of users… and almost no value.

Years later, I joined an agency that served small businesses across Africa to lead the marketing execution - the team that actually ran the campaigns for these small businesses. Typical clients paid between $150 and $250 per month - covering the cost of social media management, ads on search and social AND the agency fee. Did you cringe at the impossibility? Yes, that's the type of clients we worked with, and they were very demanding because the $200 dollars they gave us was a choice between marketing and paying school fees for their children. So, how do you report to them at the end of the month that they got 300,000 impressions? Would they even matter? What mattered was leads and actual sales. And somehow, we made it happen!

These experiences taught me a lesson I've carried through my entire career: *numbers do matter,* but only the right numbers matter. You look at the wrong numbers, even the ones that make you happy, and they can easily bury you. You follow the right ones, and you create miracles. Hence the concept of vanity metrics.

What Are Vanity Metrics, Then?

The term "vanity metrics" was popularised by **Eric Ries** in *The Lean Startup*, where he describes them as "measurements that give the illusion of progress but don't reflect meaningful, actionable insights." In other words, they make you feel good without making you any smarter. They are the numbers you point to when you want to appear successful, not when you want to understand what is actually happening.

Tableau defines vanity metrics as "performance statistics that look impressive on the surface but do not offer meaningful, actionable insights into a business's actual health or progress. They can provide a false sense of success and often fail to correlate with core business objectives like revenue, customer acquisition, or retention."

Harvard Business Review has written about this, noting how vanity metrics "reward the appearance of growth rather than the substance of it." They are seductive because they rise quickly and are easy to influence, but they rarely correlate with value creation, profitability, or long-term brand health.

So, what exactly makes a metric a vanity metric?

Vanity metrics tend to measure volume, not value. They count everything, but weigh nothing. App installs, page views, impressions, total followers grow fast and look beautiful in presentations, but they don't tell you if the people behind those numbers care about your product, understand it, or would ever pay for it.

Vanity metrics show activity, not behaviour. A million app impressions do not tell you if anyone actually uses the app. High web traffic doesn't tell you if people found what they were looking for. A large social media following doesn't tell you if your brand is trusted. Vanity metrics measure motion without telling you whether that motion leads anywhere meaningful.

Vanity metrics show popularity, not performance, amplifying noise rather than signal. A campaign can go viral on social media yet fail to convert a single sale. A video can accumulate hundreds of thousands of views while brand preference remains unchanged. In many industries, especially ours, popularity is a fragile and misleading compass.

Vanity metrics are easy to manipulate. A modest budget can inflate follower counts. A well-timed promotion can spike app installs. A paid influencer push can make engagement skyrocket. But when the campaign ends, the numbers often collapse just as quickly as they rose. Anything that grows dramatically overnight should be treated with suspicion.

Vanity metrics lack context. They don't explain why something happened, whether it will happen again, or what it means for the business. They are isolated numbers floating in a vacuum, impressive from afar, but hollow when examined closely.

What makes vanity metrics dangerous is not the metrics themselves but the false confidence they create. They are easy to chase, easy to celebrate, and easy to hide behind. They give leaders the comforting illusion that growth is happening. But as my own experience taught me years ago, that comfort can be fatal.
The real problem is that we've built cultures around these conveniences. Cultures where marketers are rewarded for activity, not impact. Where founders chase growth without asking whether that growth is useful. Where internal dashboards become echo chambers that reaffirm decisions instead of challenging them.

In these cultures, vanity metrics thrive. And meaningful metrics - the ones tied to value, loyalty, experience, margin, or consumer emotion - get ignored because they are slower, quieter, and harder to influence. But they are also the ones that tell the real story.

The Problem Isn't Data. It's The Wrong Data

Sitting with older marketers and reading books about marketing in the past, you will appreciate one fact: we do not have a shortage of data.

The truth, and it's a truth many marketers quietly know but rarely admit, is that
we have never had more data at our fingertips as we do now, but still, we have never understood consumers less (we say consumers are complicated).

Over time, marketing has built a cathedral of metrics, dashboards, and algorithms where every click is tracked, every impression is counted, and every action is plotted. But somewhere along the way, we might have lost the plot by confusing data with insight. We confused measurement with meaning and reporting with strategy.

I think being a fully qualified accountant probably helped sharpen this instinct in me. I look at numbers differently. I'm trained to follow value, to connect metrics to actual business outcomes, to understand how every coin spent or earned finds its way into the bottom line. And because of that, it has always baffled me how many marketing teams obsess over growth that doesn't grow anything, dashboards that dazzle but don't deliver, and KPIs that reward motion instead of progress.

Especially marketing agencies. Have you seen their pitches and reports?

The thing about vanity metrics is that they are relative, and anyone could actually be tracking them. It's not like they don't show up wearing a label. In fact, they're often the neatest numbers in the room. They rise smoothly. They spike spectacularly. They make you feel like you're in control - like something meaningful is happening.

Vanity metrics are the easiest numbers to generate and the easiest to misinterpret. They seduce you because they're loud and not because they're right.

And that's where so many otherwise good marketers, smart founders, even entire corporations get it wrong. They don't fail because they lack data. They fail because they follow the wrong data with religious devotion. We have been taught that data-driven decision-making is the gold standard, and it is. But only when the data points in the right direction. Because if your compass is broken, it doesn't matter how diligently you follow it. You're still lost.

Let's look at a few examples.

Take the example of a digital lending app. Every time a new loan app launches, the early numbers are spectacular. Thousands of installs. A flood of first-time loans. A dashboard glowing with activity. These metrics matter, but probably not so sustainable until you start asking about repeat borrowers, repayment reliability, uninstall rates, and complaints logged (have you ever received those debt collector SMSs that threaten your entire lineage? That's desperation). The same dashboard that looked so triumphant hides the uncomfortable truth that many users jumped in because the first loan was free or nearly free. The moment terms tightened, they vanished. What looked like traction was nothing more than opportunistic sampling.

Or a ride-hailing app. Drop prices by 50% or offer a week of discounted rides, and the whole of Nairobi will flock to your platform. Trips double. New users pour in. Drivers stay busy. And for a moment, the campaign feels brilliant. But turn off the promotion, and the party ends abruptly. Riders go to the next best deal or their default app, loyal to nothing but price. The KPI that made the team look exceptional on Friday becomes irrelevant by Tuesday.

The same thing happens every November and December in e-commerce. Black Friday numbers jump out like fireworks. Traffic surges. Carts fill. Orders flood in. Leadership smiles knowingly. "This," they say, "is what great marketing looks like." I have worked in e-commerce, and the marketing department loves this time of the year because the KPIs are so easy to beat due to the discounts and the implied culture that has been built around this season - pageviews skyrocket, and even the better metric, sales, go up exponentially. And yet, January tells a completely different story. Many of

> "The term "vanity metrics" was popularised by Eric Ries in The Lean Startup, where he describes them as "measurements that give the illusion of progress but don't reflect meaningful, actionable insights." In other words, they make you feel good without making you any smarter. They are the numbers you point to when you want to appear successful, not when you want to understand what is actually happening.

those customers were one-night stands, not relationships. They came for the discount, not the brand.

What ties all these together isn't bad marketing or poor products. It's misaligned metrics, numbers that look promising but fail to answer fundamental questions about user value, behaviour, or longevity. When you measure the wrong things, even the right actions can look like failures, and the wrong actions can look like success.

Data itself is not the enemy here. In fact, true data-driven decision-making has never been more essential. What's dangerous is the assumption that all data is equal, that a big number must mean a big achievement, and that any upward curve signals strategic progress.

The reality is that some numbers lie. Or, more accurately, some numbers tell only the convenient part of the truth.

Why Vanity Metrics Seduce Us

If vanity metrics were obviously useless, none of us would fall for them. But they aren't obvious. That's why they're dangerous. They rise quickly, look impressive, and give teams something to celebrate. They reward our desire for certainty and progress, and in many organisations, they become the closest thing to validation. That psychological comfort, combined with organisational pressure and marketing, can be stressful, which is precisely why vanity metrics thrive.

One of the biggest drivers of this obsession is impatience. Marketers operate in environments that demand instant proof. Boards want "measurable" wins. Investors want "traction". CEOs want "growth". Quarterly reviews demand "numbers that move". Investors want hockey-stick charts. In this context, slow-building metrics like brand equity, perception shifts, customer trust, or lifetime value feel frustratingly vague. But vanity metrics feel gratifying, giving the illusion that the work is paying off. It's no surprise that we sometimes chase these numbers even when we know they are not tied to sustainable value.

Harvard Business Review describes this perfectly in its analysis of "metric fixation." When people face pressure to demonstrate progress, they "gravitate toward the metrics that move the fastest," regardless of whether those metrics reflect real performance. In other words, vanity metrics don't just appeal to marketers - they appeal to organisational psychology.

Going back to the lending space example (another story for another day - GeoPoll recently conducted a study showing that close to 40% of digital lender customers across Africa borrow with the intention to default, which is a crazy metric). The early KPIs, installs, first-loan uptake, and disbursement volume shoot upward dramatically, and become an excellent ammunition for the next investor pitch. But deeper metrics, such as repayment reliability, month-three retention, borrowing behaviour after interest sets in, or customer lifetime value, tell a much darker story. Yet because they take longer to materialise, they are often deprioritised. The story the team tells itself, and their investors, is based on the numbers that look good, not the ones that matter. Small wonder that many start-ups in this part of the world fail even when heavily funded. And I can bet you just thought of one such start-up.

This dynamic isn't unique to Africa. According to the "Facebook Files" reported by The Wall Street Journal, Facebook (now Meta) notoriously built its entire algorithmic system around engagement. Engagement was their vanity metric of choice - more likes, more comments, more shares. The higher the engagement, the better the platform was assumed to be performing. But internal research later showed that high engagement often correlated with divisive, inflammatory, or misleading content. Engagement grew, yes, but at the cost of trust, safety, and societal well-being. That's the power of vanity metrics: they reward what is measurable, even if the quantifiable thing is harmful.

Meanwhile, according to research by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), approximately 60% of the sales lift from advertising comes from brand-building, not tactical activations. In other words, 60% of the total payback from advertising comes from sustained, long-term brand-building, while the remaining 40% comes from short-term sales activation. Yet many marketing teams obsess over click-through rates and short-term response metrics, because those numbers move today. They're visible. They're comforting. But they don't build long-term success.

Even seemingly innocent metrics like follower counts play on our need for social proof. A brand with 500,000 followers feels more legitimate than one with 5,000, even if those followers are largely inactive, unengaged, or uninterested. Vanity metrics feed our insecurities and our desire for status. They make us look bigger, louder, more successful than we actually are.

There is also a cultural dimension to all of this. In many organisations, KPIs are tied closely to personal performance. If your job depends on delivering growth, you will naturally gravitate towards the numbers that grow fastest, as I did at the start-up. It's not dishonesty, it's survival. Vanity metrics become a shield. They allow employees to say, "Look, I did what was asked," even when the outcomes aren't meaningful.

And then there's the simple truth that meaningful metrics are harder. They take time to measure. They require better systems. They require researchers, analysts, and cross-team collaboration. Metrics like customer lifetime value, net promoter score, 90-day retention, satisfaction at key touchpoints, brand consideration, and emotional resonance are incredibly valuable, but they take effort and discipline. Vanity metrics, by comparison, are easy to collect. They're automated. They're convenient. They're always available.

In a famous experiment published in Psychological Science, researchers found that people often choose rewards that appear bigger rather than rewards that are meaningfully better. That's how our brains are wired. This behavioural bias doesn't disappear in boardrooms. It's why 100,000 impressions feel more exciting than 100 high-quality leads, even though those leads are the real value.

The seduction of vanity metrics is not only numerical but also emotional. They flatter us. They reassure us. They tell us that our marketing is doing something. They fill presentations with beautiful graphs. They mask the discomfort of uncertainty. And sometimes, they keep us from asking hard questions we don't want to confront.

It's not that marketers love bad numbers. It's that vanity metrics let us feel good without facing the complex, sometimes uncomfortable truth behind real performance.

But that comfort comes with a cost that every mature marketer learns eventually. Numbers can make you feel safe right up until the moment they betray you. And if you've been relying on the wrong ones, that betrayal is always very painful.

The Opposite Of Vanity Metrics Is Actionable Metrics

If vanity metrics are the loud, flattering numbers with no substance, actionable metrics are their grounded, honest counterparts. They tend to be quieter, slower-moving, and sometimes even

MARKETING AFRICA

The Pitch



You now have the opportunity to tell your brand story however you like! Plug in to Marketing Africa's new platform - THE PITCH! Connect with your target audiences like never before. For more information on the THE PITCH, email: info@marketingafrica.co.ke or call +254 - 717 - 529 052.

uncomfortable but they show what is actually happening inside a business.

The Lean Startup defines actionable metrics simply as "numbers that demonstrate cause and effect." They help you understand how a decision impacts behaviour. They show you what to fix, what to change, and what to invest in and that when you change something, the onboarding flow, the pricing, the messaging, the quality, consumer behaviour changes too. That's how you know you're measuring something real.

Let's bring this into the real world.

Consider a streaming platform. View counts are vanity metrics, big, impressive, but often misleading. Completion rate is actionable. Churn rate is even more actionable. These metrics tell you whether people love the content enough to finish it, whether they stick around, and what drives them away.

This is a lesson platforms globally have learned. Netflix, long seen as the pioneer of data-driven entertainment, discovered that total hours watched, once their prized metric, wasn't enough to predict customer satisfaction or retention. When subscribers began cancelling because they didn't feel they had enough compelling content, Netflix shifted focus toward depth of engagement and retention-linked metrics. They realised that algorithmic popularity didn't always translate into emotional connection.

Telcos provide another useful window into actionable measurement. Selling millions of bundles looks good on paper, but it doesn't prove brand health. Metrics like churn, Net Promoter Score, minutes of dropped calls, network uptime, revenue per user, and product adoption depth are far more indicative of long-term strength.

In Safaricom's annual and sustainability reports, customer experience is highlighted as a strategic pillar. They say they track real customer pain points, such as the number of customers affected by outages, and monitor NPS across customer segments. Their public commitment to becoming a "customer-obsessed tech company" shows a shift toward experience metrics that correlate with trust, loyalty, and long-term revenue. These are actionable metrics: human, behavioural, and tied to real outcomes.

Banks offer an equally instructive example. For years, many institutions fixated on the number of new accounts opened. But a dormant account has no value. The real question is: how many of those accounts are active, funded, and using multiple products?

Equity Bank, whose "low-cost, high-volume" business model is well documented, is a perfect case study in how actionable metrics change with maturity. In the early years, Equity's scale came from sheer volume: many Mimi ni Member accounts, many small transactions. That was the foundation. But as the bank matured, the metrics that mattered shifted. Today, their reporting and when you listen to their leadership, emphasises deposit growth, transaction activity, cross-product usage, and earnings per customer, behavioural indicators of deepening relationships, not just raw account growth. The bank still seems to care about volume, but its strategic metrics reflect value, endurance, and customer productivity.

In FMCG, the most precise actionable metric, in my view, is the repeat purchase rate. Sales spikes during promotions are vanity. What happens after the discount disappears is actionable. Household penetration - how many new people are entering your brand - is actionable. Share of wallet is actionable. These metrics tell whether consumers are choosing your brand because they love it, trust it, or simply because it was cheap that week.

It's the same story across categories. Actionable metrics almost always have three characteristics:

They are behavioural: They capture what people actually do, not what we hope they are doing.

They are tied to value: They influence revenue, retention, loyalty, or satisfaction.

They are directional: They tell us where to adjust, not just where we stand.

And perhaps most importantly, actionable metrics usually force uncomfortable questions - the kind we avoid when hiding behind vanity metrics. Why aren't customers returning? Why did satisfaction drop? Why is churn rising? Why is this segment not converting? Why is our premium offering underperforming?

When companies start measuring the right things (the hard things) strategy suddenly comes into focus. Teams stop chasing spikes and start building systems. Marketing becomes clearer, calmer, and more effective. The business becomes anchored in reality.

One of my favourite pieces of research from Deloitte notes that companies that consistently outperform their competitors "anchor their decisions in behavioural data rather than exposure metrics." Exposure metrics (like reach or impressions) are vanity-adjacent because they show potential impact, not real impact. Behavioural metrics show what actually happened. The truth, not the hope.

The Danger Of Data Without Context

If actionable metrics are the numbers that show you the heartbeat of your business, then context is the oxygen that keeps that heart alive. Without context, even the most sophisticated metric can mislead you. This is the silent trap we fall into as marketers: believing that a number, by itself, tells the whole story. It never does.

Data without context is like a photo without a caption. It captures a moment, but not the meaning behind it. And this is

"If actionable metrics are the numbers that show you the heartbeat of your business, then context is the oxygen that keeps that heart alive. Without context, even the most sophisticated metric can mislead you. This is the silent trap we fall into as marketers: believing that a number, by itself, tells the whole story. It never does. Data is the map. Context is the terrain. If you sail with one and ignore the other, you get lost.

where so many organisations, even those that pride themselves on being "data-driven," lose their way. They think the number is the truth. But in marketing, numbers are only clues. The real truth sits beneath them.

I have seen companies make dramatic decisions based on a single metric: retention drops, so they overhaul the app. NPS dips, so they revamp the entire customer-service department. Website traffic rises, so they declare a campaign successful. But the number is never the whole story.

Context is even more important because consumer behaviour is shaped by nuances that don't show up on dashboards. Price elasticity, trust, culture, proximity, shared devices, income cycles, these are lived realities that no single metric can capture.

I have seen a case at GeoPoll where a client was convinced their brand health was declining because the sales graph in a certain region was pointing downward. But when we actually asked consumers directly, we learned the real issue had nothing to do with preference. The product had become harder to find because distribution was collapsing in that region. The stats said "declining demand" while the consumer said "we still want it, but we can't find it." Two completely different realities.

I have also seen a brand surge in customers and assume loyalty is climbing, but when consumers are interviewed, they say they bought the product only because it was the cheapest option. Sometimes the most powerful insights are embarrassingly human.

And this is why context matters as it is the bridge between the number and the meaning.

Brand health tracking tells you that awareness dropped; qualitative insight tells you it's because your competitor launched a campaign you dismissed. Sales data shows a dip in household purchases; contextual insight shows that the Back to School season tightened budgets temporarily. NPS declines; customer interviews reveal that one policy change offended a loyal subsegment you never considered.



Data is the map. Context is the terrain. If you sail with one and ignore the other, you get lost.

What Being Truly Data-Driven Actually Means

One of the buzzwords of our time is "we are data-driven." But what does it mean? Is it the dashboards, algorithms, or the size of your analytics stack? Is it how many charts you can pull in under five minutes?

Being truly data-driven starts with asking better questions. What problem are we trying to solve? What behaviour are we trying to influence? How will we know if this is working? What does "success" actually look like? The right metrics only come out when the right questions are asked. Bad questions produce bad KPIs.

Second, being data-driven requires courage to measure even the hard things. Behavioural metrics like retention, customer lifetime value, repeat purchase rate, satisfaction, or adoption depth are messy and don't spike overnight or flatter you. But they are the metrics that predict long-term performance. McKinsey's work on "analytic competitors" shows that organisations that thrive don't measure more, they measure better. They identify the handful of indicators that tie directly to customer value, then align the entire company around them.

Third, being data-driven means recognising that numbers tell the story, but people explain it. A dip in retention is a number. Why it happened is a conversation. A spike in sales is a number. What caused it is a truth hidden behind behaviour. This is why research and talking to consumers matter. Why cultural insight matters. Why listening matters. If data gives you the map, human insight gives you the terrain. When marketers ignore the terrain, they get lost, but confidently.

Finally, being truly data-driven means accepting that judgment still matters.

The best marketers in the world aren't afraid of numbers, but they don't worship them either. They use data as a compass, not a cage. They know when a metric matters and when it's noise. They know when to pay attention to the trend and when to trust their instinct. This is the part of marketing that cannot be automated, the part that comes from experience, taste, and an understanding of people.

Great marketing has always required a blend of art and science. The science tells you what is happening, and the art tells you why it matters. The modern marketer must be fluent in both.

Because at the end of the day, data is not the hero. You are. Your judgment, your curiosity, your ability to interpret what the numbers really mean - that's what makes the difference between a brand that looks good on a dashboard and one that wins in the real world.

Being truly data-driven isn't about the size of your numbers. It's about the strength of your understanding.

Ultimately, as I wrote in my last article in this magazine (look it up), those numbers you are looking at represent people. Every impression, every visit, every rating, every minute spent on your product is a person choosing to give you their time, their attention, or their money. It is easy to forget this when we spend our days buried in dashboards, debating percentage points and colour-coded charts. But behind every rise and every dip is a human being with expectations, frustrations, preferences, constraints, and motivations. If we lose sight of that truth, even the most sophisticated metrics will lead us astray.

The real work of marketing has always been about understanding people - what they value, what they need, what they struggle with, and why they choose one brand over another. When we remember that metrics are simply reflections of human behaviour, not abstractions, the decisions we make become clearer, wiser, and more grounded in reality. In the end, the most powerful form of being data-driven is staying human-driven.

Data can guide us, but it cannot replace the human understanding of consumers, cultures, and the subtle forces that shape decision-making. If we are willing to pay attention to the metrics that matter, even when they challenge our assumptions, we position ourselves not just to chase growth, but to sustain it.

That is the real work. And that is the real opportunity.

Frankline Kibuacha, MCIM, is the Director of Marketing (Global) at GeoPoll. With over a decade of experience in marketing, brand management, and consumer research, he has witnessed firsthand how brands build, lose, and rebuild trust in an increasingly complex digital landscape. Engage via mail at: Mwenda@frankmwenda.com