Absa’s first year as a standalone African brand

On 11 July 2018, one of South Africa’s biggest brands was relaunched to the market after its separation from Barclays PLC. David Wingfield, Managing Executive: Marketing and Brand, Absa Group Limited, discusses how, over the past 12 months, the Absa brand has grown into its bold and passionate personality to deliver true Africanacity.

The relaunch of the Absa brand last year was an opportunity to reshape a forward-looking, digitally led and standalone African bank with global scalability. The challenge was to maintain the gravitas of the Barclays brand on the continent, while allowing Absa to create its own destiny as a proudly African bank. This was a complex process with its fair share of challenges.

When Absa launched its refreshed brand in South Africa on 11 July 2018, the reception was largely positive, with some negative feedback. It was a huge shift in the brand’s identity – asking customers to revisit their perceptions of an entity that has operated in South Africa for decades.

The rebrand saw multiple agencies collaborate to develop the brand’s new identity as a partner in financial services. It also taught all of those involved many lessons about what to do, but also what not to do when they move to rebrand their African business later this year.

When the team started conceptualising the rebrand, they spoke to more than 130,000 customers across the African continent. With the Barclays brand in countries outside South Africa and Absa in South Africa, the brand had to understand its customers’ needs before starting on this journey. Their feedback, together with advice from top brand experts, helped the brand reach the conclusion that it would become one brand that speaks to Africa; and that brand would be Absa, but Absa needed to be an entirely reinvented brand.

Reflecting on the process, one of the biggest lessons was around how important it is to remain flexible and allow for the brand to lead the strategy.
This was a particularly valuable lesson in light of how quickly Absa had to pull the required elements together to ensure that the new Absa was the relevant, Africa-powered, bold Absa that we have today. In a relatively short period, the right people were set in place, the right agencies came on board and the right attitude was brought into play. An integrated above-the-line campaign was launched – more than 40 branches and 150 ATMs were rebranded, and the internal digital channels were converted. It is possible to achieve the impossible when you have commitment and passion.

The overall rebrand of Absa had to redefine both internal and external benchmarks, transforming legacy manual systems into market-leading, digital channels that were both relevant and scalable.

One of the biggest challenges faced was conveying the new ideology and digital principles in all branding material, so that customers could see how the brand reimagined their access to the digital world through its solutions, services and platforms. The bank had to rethink everything, from the bulkheads of the ATMs to the logo and brand identity. Absa has proved that it is possible to take a traditionally analogue brand, redesign it and transform it into a digital first, analogue second entity.

Another lesson learnt was how the little things can actually become the biggest headache when it comes to a rebrand. There were around 48 000 touchpoints to rebrand, which included around 23 million references to ‘old’ Absa and Barclays – everything from branch signs to branding on contracts to references in web copy and more – it all had to be replaced with new Absa branding. This entailed a complex web of coding, messaging, logo redesign, refitting and refurbishing. Taking an eight-letter word (Barclays) and replacing it with a four-letter word (Absa) also had implications in coding, and the process turned out to be far more complex than initially envisioned.

The rebrand also meant a complete refocus of the overall brand strategy as a business, and so a new strategy appropriate for an African business was created. It becomes easier to drive the business forward, both internally and externally, if you start by aligning your business strategy with your brand proposition.

Finally, the brand had to find a word or phrase that would define its journey, its company, its vision and its future. There was none suitable, so they invented their own – Africanacity.

Africanacity is the distinctly African ability to always find a way to get things done. It is built on the tenacity, audacity and creativity of our people and our continent, as well as the brand’s commitment to walking alongside customers as they navigate their potential and realise the possibilities of Africa.

Much has been said about Africanacity and the new-look brand with its 15 bold shades of red. Research gathered over the past year shows that, while it has taken South Africans time to wrap their minds around the change, there is no doubt that the new, friendlier, digitally relevant, button-like logo is much more liked than the previous, austere look.

It has been a challenging and demanding, but also an educational year. Absa is now taking the lessons learnt into the continent as it starts replacing Barclays with Absa in the countries where it has a presence. As the brand prepares to launch, it will use what it has learnt locally to carry a bold and passionate vision into these markets.

It is sure to be another interesting year ahead.
Africanacity
It’s how we get things done.

The opportunities on the African continent are endless. As an African bank with a global perspective, we understand just how much creativity, tenacity and ingenuity is required to make your dreams a reality. That’s why we’re committed to partnering with you to find a way to bring your possibilities to life.

That’s Africanacity. That’s Absa.