Laying the foundations in Cameroon – the gateway to Middle Africa

Middle Africa – comprising Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic and now South Sudan – is one of the most neglected regions of the world by many global brands.

Thanks to its sparse population, desert climate and frequent unrest, the region is often regarded as something of a no-go area for brands within an otherwise increasingly accessible and commercially dynamic continent.

However, those who dismiss the region wholesale may be missing a trick in Cameroon. Increasingly the region’s only coastal country is defying the stereotype and providing valuable opportunities for brands prepared to invest. In spite of economic challenges, an extended period of political stability has boosted the country’s fortunes and encouraged an increasingly dynamic consumer culture.

Brands capitalising on this are seeing the benefits. Laundry detergent Ariel recently entered the market and quickly gained wide visibility by adopting the right strategy. Large campaigns were rolled out across the country through road shows with brand ambassadors, which included free product trials. In addition, Point of Sale marketing materials were made available in almost every outlet in Cameroon and billboards of the brand were visible in almost every neighbourhood. However, too many others are still reluctant to allocate research and media budgets to the country, treating it as an afterthought if they operate there at all. In doing so, they often overlook the things that make Cameroon unique, each of which brings new ways to market more effectively.

1. Brush up on your French
Cameroon is one of the most developed and influential French-speaking markets in Africa, with 70 percent of people speaking the language. This makes it an interesting prospect for companies that already market in French, and who understand the cultural nuances in Francophone countries. Cameroon’s French-speaking consumers tend to be wealthier, with higher purchase power and more refined tastes. They are more likely to opt for fresh products, while English-
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speaking people consume more long-life products, such as Nido powdered milk.

Understanding these subtleties may explain why Viettel, headquartered in fellow Francophone country, Vietnam, has invested so heavily in French Africa, and is due to become Cameroon’s third licenced mobile operator early this year.

2. Look beyond traditional gender assumptions
Brands expanding into Cameroon should be wary of assuming that Cameroon mirrors its neighbours in terms of social values – particularly where women are concerned. For example, it is socially acceptable for women to drink alcohol in public – contrasting strongly with countries such as Nigeria and Uganda, where such behaviour would be unacceptable. In Cameroon it is a huge part of the culture and has cemented the popularity of brands like Guinness and Heineken. Brands wanting to succeed in this category should focus on accessible, gender-neutral messaging – an approach which has helped local brewing company Brasseries du Cameroun punch above its weight compared with international rivals, with engaging adverts for brand such as Castel Beer and Mützig.

3. Tap into international aspirations
Whilst many African markets show a strong preference for local products and traditions, Cameroon is highly receptive to international brands. People of all ages invariably aspire to own foreign brands rather than domestic ones in almost every sector – from cars and electronics to fashion and beauty. The only exception is food products: traditional fare still dominates the dinner tables of Cameroon. It is not only the supermarket shelves and showrooms that reflect this international outlook: young people in Cameroon are increasingly going to Europe and the US for higher education and career opportunities – not only among the country’s elite, but in fields such as accounting and secretarial work.

4. Make Cameroon a hub for the wider region
Unfortunately, other countries in Middle Africa face a rather less optimistic future than Cameroon, as the recent escalation of violence in South Sudan testifies. A market such as the Central African Republic is still a highly risky place to run a business, and it is likely to be some time before global brands consider basing themselves there. However, the fact remains that over 44,000 consumers live and work in Middle Africa – and competition to serve their needs is scarce.

Much of our work in Cameroon is focused on helping brands understand the wider region, and how daily essentials can be marketed in the right way to be accessible and affordable to these millions of people with limited income. While they are undoubtedly a low-income market, as a group they represent a significant source of revenue.

In short, Cameroon may be a tough landscape to do business in, but it is an increasingly attractive prospect for brands prepared to put in the effort. Small gestures towards local habits and customs can yield disproportionate rewards, paving the way for long-term stability. Companies considering a future in Cameroon should bear in mind that they are not only pursuing a share of the market as it stands, but laying the foundations for valuable relationships with consumers as the economy grows and prospers.