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What's in a number?

598, 16 and 200.... Mean anything to you? Unless you are a magician or a witch, I cannot imagine that these numbers mean anything to you. Don't you find it strange how numbers on their own mean very little to us. Yet we spend so much time using numbers to justify things. Some numbers like #1, maybe are, exempt (slightly) from this statement for obvious reasons. The point we are getting to, however, is that numbers on their own are quite pointless, actually. Clearly what matters most is the story that surrounds the numbers. It is the context that surrounds the numbers that gives them meaning.

Similarly, brand names would mean nothing if there was no story behind the names and icons. A tick on the side of a shoe would just be that. However, add the words "Just do it", a high energy television commercial (TVC) with a muscular man running up a mountain road in that tank top, and you have one of the greatest brands in history: Nike. What would an old white bearded man from Kentucky mean to us if he did not promise that his chicken was "Finger lickin' Good?" Without his brand story he would just look like a man from the deep South, a man that we in Africa would find totally irrelevant in our daily lives... The chicken saves him then! Or rather, the brand story does.

Looking back at those numbers that I started with, Let me give you some context and you will suddenly find that those three numbers have powerful meanings too. We just need to find out what story they represent. And so: 598 are the number of years since a Pope from the Catholic Church last retired; 16 are the number of teams that just played in the Africa Cup of Nations and; 200million is the number of users on LinkedIn today.

Suddenly, these simple numbers 598, 16 and 200 become powerful facts that support a powerful story. It is important to point out that words and numbers work together. As without the numbers the words cannot be quantified. Phrases like "a lot" and "often" just do not give an observer a feel of the significance of an issue without numbers. One is left with more questions than answers if you just use words to describe topics... what is "a lot"? What would be a little? In order to get around

this, wordsmiths would be hard pressed to get quantity or size across in a globally uniform manner. This symbiotic relationship between numbers and words is comparable to brands and products. The Brands can be likened to the words that coat a product to bring it to life.

So let's try it with Brands: Chicken Tonight, Tavern or KayTees are all eateries that command a significant following in their respective cities. Depending on where you are reading this column, you might have some knowledge of the deeper meaning of these words in those markets. However, if you have never heard of these brands you would like to hear descriptions like "KayTees is one of Botswana's leading fast food joints. It has historically been the one stop travellers will make on a trip up the A1. KayTees is ranked in the top ten local brands of Botswana, and is most famous for its Tswana chicken, fat cakes and chips".

Even without sharing with you KayTees' logo, you as the reader have now shaped an opinion on this Brand simply from the words and numbers provided. Surely this is proof that a logo is just a badge to draw consumers' attention to your brand. Your Brand is thus NOT your logo but the story you carry, supported by the facts and figures. Yes, this is further evidence that if you want to build your Brand, get yourself a Public Relations Practitioner to shape your story. At the end of the day, pretty pictures don't sell fat cakes... numbers do!

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