

NEDBANK IMC 2026

SHIFT HAPPENS™ — ARE YOU READY?

Conference White Paper



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Shift Happens.™ > Are you ready?

#ShiftHappens #NedbankIMC2026

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Researched and written by Red & Yellow.

INTRODUCTION BY DAWN ROWLANDS

Enough with potential.

Dear Marketer,

Enough with potential.

For decades, Africa has been described as a continent of potential: potential investors, consumers, growth and opportunity. At some point, however, potential stops being a compliment and becomes a question. Why is a continent rich in talent, creativity, resources and ambition still so often discussed in terms of what it could become, rather than what it has already built?

That question sits behind many of the conversations captured in this white paper.

The 2026 Nedbank IMC was not simply about anticipating change. It examined the responsibility marketers have to shape it. Across the day, speakers explored the global ambition of African brands, the role of culture in creating connection, the tension between artificial and human intelligence, the importance of self-knowledge in leadership, and the growing power of consumers to research, compare and decide for themselves.

Running through these conversations was the importance of community: the people, businesses, technologies and cultures that influence how marketing creates value.

For African marketers, the opportunity is not simply to adapt to models, platforms and ideas developed elsewhere. It is to build brands, intellectual property and commercial value rooted in African insight and capable of competing globally.

Ownership matters. That includes ownership of our ideas and technology, but also of our narratives, customer relationships and business outcomes. Marketing cannot sit on the sidelines of this change. Marketing is Business®.

The future is already being built. The question is how much of it will be shaped here, by people who understand this continent and are prepared to take responsibility for what comes next.

Dawn Rowlands
CEO, dentsu Africa



NEDBANK IMC 2026

Introduction

The theme for the 2026 Nedbank IMC was Shift Happens™. Are you ready?

Dale Hefer, Founder and CEO of the Nedbank IMC, welcomed almost 4,000 delegates from 28 countries, with over 2,500 attending in person and the balance online. She acknowledged all stakeholders and set the stage for the day's sessions.

Across the conference, we found that brands depend on the communities they serve, the employees who deliver their promises and teams who understand consumer needs.

We describe this as **The Community Shift:** these communities are increasingly shaping brand meaning, questioning brand claims and influencing how businesses respond. The five themes explore this through African brands' global ambitions,

cultural storytelling, human-AI collaboration, employee empowerment and consumer choice. Together, they show why understanding these relationships matters commercially: it helps marketers make better decisions, build trust and turn insight into business value.

According to Hefer,

“Communities that shape growth, share learning and help us navigate are the communities that hold greater return on investment.”

Donovan Goliath, comedian and content creator, hosted the conference.

Dr Gcina Mhlophe, author and storyteller, opened with song and storytelling, welcoming delegates through her reflections on belonging and ancestral connection.

Mhlophe encouraged delegates to reignite their creative energy and carry it into the stories, ideas and brands they share with the world.



Dale Hefer, opening the 2026 Nedbank IMC.

NEDBANK IMC 2026

Themes

1 Local Roots, Global Ambition.

The rise of African brands.

2 Culture as Conversation.

Folklore, storytelling, and music in marketing.

3 The AI Paradox.

Using machines to strengthen human connection.

Dr Gcina Mhlophe, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.



4 The Inner Shift.

Understanding ourselves to lead with purpose.

5 The Consumer is the CEO.

The shift to self-directed research and choice.

Local Roots, Global Ambition

THE RISE OF AFRICAN BRANDS

In a world driven by Western consumption, the shift toward honouring African roots became a core theme of the conference. Marketers and business leaders must think flexibly and apply cultural distinctions to their strategies to compete globally.

“What happens when globalisation, global competition and digitally empowered consumers are in a room?”

CMOs need to ‘shift’ their traditional mode of thinking and move towards a realistic, sustainable brand-client alignment. Dr Thebe Ikalafeng, Founder and Chairman of Brand Africa and Chancellor of Sol Plaatje University, presented what the present-day CMO should do to build forward-thinking, globally connected brands. Ikalafeng emphasised that “trust value must be at an all-time high” as the world changes and consumers are already empowered to assess brands independently. Marc de Swaan Arons of the Institute for Real Growth supported this and shared that brands are “a bundle of promises.

People need to trust in it.” Consumers now demand that brands validate their claims, rather than merely pushing a narrative.

According to Ikalafeng, this signals the potential end of brands owning their narratives, with artificial intelligence increasingly taking over design, research and storytelling. Alongside the conversation about AI, Ikalafeng noted rising unemployment in Africa and asked marketers a critical question: “Where are the African brands that drive global ambition?” Dawn Rowlands, CEO of dentsu Africa, echoed this sentiment, saying, “If we do not control our own data and build our own systems, we will lose our sovereignty, which will impact our culture.”

Ikalafeng encouraged marketers to remain persistent toward their goals and be the architect of anticipation. Design should not only live on billboards, posters and websites but also in the strategic and thoughtful craft of marketing. Ikalafeng outlined that “a great marketer travels into the future so that when

the customer arrives, they find them waiting”. He emphasised that a future-ready marketer is a steward of trust, Afrocentric in approach and anticipates the future with bold ideas. In closing, Ikalafeng presented Brand Africa’s CMO Top 100 list.

The Community Shift begins with understanding what matters locally.

The globally minded marketer often sees Western ideas as attractive; however, Suhayl Limbada, Chief Marketing Officer at KFC India, posed a pivotal question: “Why make global work when you can make work that only South Africa can make?” Limbada asked marketers to “think local” for international impact. He urged brands to invest in culture and nurture local talent. Limbada shared insights from System 1 research, which found that emotional connection is more impactful than rational advertising.

Local Roots, Global Ambition

THE RISE OF AFRICAN BRANDS CONTINUED

Culture is valuable in crafting creative, competitive work. Limbada shared lessons on **the value of local cultural understanding**:

1. People must get comfortable with being uncomfortable. To gain the trust of local people, you need to understand the cultural insights they hold.
2. Campaigns can have a focused target market, but how they are executed can give access to more target markets. Thus, find the local in the universal.
3. The execution of an idea without permission can land one with “time in the principal’s office...that’s the necessary price to do cool work.” It’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.
4. As a CMO, one needs to be prepared to get fired. Limbada advocated for more leaders to encourage their teams to take risks: “You have to be willing to go where nobody else is willing to go.”

Limbada invited marketers to “create the conditions for courage” and outlined that human capital is critical for business success and failure must be normalised. He advised businesses to “hire brilliant people, then get out of the way.”

Limbada appealed to creatives to unapologetically “claim your seat at the table.” Creative ideas must be believed in and protected, especially when they challenge corporate comfort.

In closing, Limbada called on strategists and creatives to “play with South African culture and make work that only South Africa can make.”

Suhayl Limbada, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.



THEME ONE

Summary

We found that competing with global brands comes down to aligning with local culture.

Marketers should shift from marketing to communities to nurturing brands with cultural understanding.

The Shift in Five Points

1. Local relevance can be a source of global advantage.
2. Agencies must uphold the African voice and preserve it in the global market.
3. CMOs should build local culture into their strategies to deliver relevant communication and help their companies compete as international brands.
4. Marketers build brand connections by meeting consumers where they are.
5. Trust is the currency: consumers can check every claim, so brands must back what they say with what they do.



Marc de Swaan Arons, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

What This Means for Marketers

CMOs need to turn what they learn from communities into actionable consumer insights. Check whether local relevance is lifting trust and sales, and back the ideas that work with money and local talent.

Culture as Conversation

FOLKLORE, STORYTELLING, AND MUSIC IN MARKETING

Culture shapes how we tell, understand, and remember stories. Through music, real-world experiences, distinctive language and creative bravery, the conference explored how brands can communicate in ways that resonate with audiences. These community relationships give stories meaning and build shared experiences over time.

Marketers understand that cultural interpretation becomes valuable when they understand audiences. Tarryn Knight, Head of Marketing at Ford, shared that “cultural meaning doesn’t happen overnight; it is accumulated.” She also said that the “automotive industry is experiencing the most change” and that a resilient marketer must be able to consider, “What do people value?” Humanity should be amplified, not ignored, because sustainable relationships build sustainable businesses.

Knight said that behind each Ford brand are people responsible for sustaining the brand’s reputation, craftsmanship and longevity. “Behind a brand are the

contractors, the memories, the constants...” People remain the constants, ensuring the brand remains viable for generations to come.

“A creative idea and a monster have the same job. They both have to get the audience’s attention and make them feel something in seconds,”

said Fran Luckin, Co-Chief Creative Officer at Boundless, who, together with Roanna Williams, Co-Chief Creative Officer and Co-Founder at Boundless, showed creative bravery as a gateway to storytelling in advertising.

In their creative attire, they showed delegates how cinema creativity mirrored advertising creativity.

They shared five lessons on creative courage:

1. Constraint is a gift. When your resources break, force your imagination to get braver. Half of great creativity is turning a limitation into a gift: Optimise the tools you have to create impactful work.
2. Bring in an outside voice. Explore influences from outside the category. Make the idea simple. Not the

execution safe: There is value in simplified ideas coupled with brave executions.

3. Trust your audience’s stomach. Don’t smooth off the strangeness. A powerful

human truth can anchor even the wildest idea: Give audiences room to connect with your storytelling.

4. Don’t wait for permission or technology. Invent it as you go. Pioneers make the tools: Make the adaptations that keep marketers at the forefront of creative ideas.

5. Brave creativity uses metaphor inventory to say what’s hard to put into words. Protect the thing that makes the ideas enormous: Marketers need to protect their ideas through critique and maintain the original spark behind the why.

Culture as Conversation

FOLKLORE, STORYTELLING, AND MUSIC IN MARKETING CONTINUED

According to Luckin, “Sometimes the biggest monster is the fear inside of us,” and films and brands have to overcome it to make great work. “Every brave idea looks like a little monster before it becomes a hero.” Creatives must protect the story they are creating.

Storytelling doesn’t need to be perfect. In fact, “perfectly acceptable is not acceptable,” according to Tiffany Markman, communication expert, speaker and Founder of Tiffany Markman Writing & Training (TMWT). Behind every story shared with our audiences is an opportunity to immerse them in the five senses. This matters for marketers. As she put it, “Business communication is just communication, and all communication is human communication.”

Markman stated that for business communication to be ‘human’, it must be specific, detailed, unexpected, sticky, flawed and occasionally nonsensical. Marketers should bring character into their writing and brand communication. As AI makes writing “beige”, Markman urged all marketers to

be enthusiastically weird in their communication, to “find the sentence that only you could have written” and let it be “specifically odd”. Music is a form of communication that connects community members through the unique memories it taps into. Siya Metane (Slikour), Founder of SlikourOnLife, created a vibrant Amapiano song, The Sound of the Shift, using sound bites captured throughout the day.

He brought speakers’ words together through music. Rarely is deep consideration given to “What triggers social-first behaviour, and music plays a huge part in that.” In the final stages of crafting his piece, he tapped into the emotional connections that delegates held toward African culture. He brought the delegates back to a marketing opportunity: “Why isn’t music considered a social-first strategy?”



Tarryn Knight, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.



Tiffany Markman, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

THEME TWO

Summary

Marketers need to embed communication plans in culture, shifting away from the easy output of AI-generated content. Brands create stronger stories when they take part in culture rather than watch it from a distance.

The Shift in Five Points

1. Brands anchored in local culture can connect deeply with the community and contribute to the local culture, becoming part of the communal story.
2. Cultural context enriches creativity and must be protected through the creative process.
3. Marketers must keep pursuing cultural understanding to sustain relevance.
4. AI must not be allowed to steal the unique human voice, and oddity may be a key distinguisher from technological content.
5. When it feels relatable on a human level, it allows storytelling to touch consumers' hearts.



Khensani Nobanda, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

What This Means for Marketers

Bring cultural voices into the process early, not only when the campaign is being executed. Creatives must shift from observing communities to participating in them.

Brief for specific, sensory detail, push back on generic AI-written copy, and test the work with the communities it is meant to speak to.

The AI Paradox

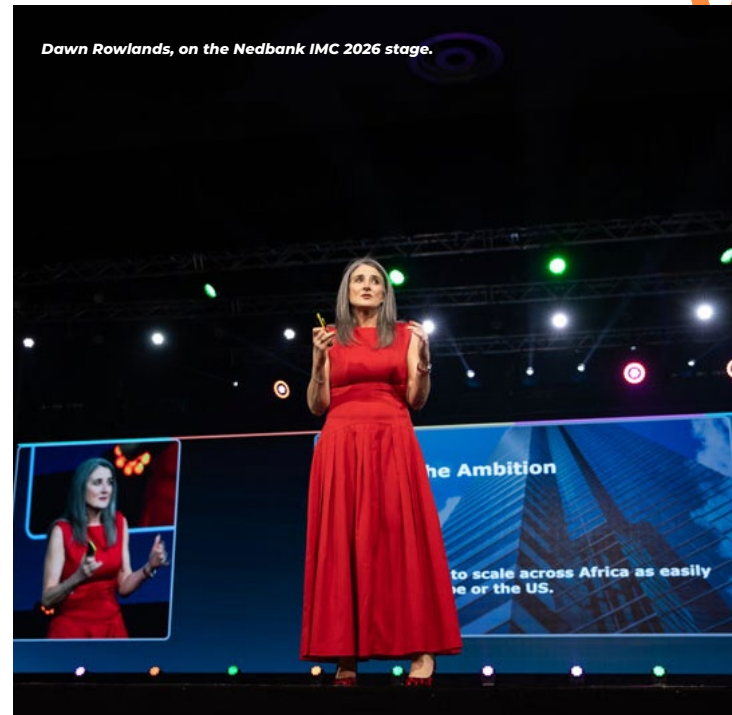
USING MACHINES TO STRENGTHEN HUMAN CONNECTION

Technology changes how brands understand and respond to their communities. The conference explored how AI can support human needs and help marketers turn that understanding into business value.

At this year's conference, Dawn Rowlands unpacked the challenges of building businesses in Africa and shared AI-driven insights. Rowlands advocated for businesses to be more determined and ambitious, and she shared the formula dentsu has created to combat this, built around five ambitions:

1. Talent: Businesses need to scale fast on AI, showing evidence of "growth and momentum".
2. Data: African businesses must build digital identities and keep greater control of their own data and systems.
3. Scale: Intracontinental trade faces numerous scaling challenges. Businesses must collectively lobby to build a market with "homogeneous systems" where money can move easily, and IPs can be shared across borders.
4. Capital & IP: Rowlands encouraged delegates to shift their confidence toward African skills. Africa has world-class talent, enabling Africans to export their IP instead of relying on international technological imports. Businesses must shift toward creating stories that are easy to connect with and attract global investment.
5. Speed: Pilot it and try. Africa needs to become a space where innovations are piloted, knowledge is gained, and local projects are generated to build local technology.

In closing, Rowlands urged marketers to adopt a global mindset. She reminded CMOs that supporting creative bravery, working together to influence policy, and removing barriers would help turn our ambition into the future "we hope to leave for our children."



The AI Paradox

USING MACHINES TO STRENGTHEN HUMAN CONNECTION CONTINUED

Marc de Swaan Arons, Founder of the Institute for Real Growth (IRG) in the United States, took the stage to share insights on marketing's impact in the new era. In this age of AI, he said, businesses must ask themselves, "What are the different stakeholders expecting from us?" A shift is underway, and businesses must recognise that trust is the currency of stakeholder relationships.

"People are just tired of all the transformations," he added.

Employee worries about job security and longevity negatively affect the quality of marketing output. To help address this, de Swaan Arons presented four Marketing Impact Areas:

- 1. Window on the road:** marketers must provide holistic information from marketplace research that allows businesses to be strategically competitive.
- 2. North Star:** Marketers can steer and clarify the business vision to ease employee anxiety.
- 3. The Hybrid Capability:** Businesses need to find their hybrid capability to allow for AI collaboration, while keeping a safe psychological space for consumers.

4. Commercial Performance: Marketing output needs to show the value being generated for stakeholders, as trust is a high-value metric.

de Swaan Arons believes that the most competitive companies are those where marketing strategy is closely aligned to corporate strategy. "When the marketer takes a step back and thinks about all of the stakeholders, it actually helps the company be a better place for society."

Kabelo Makwane, Country Director at Google South Africa, challenged marketers to link AI adoption to their business outcomes. Citing research from Google's CMO Labs, he pointed to the gap between marketers using AI and the far fewer organisations that had embedded it for competitive advantage. "AI moves in dog years while human beings are quite pedestrian,"

Makwane said, highlighting how established habits and legacy infrastructure can slow transformation.

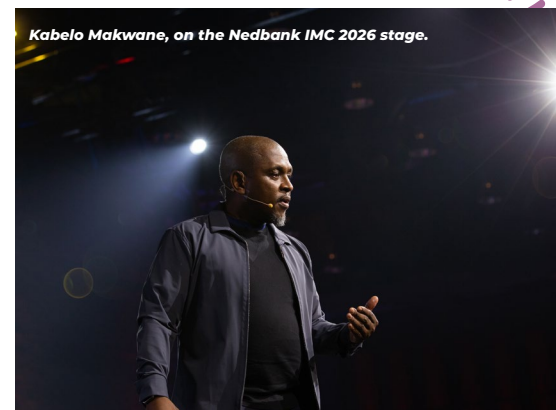
Consumer behaviour is also changing: consumers are moving faster, and their journeys are concentrated online, spanning searching, streaming, scrolling and shopping, with AI agents increasingly acting on their behalf.

According to Makwane, this shift is the "agentification of marketing".

Marketers must shorten cycles of creative development, measurement, and optimisation. First-party data and AI tools can help teams respond to consumer signals, stretch budgets and deliver more personalised messaging. Makwane cautioned that human oversight should not become a bottleneck. "You don't need an AI strategy. What we advocate for is for AI to run your strategy," Makwane said.

His closing challenge brought the shift back to organisational mindset: build capability, question established approaches and use AI to turn business goals into outcomes.

Marketing is Business®, and understanding how consumers and marketers will work with AI belongs in corporate planning.



Kabelo Makwane, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

The AI Paradox

USING MACHINES TO STRENGTHEN HUMAN CONNECTION CONTINUED

Tahaab Rais, Group Chief Strategy Officer and Film Director, Publicis Groupe (MENAT), recognised the rapid growth of AI and advised marketers and agencies to avoid simply chasing technological trends and focus on connecting with people. Rais questioned whether businesses truly understand the consumer and the human insights in the market. Archetypes can simplify AI, quicken team output, magnify the solutions generated, and provide clarity in the ecosystem of AI.

Rais shared eight archetypes developed to combine AI technology with human psychology:

1. The Imagineer fills gaps for businesses to build what consumers have only ever imagined. Companies that have used it have “augmented” the roles of designers to meet the needs of their customers.

2. The Multiplier maintains and magnifies human input through its tools, freeing people from limitations.

3. The Storyweaver uses data to shape narratives, allowing marketers to shift from crafting “mass storytelling” to personalised storytelling.

4. The Synthesiser turns data gathering into analytics, helping people move from “information overload” to clearer choices.

5. The Automagician amplifies marketing, especially the in-store shopper experience. It anticipates and addresses needs and reduces the “effort” required from users.

6. The Companion is a tool that predicts and understands human emotions and fluctuations in varying scenarios. It’s taken us from automation to emotionally acclimated intelligence.

7. The Predictor gives AI a grander role: providing humans with certainty. It has shifted tools from reactive to anticipatory, reducing uncertainty and giving people greater security and agency.

8. The Personaliser has shifted communication strategy from engaging with many to establishing individual experiences, which has moved people to feeling “seen and invited”.

Rais asked,

“What if a companion is actually there, that feels more human than actual humans?”



Tahaab Rais, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

The AI Paradox

USING MACHINES TO STRENGTHEN HUMAN CONNECTION CONTINUED



AI can give people time back by easing time-consuming tasks. In real time, Milan Naran, Strategic Account Executive at Google, “synthesised” AI data to generate practical resources.

He shared a digitally accessible recap of the entire conference on Google Cloud using Google AI tools. According to Naran, “AI is able to synthesise data a lot faster than most humans can.”

During the conference, Google AI tools worked behind the scenes, transcribing speaker highlights into podcasts and infographics.



This demonstrated Naran’s central message:

“The key is to see AI as a [collaborative] tool and not as a replacement for people.”

Naran highlighted benefits for marketers, noting that Google AI Studio lets you build applications through natural language, and NotebookLM helps businesses research and target audiences.

Jarred Cinman, CEO of VML, gave delegates the advertising spin on how AI is affecting businesses and agencies. He asked delegates to consider where marketing currently stands in relation to AI. Cinman described how a creative process can be completed in a single day when partnering with AI agents. His demonstration showed that AI agents can deliver faster and more efficiently than human creatives, freeing the creative director to focus on other activities. During the

process, the creative director “wonders if the client could have done this without her.” Cinman highlighted the stark reality of job risks from AI integration that marketers and creatives may face. Cinman shared three truths that made his story’s realities feasible: everything described is possible in the current market; the impact on jobs is apocalyptic; and nothing stops clients from insourcing to reduce costs.

According to Cinman, AI businesses are advancing their technologies to build a world reliant on them. “There is still time to question this outcome ...to fight to preserve the importance of human creativity...2026 will be looked back on as the last moment when we could have changed our approach.” Cinman called on clients to consider their role in the development he described. He asked that they think “about the decisions they are making that are either going to shepherd that in or challenge it.”

THEME THREE

Summary

Businesses should invest in local AI development. Marketers need to use AI to build local strategies that resonate with African consumers, while keeping human judgement at the centre.

The Shift in Five Points

- 1.** Businesses must nurture local talent with AI skills to scale more easily.
- 2.** AI must support human capabilities for both mechanical tasks and emotional marketing.
- 3.** CMOs should invest in upskilling marketing teams to optimise AI tools.
- 4.** Executives should shape AI decisions with people in mind to limit the risk of AI replacing human jobs.
- 5.** The industry must recognise AI's impact on human employability and collectively safeguard people's place in it.

What This Means for Marketers

Start with a small number of real business or customer problems. CMOs need to develop hybrid models that sustain competitiveness in an AI-shaped market while preserving the human element, so decide where human judgement has to stay and who is accountable. Measure what changes for customers, employees and the work itself, not only the time and money saved.



The Inner Shift

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES TO LEAD WITH PURPOSE

People drive corporate success, so how can businesses prioritise a human-centred, community-based approach? As employees push to stay in tune with ever-adapting marketing tools and meet the bottom line, is team wellbeing on the corporate agenda?

“When a shift happens, it’s about how you respond to those shifts,” said Conn Bertish, the Founder of The Creative Resiliency Group. A brand’s resilience and success are rooted in the human capital that drives it. He believes that “happy purposeful humans are harder to kill,” and they make “happy resilient businesses hard to kill.” Bertish reframed challenges as opportunities for people to play a role in their companies and communities.

Employee value extends to brand recognition and community impact. Marketers were urged to lead creatively with purpose, grounded in clear internal awareness. Understanding purpose “breeds resilience and improves performance and culture”.

Bertish empowers employees to be part of something bigger than themselves: the business they invest

their skills and time in. Collaborating with top South African brands, including Discovery and Shoprite, Bertish has played a key part in empowering their workforces. Bertish invited delegates to take part in this movement to make

“South Africa harder to kill by empowering our people and employees to become happy and healthy and harder to kill.”

Sheldon Tatchell, CEO and Founder of Legends Corporation, persisted through challenges to build an expanding, community-driven barber brand. Tatchell was this year’s inspirational speaker. He developed barber skills at 14 years old, which became a vehicle for opportunity, financial freedom, and community impact.

An early understanding of the value of combining competitive analysis, community culture, and customer relationships allowed Tatchell to become a contender in his local barber industry. Though his first store closed, Legends Barber relaunched in 2014. In 2019, it launched its first franchise with Riky Rick. Legends Barber has expanded to more than 80 stores across five African countries. Its product range has also expanded to

Clicks, Dis-Chem and SPAR retail stores.

Legends Barber was a community-inspired brand, created to honour the older residents, “the legends”, in the community.

Tatchell gives back by creating opportunities for young barbers, including free haircuts, donating a pack of clippers to a roadside barber for every 10 clippers sold, and providing financial support to his township community.

Finally, Tatchell explained the Legends Barber training academy, which equips young people with barbering skills to improve their economic circumstances. “We take boys and girls in our communities, and we upskill them. We give them a skill to become good men and women of our society.”



Sheldon Tatchell, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

The Inner Shift

UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES TO LEAD WITH PURPOSE CONTINUED

Meaningful community contribution requires mastery of self. Cultural icon and pastor Kabelo Mabalane delivered the conference's closing speech, underscoring the relevance of context and perspective as he advocated for self-mastery.

Mabalane delved into the need to focus on the self and, as people pursue life's ventures, rest is non-negotiable. Mabalane stated that "Rest and nurturing are not rewards for performance; they are prerequisites." Reconciliation with history and past experiences is necessary because it shapes how people engage with the present, and it requires an honest, personal inventory.

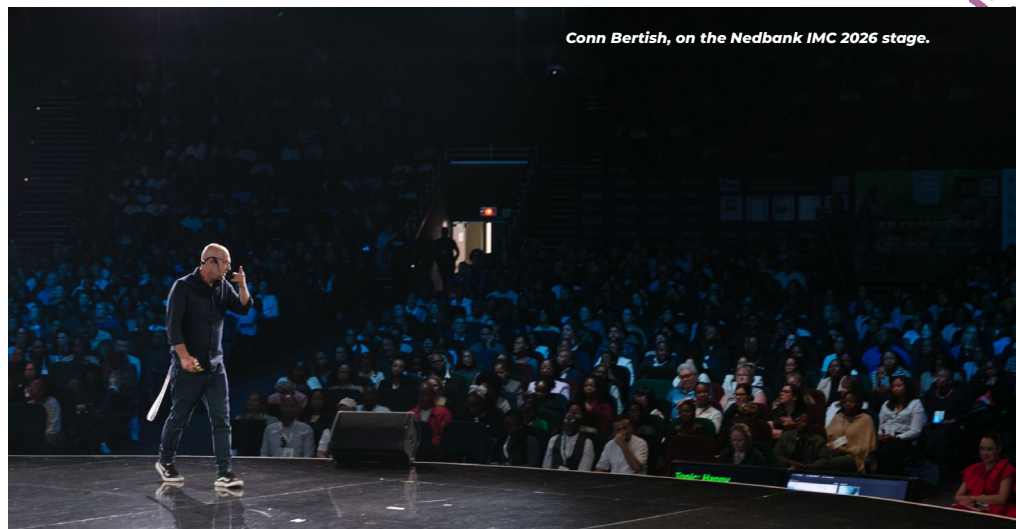
Mabalane believes three factors make a person: spirit, soul and body. For people to function at their best, all three need to be fed. The body needs "movement, nourishment and recovery".

Rea Leopeng, wellness expert and yoga instructor, led a physical movement session. She called the delegates to "notice the shift...created through movement."

To safeguard the mind and soul, Mabalane advised careful review of content consumption. He grounded his spirit in his religious beliefs and concluded his talk by giving the delegates permission to be unreasonable. This is based on a quote from George Bernard Shaw: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world, but the unreasonable man persists in adapting the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."



Sheldon Tatchell, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.



Conn Bertish, on the Nedbank IMC 2026 stage.

THEME FOUR

Summary

Marketing is aimed both out of the business and into it, with employee empowerment, personal internal review and community connection helping sustain the brand.

The Shift in Five Points

1. Employee empowerment needs renewed attention.
2. Internal investment can reshape a brand.
3. Community connection helps sustain brands.
4. Rest and recovery are prerequisites for performance, not rewards for it. Personal reflection and wellbeing affect employee output.
5. People management must evolve to make room for personal care.



What This Means for Marketers

Marketers need to contribute to corporate culture by supporting employee wellbeing. Treat the internal brand as seriously as the external one: what employees experience should match what customers are promised.

Include wellbeing and learning when you measure marketing effectiveness.

The Consumer is the CEO

THE SHIFT TO SELF-DIRECTED RESEARCH AND CHOICE

Younger generations demand deeper brand authenticity. Brands must assess how well their communication aligns with their offerings. Failing to do so risks compromising trust, since audiences now rely on themselves to find information. Consumers have shifted from simply believing brand communication to quickly scrutinising and judging brands.

Gugu Mthembu, Chief Marketing Officer at Telkom, spoke with Desmond Koolen, Gen Alpha influencer, and Marko Stavrou, Founder of Genlink, to share marketing perspectives through their generational lens. The panellists shared diverse insights on attention, brand trust, and guidance for delegates in gaining a clearer understanding of their generations.

Koolen said that “YouTube and Fortnite” keep him glued to the screen, while Stavrou cited Anthropic’s Claude as his preferred app. Koolen described YouTube as a source of educational information, humorous video content, and rugby highlights, while Stavrou explained that

“Claude gives Gen Z and Gen Alpha access to global information.” Stavrou said businesses should ensure their brands are accessible through AI.

Mthembu asked Stavrou what Gen Z expects from brands today that may differ from previous generations. Stavrou underscored how technology has shaped his generation. He said, “If you are not posting between 10 and 15 times a day, you are losing a major part of our generation.”

Businesses need to be more willing to take risks to capture audiences’ attention, especially when they want relevance and trust on a global scale.

Koolen, on the other hand, challenged another assumption about Gen Alphas and screen time. He explained that “We don’t always want to be in front of a screen; we want to play outside.” Isolation isn’t fun, so Gen Alphas create online communities to socialise with their peers.

Stavrou shared friction analysis audit findings that require brands to investigate

their reputations in the market and ask, “As a part of my authenticity, what do I stand for, and what does the market say I am?” Customer research, engagement and collaboration tighten the gap between brands and customers and increase authenticity.

Stavrou advised delegates to post across social media platforms, as the cohort under 35 is otherwise lost. Brands must invest in live social shopping, as people now want to use “customer-generated content”. Finally, Stavrou anticipates a trend over the next 10 years: brand collectables. Koolen advised ethical marketing and “age-appropriate” targeting for his generation.

Mthembu closed the discussion with the key learning that “Attention is won through relevance, but trust requires deeper connection.”



The Consumer is the CEO

THE SHIFT TO SELF-DIRECTED RESEARCH AND CHOICE CONTINUED

The human component is irreplaceable. Opeyemi Lawal, Chief Marketing Officer of NBA Africa and the Basketball Africa League, and Khensani Nobanda, Group Chief Marketing Officer of Nedbank, joined Dr Thebe Ikalafeng on stage to continue the CMO shift discussion. Lawal acknowledged the industry's shift towards automation but returned to the human element that fuels it.

Nobanda sees the expansion of responsibilities in the CMO role as a shift and an opportunity to assume a more senior position in a company, with corresponding expectations. Lawal added,

“Understanding the enterprise value is the job of everyone on the leadership team.”

Nobanda thinks marketers have given away their power by not actively cementing their presence in important rooms to ensure marketing representation.

She called on marketers to command their place in boardrooms and not “wait for permission”. Nobanda emphasised that CMOs must contribute at the executive level by demonstrating business value and uncovering growth opportunities: “You are not a marketer on EXCO; you happen to run marketing. You are part of the business team.”

Ikalafeng asked the panellists what shifts they have had to make in their roles as CMOs. Lawal asserted that she has had to understand the flux of generational preferences, gamification trends using AI and how local sports can

be translated for effective interaction with different audiences. She said, “As marketers, we constantly need to work at the speed of consumers and the speed of technology.”

Nobanda spoke on shifting toward releasing creativity to third parties.



The Nedbank IMC 2026 crowd.

The Consumer is the CEO

THE SHIFT TO SELF-DIRECTED RESEARCH AND CHOICE CONTINUED

Trust among corporates can unlock huge potential when CMOs recognise their internal limitations, collaborate with those who know more, and learn from them.

When asked how they intend to build trust, Lawal said they will safeguard their understanding of their consumer base. Nobanda shared that, as a bank, investing in the future now is what will drive sustainability.

Kagiso Mosina-Matlakala, a BCom marketing student at Red & Yellow Creative School of Business, explained that Gen Z consumers are not the only ones questioning brand authenticity.

According to Mosina-Matlakala, “questioning isn’t rebellion; it is adaptation; it is instinct; it is survival,” and that brand “authenticity is a claim, and consistency is the evidence.”

Mosina-Matlakala advised delegates to perform brand consistency audits and brand alignment reviews.

He urged marketers to note that, “In a generation that questions everything, trust isn’t built through what you say; it’s built through what survives scrutiny.”

The CMO Shift panel discussion: Khensani Nobanda, Opeyemi Lawal and Dr Thebe Ikalafeng at the Nedbank IMC 2026.



THEME FIVE

Summary

Consumers command the process, making consistency between brand promises and behaviour essential to trust.

The Shift in Five Points

1. Consumers have greater access to information and more opportunities to scrutinise brands.
2. Trust depends on consistency between brand communication and behaviour.
3. Marketing must keep pace with consumers and technology.
4. CMOs need to reclaim their place in executive decision-making and demonstrate business value.
5. Consumer research, engagement and collaboration help bridge the gap between consumer expectations and brand truth.



Dawn Rowlands and Mongezi Mtati, on-site podcast for The Lead Creative.

What This Means for Marketers

Marketers must use customer research and brand consistency audits to bridge gaps with consumers. Marketers must back business value with concrete evidence to build consumer trust, and keep listening to the shifts happening among consumers so that brands are not left behind.

NEDBANK IMC 2026

Conclusion

This year, the Nedbank IMC brought together delegates to hear globally recognised marketers and businesspeople share their insights on the Community Shift. Corporate strategists, marketers and creatives were called to invest locally to compete globally.

Amid the turbulence of the African market, business leaders and CMOs gained insight into how AI can better understand people and processes and generate creative ideas. AI is putting jobs under pressure, and we must act now to safeguard human creativity. CMOs must remember their place at the executive table and fight for it. Consumers now have more control over what they believe about a brand, and a brand that says one thing and does another only widens the gap.

In closing, we echo Hefer's sentiment when she commended Africa for showing up. This was not just a celebration of showing up at a conference; it was a broader call to action to show up and compete with the rest of the world.

Together, the five shifts show how understanding communities can inform creative work, technology choices, employee support and consumer relationships. Marketers must turn that understanding into decisions that build trust, strengthen competitiveness and support growth – the commercial responsibility at the heart of

Marketing is Business®.

Donovan Goliath, opening the 2026 Nedbank IMC.



NEDBANK IMC 2026

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Conference White Paper



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Thank you.