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The *Authenticity* Imperative: What FMCG Brands Need From Marketing Talent in 2026

South Africa's senior marketing leaders have answered the big question. The future of FMCG marketing isn't louder or faster. It's something far more human - and it's completely rewriting who gets hired.

Insights by Tania Brooks, Senior Sourcing Specialist at Afrizan People Intelligence.

Through Tania's engagements with some of South Africa's most awarded CMOs and Marketing Directors, a clear pattern is emerging. One word is consistently surfacing in boardroom conversations: authenticity – and it is redefining what effective marketing, and therefore marketing talent, looks like.

When posed a simple question - "What does the future of marketing look like in South Africa?" - the expectation was detailed strategy frameworks and discussions around evolving tech stacks. Instead, the answer was far simpler - and far more difficult to execute. Authenticity is no longer a brand value. It is a commercial driver.

This article unpacks what that answer means for the brands building marketing teams in 2026.

01 - The Consumer Shift

Authenticity Isn't a Brand Value.
It's a *Growth Strategy*.

Today's consumers are more informed, more connected, and far more discerning. They are no longer passive recipients of marketing messages, they are active evaluators of brand behaviour. They want to understand: what a brand stands for, how it operates beyond marketing, and whether its actions align with its messaging, and they are making purchasing decisions accordingly.

97%

of consumers say authenticity is a key factor in deciding which brands to support

70%

of consumers are willing to pay a premium for brands they perceive as genuinely authentic

81%

of consumers have stopped supporting a brand they felt was no longer being genuine

Clutch Brand Authenticity Report 2026.

"My customers' mindset has shifted. They are asking themselves what brands are doing beyond marketing. They want to know how these brands are giving back - what initiatives they're involved in, how they're making a difference."

-CMO, Industry-Leading South African FMCG Brand

This isn't sentiment. It's commercial reality. 66% of consumers globally now say trust and authenticity matter more than product quality when choosing a brand. The implication for FMCG organisations is clear: **the brands winning in 2026 are not the loudest - they are the most believable.** That requires a fundamentally different kind of marketer to build and sustain.

02 - The AI Paradox

AI Is Everywhere.
Generic Is the Enemy.

Here's the central paradox of FMCG marketing in 2026: the tool that promises to make everything faster and cheaper is also the tool making consumers hunger for something undeniably human. As AI-generated content floods every channel, audiences have become acutely sensitive to what feels real versus what feels manufactured.

Consumers demand greater control over their experiences and expect brands to deliver personalised value at every touchpoint. Scale alone no longer guarantees advantage. **The smartest FMCG marketers understand this isn't an either/or conversation.** AI handles the mundane. Humans handle the meaningful.

The marketing leaders getting it right aren't asking "how do we use AI to replace our team?" They're asking "how do we use AI to free our best people to do the work only humans can do?" Marketers who leverage AI to eliminate time-consuming tasks are gaining real competitive edge — while redirecting that time toward building **genuine relationships with real audiences**. That is exactly the calibre of professional organisations should be hiring for right now.

73% of consumers want brands to be more entertaining - and entertainment requires human creativity. Generic AI-driven campaigns are already losing audience trust. The brands cutting through are those using AI as an accelerant for human thinking, not a substitute for it. The marketers who understand this distinction are the ones worth hiring.

03 - The Talent Shift Is Happening Rapidly

Your 2019 Job Description Won't Hire a **2026** Marketer.

This is where many FMCG businesses are beginning to feel the pressure. They are still hiring for yesterday's marketer; while the market has already moved on. The shift is not just about digital capability or data literacy. It is about something far more difficult to define - and far more valuable to get right: the ability to build, protect, and scale authentic brand connection.

Through her ongoing engagements within this portfolio, Tania Brooks is seeing a clear shift in what organisations are prioritising, and where they are struggling to secure the right talent. The market is no longer looking for specialists operating in silos. It is demanding marketers who can operate at the intersection of brand, data, culture, and commerce.

The modern FMCG marketer is no longer just a brand custodian. **They are:** commercially astute, data-literate, digitally fluent, culturally aware, and deeply human in how they connect with audiences. What was once a differentiator - analytics and digital capability - is now a baseline expectation. This shift is reflected globally, with World Federation of Advertisers (2026) highlighting that modern marketing capability now requires the integration of data, technology, and creativity within a single function. The roles being built across leading FMCG organisations reflect a new kind of marketer entirely:

- **Performance Brand Managers** who are able to balance brand narrative with real-time performance data
- **Creator Economy Leads** with a deep understanding of digital culture and evolving consumer behaviour
- **Loyalty & Data Strategists** who translate customer data into meaningful, personalised experiences
- **AI Marketing Specialists** who use technology to enhance - not replace - human connection

The most valuable professionals in the market today are those who can operate across all of these dimensions simultaneously without losing the authenticity that makes the brand believable. This combination is rare - and increasingly in demand.

04 - Final Thoughts

Hiring Needs To *Catch Up*

The greatest risk facing FMCG businesses today is the erosion of authenticity - driven by misaligned hiring and outdated role definitions. Organisations hiring for execution alone will struggle to earn trust. Those hiring for authenticity will drive growth. The marketer of 2026 already exists. They are simply not being hired fast enough - or correctly.


Building Your **2026** Marketing Team?

Tania Brooks partners with leading FMCG organisations to identify and secure marketing talent capable of delivering authentic, commercially effective brand growth. Her focus is simple: ensuring clients are hiring for where the market is going — and for what today's consumer actually values. In 2026, authenticity is not a soft metric. It is a hiring strategy.



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