

WORDS PETER MUIRURI



HOW TOP BUSINESSES WIN HEARTS,
NOT JUST WALLETS

In a distant land, a Kenyan family makes its way to an international airport for a flight back home. They tear up at the sight of a Kenya Airways plane with the unmistakable national colours on the tail. Inside the plane, a jingle plays. It is the airline's theme music, composed in 1993 by Mathew Peevers and encompasses Kenya's traditional musical instruments like the nyatiti (plucked bowl yoke lute) and a flute, both from the Luo community, and the African drum. Maasai chants and chirping birds combine to make the music a truly authentic Kenyan experience. The jingle will play again as the plane lands at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi.

"This is the spirit of Kenya," said Allan Kilavuka, Kenya Airways group managing director and CEO, in a past interview. "It is so emotional that some Kenyans who have been away for a long time told me they cried when the jingle played before their flight back home. Several attempts to change the jingle have failed."

In 2010, Safaricom, one of the most successful telcos in Africa, created an elaborate ensemble that traversed the length and breadth of Kenya – from the snowy peaks of Mount Kenya to the shores of the Indian Ocean and the

deserts of northern Kenya – to create one song, *Niko na Safaricom*. It was primarily an advert but ended up showcasing the country's vast repertoire of breathtaking geographical features. It remains one of the most iconic visual productions in Kenya.

The two pieces of music have a common thread; they showcase the power of branding in whipping up deep emotions that transcend primary commercial ideals. Through the jingles, logos, or catchphrases, top Kenyan brands such as Kenya Airways, Equity Bank, Safaricom or Kenya Commercial Bank, are not just companies but symbols of national and regional achievement that make people feel proud when the brands succeed globally.

In June 2025, Brand Finance, a brand valuation consultancy, named the above companies among the most valuable and strongest Kenyan brands in 2025. This is no mean achievement since Brand Finance tests 6000 of the world's biggest brands each year and publishes over 100 reports ranking brands across all sectors and countries. Safaricom was also

named the Most Admired Brand in Africa at the 2025 Annual Brand Africa Awards.

EVOKE CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The men and women leading brand visibility drives in these organisations say creating a brand that generates customer loyalty is a meticulous but rewarding endeavour

Kenya Airways has been in existence since 1977 with a major rebrand in 2005 resulting in a simpler, modernised and stylised 'KQ' on the tail ('K' enclosed in a 'Q'). The red and white livery signifies energy, passion, and national pride, while modern typography reinforces agility and global presence.



anchored in "resilience, authenticity, pan-African pride, and innovation".

"Your brand must resonate with Kenya's diverse cultural and regional identities," says Martin Gitonga, general manager, Digital, Brand and Marketing at Kenya Airways. "We celebrate Kenya's cultural richness by embedding regional narratives in our content, inflight experience with our cabin crew adorning the African head bead made by women in Kibera out of old *Msafiri* magazines, showcasing upcycling, sustainability and community empowerment."

Gitonga says KQ, as the national carrier is known globally, is more than an airline but a national ambassador and symbol of quality global connectivity and where a small gesture such as greeting a foreigner in Kiswahili or a large initiative like the Clean Skies for Tomorrow Sustainable Aviation Challenge must "evoke pride, reliability, and aspiration".

EMPOWER AND INSPIRE

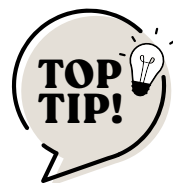
Beyond resonating with Kenya's diverse cultural and regional identities, top brands stem from deep understanding of customers' needs and a commitment to partner with them in solving their problems.

According to Dr James Mwangi, Equity group managing director and chief executive officer, a brand must create a sense of belonging or lose the most critical partner.

"Everyone, regardless of background, income level or geography, has a seat at the table. Equity is for all, the entrepreneur in Nairobi, the farmer or expatriate in Juba, the business lady in Kigali, the miner in DRC, the tour guide in Zanzibar or the teacher in Dar es Salaam," he says. ➔

Equity, the largest bank by customer base in the region began as a micro institution in 1984 with a mission to provide mortgage financing to low-income earners then excluded from mainstream banking. It transitioned into fully fledged commercial bank in 2004 and made banking accessible to the previously “unbankable” masses in the informal sector including small-scale farmers, roadside vegetable vendors (mama mbogas), small retailers, fishermen, and entrepreneurs in the informal sector, who currently manage their finances outside the physical branches.

Dr Mwangi imagines a time when banking felt like a distant dream for such Kenyans before the bank’s ‘Member Campaign’ tore down those barriers and proved that everyone deserved a place in the formal financial system. The brand campaign, he says, went beyond opening accounts but gave the mama mboga the same access to financial services as a civil servant, empowering her to grow her



Start with clarity. Define your purpose, tone, and promise. Listen and evolve by using feedback as your compass, not your critic. Seek to generate more brand affinity and appeal as a currency. Embed brand values internally since employees are your first brand ambassadors. Make sure your team can articulate your brand as clearly as your website does.

MARTIN GITONGA, KENYA AIRWAYS

business, secure her future, and provide for her family.

“We want people to feel empowered, valued, and inspired when they encounter the Equity brand. The bank is more than a financial institution but a catalyst for transformation. Those banking with us call themselves ‘members’ so we rarely address them as customers but as Equity members,” says Mwangi.

GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT

While getting to the top is easier, remaining at the helm requires constant re-evaluation of the steps that put you there in the first place. Top brands are like high performance athletes who are cognisant of younger, upcoming athletes ready to upset the apple cart. In today’s cutthroat competition, these companies must rethink their branding strategies as newer, more agile players keep knocking on their doors seeking a piece of the pie.

At Safaricom, Zizwe Awuor, the Brand and Marketing director, has the onerous task of ensuring one of East Africa’s most recognisable brands remains on top. With 50 million subscribers in Kenya, Safaricom is literally in people’s faces every minute of the day. Yet, Awuor says they can never become complacent but run the race to the best of their ability, counting on the

daily interaction with the subscribers to drive brand visibility.

In 2017, for example, Safaricom launched Chapa Dimba, a football tournament meant to nurture young talent from the entire country. The contest reeled in close to 100,000 footballers who played in 15,000 matches across the seasons. Nothing out of the ordinary, perhaps, until you get into the shoes of a father and his young daughter in Kisumu. The father accompanies his daughter to every match and is over the moon when the girl is named the Most Valuable Player. Excitedly, the father decides to take the tournament’s poster home and place it right in his living room as a constant reminder of his daughter’s prowess.

“That father became our ambassador,” says Awuor. “It is about the constant and direct engagement with Kenyans in their homes, at marketplaces, and social joints. The brand must understand the Kenyan from the time he wakes up till the end of the day. We are in a relationship with Kenyans and in a relationship, you don’t go quiet for long or the other person will disappear.”

Awuor has also learnt to use any feedback, good or bad, as a chance to spruce up the brand. She recalls the time when the company made the first AI advert at the Chapa Dimba contest in 2023. There were mixed feelings about the proposal. It was a leap of faith.

“That was the first AI ad in Africa and there was heavy scepticism. Agencies were worried that AI would take over their work. The TV ad worked well. The billboard ad? Not so well. We have since become more comfortable in deploying AI tools in the business just because we dared to dream,” says Awuor.



In 2019, **Equity Group** rebranded by creating a simple house graphic illustration and dropping type to just ‘EQUITY’ under the sketch. The bank’s belief in change and transformation led them to this moment. “From today, we retain the best from the past while introducing the best of the future,” said the bank during the rebranding.

REMAIN FRESH

While some top brands have only existed and made an impact within a relatively short period, others have endured the tough African terrain for decades while carrying people’s aspirations. For example, the KCB Group, the largest bank network in the region with 538 branches in seven countries, has been in operation for 129 years.

Since inception in 1896, KCB has waded through difficult waters, including two world wars, Kenya’s fight for independence, and pandemics such as the deadly Spanish flu in 1918. It has also seen times of plenty, helping families and businesses grow and thrive over the years in keeping up with brand purpose, “For people. For better”.

The bank draws insights from Bill Taylor’s Harvard Business Review article, *Brand Is Culture, Culture Is Brand*, and the three ‘C’ principles: Courageous (never accepting the status quo but acting with purpose and direction); Connected (going beyond banking to lifestyle and being connected to new ideas); and Closer (being in touch with customers and looking out for colleagues).

Rosalind Gichuru, KCB group director, Marketing and Communications, says the bank has adopted the use of inclusive language and imagery that reflects Kenya’s cultural and linguistic diversity. This includes using Kiswahili, Kenya’s street slang known as Sheng and key vernacular phrases in respective regional media channels.

She adds that any brand activations must consider regional preferences, events, music and storytelling styles.



Safaricom’s logo combines a dark green colour denoting the vibrant African nature with a red streak of red around the ‘S’ for agility and the brand’s ability to connect people. The Proxima Nova font was selected for legibility and its modern look.

Develop a memorable logo, consistent colour palette, typography and design style. Visuals should reflect your brand personality and values. Do not chase exposure without offering real value. Build a reputation through quality products or services and meaningful customer interactions.



ROSALIND GICHURU, KCB GROUP



KCB’s brand identity, including logos, colour palettes and typography help connect with the audience. The constant feature of KCB Group’s logo is the lion, a powerful symbol of a home-grown brand that resonates with Kenyans. The lion, being the king of the jungle, represents strength, resilience, courage and leadership – values the bank stands for.

“One-size-fits-all rarely works in Kenya,” she says. “We avoid content that could be seen as insensitive, stereotypical or dismissive. We involve locals in creative and review processes to catch issues early. Cultural missteps are hard to undo and prevention is better than apology.”

The bank is intentional with the platforms it chooses to showcase the brand and is synonymous

with the WRC Safari Rally, being the title sponsor for five consecutive years. “Our investment in sports strengthens our brand value and fosters deeper engagement with our customers. Every year we have been able to not only grow brand love through sponsorship of the rally, but also increase product awareness and uptake by tagging a product to the sponsorship,” says Gichuru. 🇰🇪



Know your customer more than anyone else. Do one thing and do it well. Keep building and never become complacent if you get to the top. Refresh over and over again.

ZIZWE AWUOR, SAFARICOM

