

Move aside, TV soapies: Welcome the WhatsApp drama series

 By Leigh Andrews

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We use WhatsApp to send snaps of ourselves trying on outfits in changing rooms to our loved ones and keep neighbours informed of suspicious goings-on. But watching a TV-style drama unfold on the messaging platform? That's new. Here's how Sanlam and agency King James got an innovative series rolling, on a phone near you.

There's no denying funeral plans are a tough sell. But they don't have to be, if you're willing to break the marketing formulae usually applied to these grudge purchases. Tendani Matshisevhe, Sanlam developing markets explains that Sanlam wanted to use a platform that's 'always on' to add an element of surprise to their communication on the matter. Hence the country's first-ever WhatsApp drama series, *Uk'shona Kwelanga*, meaning both 'The Sunset' and 'The Death of Langa'. Watch the trailer video below for a taste of what to expect:

It's certainly an effective strategy, as EWN's WhatsApp News Briefs project, which taps into today's trend of sending short, emoji-based messages EWN's digital prowess took home silver in the mobile publication category at the 2016 IAB Bookmarks. They explained at the time that people expect a certain type of communication in the mobile messaging realm as it's an informal, intimate space. Done right, it can create a new, interactive and enthusiastic community with which brands can form more 'personal' relationships than through traditional media.



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But as with any trailblazing campaign, it's not easy. Matshisevhe and Lesego Kotane, strategy partner at King James, explain their bold move of talking to customers about funeral plans, WhatsApp family group-style...

 **Talk us through why Sanlam went for a 'first ever' and not with an existing, tried-and-trusted campaign platform.**



Tendani Matshisevhe, Sanlam developing markets

At Sanlam, we're always looking for innovative ways in which to connect with the market we serve. Every year, we put up a new challenge to our advertising agency, King James, to look for ways that we can talk about our funeral message with a different approach that will create a real impact. We realised that WhatsApp is a channel our market uses and we wanted to connect with them on a platform they're already using frequently. We needed to ensure there was a natural fit with the drama and what we do – we offer funeral plans. So we used many insights to ensure that we were speaking to our market in an authentic manner.

The idea behind this campaign was to educate people in an experiential and accessible way. We wanted it to be as lifelike as possible – also showing the cultural issues of deciding where to lay a loved one to rest, observing important rituals and balancing the demands of the modern world and tradition.

📺 **Sounds like experiential content marketing at its best. Explain the agency brief and how this was brought to life.**

Kotane: The agency brief was to find a way to cut through the clutter around funeral plans and to try break the marketing formulas usually applied to this kind of product. An important element was to build a bigger association with funeral cover in the minds of Sanlam's audience – so while explaining products was important, we knew we needed to go beyond that. The idea came from thinking around relevant platforms for our audience, with WhatsApp one of the biggest digital platforms in SA, and also what people go through in planning a funeral. Many people will relate to following a family WhatsApp group as this is where a lot of the drama happens in real-life and so is appropriate to be used for this kind of fictional content.

📺 **Explain the intricacies of a campaign like this, which seamlessly incorporates text, photos, voice notes and video.**



Lesego Kotane, strategy partner at King James



A 'scene' from the drama.

[click to enlarge](#)

Kotane:

“ When you follow the campaign, it looks fairly simple – like following a normal WhatsApp group. But it's actually quite technically challenging to run, as WhatsApp isn't designed to be used for brand campaigns, so we had to figure out how to use existing features such as Broadcast Lists to tell a story. ”

Once we figured out the technical aspects it was a case of telling a good story on that platform.

Luckily we had help from one of SA's top scriptwriters, Bongi Ndaba, who collaborated on the plot and dialogue. The content was then created to look as authentic as possible and replicate how real people would behave on WhatsApp.

How were other media platforms used to promote the WhatsApp campaign?

Kotane: We wanted to promote this using the style of a normal TV series. So we've used a trailer across Facebook, used some billboards as well as SMS and radio as additional support to drive interaction with the campaign, along with media partnerships with the likes of *Daily Sun* and *City Press*.

Despite its recent launch, what has response from audiences been like so far?

Matshisevhe: The response has been awesome. On Sunday, 4 June, we were already sitting at over 800 subscribers – they joined the drama before it was launched, just after seeing the trailer and we have been getting a lot of enquiries

about the drama and why we chose WhatsApp as our channel.



Uk'shona Kwelanga

Kotane: Yes, so far it's been great – sign-ups are coming in faster than expected and we've had a lot of positive comments on social media. As the story takes place over a number of days, our audience spends quite a long time with it – probably 15 to 20 minutes, making it much more immersive than a typical 30-second TV spot. The drop-off rate is also very low, so we think people are getting hooked by the story.

Do you predict more campaigns of this nature in future?

Kotane: Well, in a way what we've done is go back to the roots of soap operas, which were literally branded content funded by soap brands – it's just the technology that has changed. But yes, I think if you want to reach audiences that are numb to normal advertising because they see so much of it we'll need to find creative ways to communicate with them. We've also learned a lot on other campaigns for Sanlam, such as *One Rand Man* and last year's *Conspicuous Savers* – both of those also had strong evolving narratives and an innovative use of social channels.



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The WhatsApp drama launched on 5 June and will be available until mid-July. Subscribers will receive a series of updates over seven days – the average time it takes to plan a funeral. To find out more, SMS your name and surname to 45603 or visit the [official website](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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