

Marketing Leadership and Innovation Award 2017 goes to KFC's Mike Middleton

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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It was announced at the Loerie Awards this evening that Mike Middleton, KFC Africa CMO, is the well-deserved recipient of this year's Marketing Leadership and Innovation Award, which serves to recognise his contribution to the marketing and advertising industry over the duration of his career.

He believes he was chosen for “pushing for breakthrough and innovative creativity that connects with consumers and drives positive business results. For fostering healthy partnerships with my agencies where we respect each other and like each other, but also feel safe to have difficult conversations all in the name of delivering breakthrough creative solutions.”

Middleton joined Unilever in 1996, followed by SABMiller in 2004, then Cadbury in 2006, after which he became the marketing director responsible for managing the European Biscuits Portfolio at Mondelez Europe before returning to join KFC Africa.

I interviewed Middleton to find out why he returned to South Africa, and what receiving this prestigious accolade means to him and for KFC.

■ **First of all, congratulations!**

Thank you. I must admit that I'm very honoured and humbled in receiving this award. There are so many great marketers in South Africa, so it's extra special that I've been recognised as marketer of the year.



Mike Middleton on stage accepting his award. Gallo Images/Alistair Ncoll

■ **Where would you say your specific areas of expertise lie?**

My specific areas of expertise are brand strategy and positioning, being customer-centric, having an ability to identify an excellent creative idea and building healthy relationships with my agency partners.

■ **What do you enjoy most about your career?**

The part of my career that I love the most is the creative process. I love working with creative minds. I find them eccentric, off beat, flamboyant whilst being stimulating, engaging and energising. I could happily live in a creative agency. In fact if I was going to be buried I would choose to be buried in a creative agency.

■ **Why did you decide to come back to SA?**

I love South Africa. It's such a diverse, interesting and passionate country. Everyone has an opinion about everything and isn't scared to express it. I'd rather live in our chaos than in grey monotony. Also, South Africa is a world in one and there aren't many countries where you get to market to so many diversely different consumer groups across all income levels. It's a marketing utopia.

■ **Comment on the client/agency relationship between KFC and Ogilvy.**

Ogilvy is an amazing agency. I've been fortunate enough to work with them for the duration of my career across the various brands that I've worked on. The KFC/Ogilvy partnership goes back probably 45 years and is based on mutual respect and healthy tension. We both want the best creative to connect with consumers and keep KFC relevant and constantly push each other to achieve just this.



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■ ***How does your experience at Cadbury compare to that at KFC? Do you apply the same formula or is it completely different?***

In many respects it's the same; putting consumers first and unlocking insights that ensure a long lasting love affair between brand and consumer. The big difference is that the quick service restaurant business is faster paced. You have direct access to stores and feedback is instant, so you don't wait a couple of months to determine whether a new product launch or consumer promotion is working; you will know within two or three weeks and can amend your plans accordingly. You also don't have two listing periods in the year that you are constantly working towards, so it is far more agile and in the moment, which keeps you on your toes!

■ ***How do you ensure KFC stands out in a saturated market of not just fast food, but chicken specialty restaurants, as last year both KFC and Nandos did well?***

By immersing ourselves in our consumers' world and understanding how best to connect with them, we've moved away from a 'push' strategy of bombarding them with messages hoping that if they hear a message often enough it will make them behave the way we want them to, to a 'pull' strategy where they choose to engage with us because we are interesting, relevant and distinctive.

I'm so lucky to have worked with such amazing people over the years, in both the creative agencies that I've worked with and the companies I've worked for, that have played a huge role in mentoring and developing me to become the marketer that I am today. I am eternally indebted to all these people for teaching me all that I know and for having a lot of patience along the way.

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