

"Lay on the ground game": Lavender Sempele and Mark Kaigwa of Nendo on balancing mass communication with an on-the-ground strategy

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little about your organization, the campaign, and how this came about?

Mark Kaigwa: I'm here with my colleague Lavender, the Client Success Manager on the Maisha Meds account and project within Nendo.

[Nendo](#) is an award-winning research agency based in Kenya. We work across the African continent, covering some twenty-plus countries. We're currently running billboards and radio ads in Lagos, Nigeria, and a few other things. We also have research projects happening there, but Kenya is our home base.

In terms of the difference that Nendo seeks to make on the research side, it comes from this hypothesis; the African, particularly what we call the connected African on mobile phones, the internet, as well as social and general media, presents a sense of opportunity to figure out their behavior, their beliefs, their perceptions and more.

There's a chance to change perceptions and behaviors on the communication side. Demand generation is a big part of what we do, as well as researching fields like HIV treatment and prevention, sexual reproductive health, reproductive rights, and multiple other sectors.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you have an organization, like yourself, that does media communication, it's commonly thought of as involving public health, sexual reproductive health, education, and anything urgent or pressing. So, I'm curious: How did you get involved with eyeglasses?

Mark Kaigwa: Credit to Lavender and the rest of my colleagues. That's something that we saw as a challenge. Wintana Belai of [Maisha Meds](#) is what we consider a visionary client. [It wasn't a request for proposals.] They tried to get something going with several agencies but didn't find a fit. However, they were given somewhat cookie-cutter solutions. As a smaller agency, Nendo is very 'made to measure.'

With our initial set of insights alongside our interpretation of the problem and the challenge, Maisha Meds chose to work with us. We recommended things they never knew they needed and had not planned to do, such as saying 'Maisha Meds' is not going to cut it as a name and that they're going to have to create a brand.



Nendo is bought into this project to a [high] degree. [This] is not a profitable project for us. It's one where the difference we're trying to make is enormous. We run a business, and all clients are profitable, but we've taken on some lines with this one. For example, in principle, when you create a brand, you're not doing that from the budget because the budget we have is supposed to go out there to help awareness, etc., but we incorporate it. So, Tazama Glasses was born.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you connect with Wintana? How did that start?

Mark Kaigwa: Nendo has a network of what we call 'natives' – full-time folks – and then we have 'nomads' – part-time-folks. One of our social and behavior change nomads talked to the Chief Product Officer at Maisha Meds and passed her name on. We talked, and she set me up with Wintana. I saw the brief, my team responded, and here we are. It was very organic.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: So there was a brief at some point?

Mark Kaigwa: There was a brief, and the brief was elaborate. Many of Maisha Meds' programs are multimillion-dollar programs. They work in pharmacies. None of them need a brand, right? In fact, the everyday person who has benefited tremendously or has been impacted by their various programs probably doesn't even know Maisha Meds exists. But USAID, the Ministry of Health, and the country and state-level folks know it.

So, what we had to do was find a way to leverage people's trust in pharmacies. I might have to find the exact figure, but it's north of 70% of Kenyans. They first present medically, not at a hospital or a clinic, but at a pharmacy. So if they already present there, we could leverage that.

They self-exclude for vision because their view is that vision is expensive. The initial research we received to springboard up creatively set out some challenges with behavior change for certain people from lower socioeconomic classes and their fears and hesitations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you said that you were creating a new brand, did you literally create a new brand not called Maisha Meds, called something completely different?



Mark Kaigwa: That's correct; hence, 'Tazama Glasses' was born.

The view was that Maisha Meds doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. We needed to create a perceivable brand: how it looks, feels, presents and comes across. We needed to overcome some particular setbacks and challenges.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are you doing Tazama Glasses versus Maisha Meds because you're trying to demedicalize the product? Are you trying to make the product something that sticks in people's minds?



Mark Kaigwa: Correct. But here's our challenge: when patients get the physical glasses, they're not branded as Tazama Glasses at all. They have the donor's branding on them, so we didn't have control over that. The consignment is going to come already branded something else. But we wanted to ensure they built an affinity and association – a delight, a curiosity – with Tazama Glasses presented by or from Maisha Meds.



We designed a freestanding unit that goes into each respective pharmacy as a physical display. It was very affordable to put together. It is branded VisionSpring and Maisha Meds, and Tazama Glasses branding discusses the price. We also conducted some price experiments in both cities.

Then, talking about the different target audiences and personas, these people live on a daily wage. You could say that they were price sensitive or in situations where they can't make this purchase immediately, so they need something to refer to and return to.

Our core message, 'Macho bora Maisha bora,' which Nendo came up with, is in Swahili and translates to "Better eyes, Better life." Our brand ambassadors were people Nendo hired who lived and worked in Kisumu and Mombasa and spoke the ethnic languages of those respective cities.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Who selected the brand ambassadors?



Mark Kaigwa: Nendo selected, recruited, and trained them. They're called brand ambassadors, more from the marketing side, but people have a different word for this. They're

essentially direct sales representatives, the parlance from the industry, which just means they will strike up a physical conversation one-on-one. They will go into the markets, the open areas, the places where our target audiences -- like cobblers, shoe shiners, seamstresses -- are working hard to provide for themselves and their families. So, if you're looking for how they strike up those conversational entry points, it's approaching this from a place of pain. Research shows that people with poor vision, at least with presbyopia, experience and even mediate pain. So we show how these glasses and even these five-minute free tests could end up relieving them of their discomfort.

Lavender can talk a lot more about the number of people who are moved to tears and invite her home to have dinner with them because of the difference their 10 to 15-minute interaction made. They're reading the Bible without straining their eyes for the first time in years. Tazama Glasses by Maisha Meds has had the chance to do that.

Then we have others whose economic productivity has increased due to being able to see better. Some patients even had all three glasses, whilst some only wanted a red pair to match their Sunday best. All of these still come back to just the core insights we have and come up with that get weaved into the narrative.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are your brand ambassadors training pharmacists to sell the products? Who's using these pillars in this distinction?

Mark Kaigwa: Let me take a step back. The project works, in principle, because Maisha Meds has a network of hundreds of pharmacies, and VisionSpring has millions of glasses. Maisha Meds selects from its pharmacy network, and VisionSpring trains the pharmacy attendants. Maisha Meds devises an economic incentive to incentivize the attendants to do the screenings and sales.



When Nendo comes in, we work with that infrastructure to hide, clean, present, and package it. Then, we generate demand for hundreds or tens of thousands of people to go through the behaviour change they need to come for a screening or purchase.

Brand ambassadors come in specifically because pharmacy attendants already have a full-time job, i.e. they're behind the counter serving medication to patients. The brand ambassadors sit in the actual pharmacy and embed themselves into the communities. Our brand ambassadors can help do tests, hand out flyers, and start conversations with people over the age of forty. They're branded in Tazama Glasses merchandise such as T-shirts and all sorts of branding material.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: They're seeing and doing stuff at the pharmacy or the marketplace, but it is direct to consumers, not the pharmacist.



Mark Kaigwa: Precisely. That's where you now lay on the ground game with radio, billboards, and a mix of additional mass communication. There is a challenge of wastage, meaning you're reaching all the right people, but if they go to the wrong pharmacy and ask for your glasses, it looks strange. So, we also needed to ensure that these pharmacies are distinct so people know where to go and what to ask for when seeking Tazama Glasses. This has actually brought in its own level of competition with other people, such as [Good Vision Glasses](#) and two others trying to come in and play in this space.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can we discuss the billboards and radio campaign?

Mark Kaigwa: With that, here is just some quick background. The specific areas we're talking about — because we've done geo-mapping across all the respective locations these pharmacies are in — are in remote, hard-to-reach areas, so they don't have excellent infrastructure around them.

We've done dozens of experiments, including experiments on pricing, messaging, framing, tactics, and brand ambassadors inside and outside the pharmacy.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you measure an experiment? Can you give me an example of one experiment and one conclusion?



Mark Kaigwa: For example, we test a dozen pharmacies. Of those dozen brand ambassadors, six will stay inside the pharmacy. They won't leave a 10, 20, or 30-meter radius away from the pharmacy. Meanwhile, the other six will spend all of their time at the market, ferry or bus stops, face-timing and having direct-to-consumer conversations.

After a week of giving out patient cards, the pharmacies noted patients coming in with symptoms of presbyopia. This helped the team gauge whether people were presenting to a pharmacy for the first time after being informed that they could get a free test there. That's an example of an experiment we've run with multiple variations of the same exact conditions across cities and time overall.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You could be testing three things. One is how many people actually buy glasses, two is how many people get screened, and three is what your brand ambassadors say as feedback. What do you test?

Mark Kaigwa: Correct. We've tested all three. We've been doing this for several months and have weekly data tracking comprising the number of people reached, the number of people screened, the number of people who made a purchase, and several other data points.

We also tracked how many people wanted to bring people they knew who were in a younger age demographic, what number of people wanted glasses but would like them to serve a specific purpose, e.g. are they photochromatic, can they provide blue light protection, we were also able to sieve out the patients who have been identified with a diabetic condition and can't buy the glasses. We learnt a great deal from patient care and gathered a lot of insight and feedback along the way.



Back to radio, one question that comes to mind has been about pricing. We've done campaigns with Radio Kaya, which is one of several local radio stations in the coastal region of Mombasa, and we have developed these great [radio adverts](#) that we scripted, recorded, and flighted on air for multiple weeks with presenters talking about the Tazama Glasses. Some people genuinely called the radio or reached out to ask for "the catch" because the prices of the glasses were unbelievable.

Lavender went out on location in Mombasa City as well as Kisumu City and engaged our on-ground Maisha Meds representatives to explain that there was nothing wrong with the glasses. They're top-quality, designed in America, and manufactured in India. They're subsidized to a certain degree, but ultimately, it's about getting you the care you need. We've also done the same in Kisumu in the Dholuo or Luo language, which is predominantly spoken in the Kisumu region.



The idea with both cases is that some unexpected twists and turns come when experimenting and getting out in front of people. They're weighing the economics of going to a competitor facility or pharmacy not too far from the radio station who are selling glasses for three times our price or taking the unique opportunity to get on a bus or the back of a motorcycle taxi to go to one of our partner pharmacies and get our glasses for a fraction of the price. The patients, in general, simply want to know if the cost savings are worth it.

We take input like that, and now, with our current wave of communication, we talk about how our product is designed in America and made in India to distinguish and show that it's a top-quality product. We think that will resonate, and we've seen some early positive results.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk a little bit about the radio scripting and the process of working with Maisha Meds on that? Did you control the whole creative process of the radio script?



Mark Kaigwa: The great thing with Maisha Meds is that they trusted us to do what we do from the beginning. They've been incredibly supportive. We have both for-profit and non-profit clients, so we know how to make the most of something. Lavender would create a brief. If the brief checks out creatively, Lavender takes that to a copywriter and to a creative for further

execution, i.e., conceptualising who the characters are, which involves reviewing dozens of potential ideas. We choose our best ones, the client signs off on them, and Lavender secures studio time to listen to dozens of voices to make those creative decisions. Ultimately, we get what we think is a solid emotive and tugging-at-the-heartstrings outcome. It's very easy to get into the sales mode with this type of stuff, and for us, we challenge them creatively. We've taken so much time to cultivate an idea and identity around this brand. Of course, it's out of my hands, but we hope it doesn't end when the funding ends. There's so much more this could accomplish.

Who could be the person to take this and own it and run with it? We expect Maisha Meds would; it's their IP, but for radio, at least, it was that process. And to give Wintana and her team (those involved in the project) in both cities with whom Lavender works closely. And so it's a team effort. Some of that will be in Swahili, and some of that will be in Luo. We have great teammates at Nendo who we trust to work alongside Lavender and me to get that done.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Okay. So you have the pillars of the brand ambassador, the pillars of the billboards, and the pillars of the radio. Am I capturing the components of the campaign correctly?

Mark Kaigwa: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little bit about the comparisons of those three tactics – brand ambassadors, billboards, and radio? I understand that every country, region, and community is locally specific, but in general, how would you compare those three tactics? If you had limited funding, would you just do one of those three tactics? Which one is the most effective? Or do those three tactics work hand-in-hand?



Mark Kaigwa: We did multiple months with no radio or billboard – we even considered experimenting with TV as well – because it would take so much away from some of the groundwork we were doing in these communities.



We started in the pharmacy, then outside the pharmacy, and then to the marketplace and everyday streets of central business district areas and foot traffic-heavy areas. There are market days when men and women come with fresh produce and all sorts of things they're trying to sell. Days like that are huge for us. Lavender keeps a schedule and has several of our team leaders monitor for that.

We've also attended many church activities and religious gatherings. These are places where people come to sing, speak, hear, read, and interpret. They are an opportunity to talk to a captive audience of 40-plus, our predominant age group.



Even when we talk about brand ambassadors, there's so much happening there. There are even health camps; these are public days where multiple donors and partners unite for malaria, tuberculosis, HIV, and various screenings. In some cases, thousands of people come on those days. We're latching VisionSpring onto that to see ways that we can actually interact with people.



That's the foundational part of the pyramid, the bread and butter of what we do. Now, there's a question about scalability. We don't do radio when we don't have enough pharmacies, and we don't do billboards unless we have a certain number within a specific area with good enough foot traffic. That's one of the tricky parts of doing more of what we call 'above the line' or 'mainstream' media. You can have a lot of wastage because you generate demand that can dissipate in places that you can't capitalize on. For us, the two go hand in hand.



As we've had more pharmacies added to our list, that's when we've deployed what we think is the recipe for success – where we are working closest with the most cooperative and highest performing pharmacies because it's going to be like that as a small percentage that generates the volume of the screenings and sales.

Please remember that pharmacists have full-time jobs to run pharmacies that they have to keep profitable. They're trying as hard as possible, and we appreciate everything they do. We're latching on, in some cases, an extra aspect that's not even their sweet spot, i.e. the Glasses are a one-off sale that takes time away from selling medications. Some of these pharmacies even have mobile money services and other services that have to compete for them in terms of time and resources.

The lesson for me is that when you have critical mass points and can capitalize on demand, you can go higher for more broad-reach media – your radio, your TV, and, in rare cases, billboards and other out-of-home signage. Face-to-face interactions help society and in a part of the world like ours, right by the equator here in Kenya.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I hear you saying that every good client relationship is about trust. Could you share insights about what has made your relationship with Maisha Meds, an incredibly reputable brand, and organization, so successful?



Lavender Sempele: I have so many great insights to mention. However, one thing that stood out for me was the creative freedom Maisha Meds gave Nendo to conceptualise and execute the project with very little to no micro-management or hovering. This is almost unheard of in many client-agency relationships. It certainly was a welcome relief, as it allowed the creative team to fully explore their creativity (while still adhering to the brief and the key deliverables for the project), which made the creative process all the more fun, exciting, and result-driven. From start to finish, the project was a collaborative effort from all parties involved.

Another insight that comes to mind is that Nendo and Maisha Meds are passionate and actively involved in corporate social good. This meeting of the minds and having a shared vision of a better tomorrow for humankind added to the excellent working relationship as we understood the overall impact the campaign would have in changing numerous lives and further improving the quality of life for + 40-year-old individuals struggling with presbyopia. Even just by being on the ground, experiencing the patients' pain points first-hand, helping some of them read their bible better, and impacting some of their work output by simply being able to see better, left a positive mark on all parties involved in the project.



Mark Kaigwa: We established a client/agency relationship as partners at the very start of this engagement. When we're partners, it puts Nendo less in a position of being order takers and, instead, a position to try to have some measure of influence and to co-create. During the initial vision setting, there was buy-in from the stakeholders, including Maisha Meds, VisionSpring, and the donors and funders, and we had the opportunity to speak about that. That's not something I take for granted because it's not every day that it happens.

This partnership mindset meant that when we were having check-ins and meetings and talking about the brand itself, again, we took a co-creation approach. We came up with three different logos and gave our recommendations. Wintana would test them internally with her stakeholders and provide recommendations as well. We'd get some buy-in. She helped us by really managing the stakeholders. That meant that we didn't have to go chasing after approvals, per se, but she would manage that end of the deal, leaving us to focus more on a lot of our sweet spots, too.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: That's the biggest thing, right? If someone else can manage the stakeholder buy-in, that allows you to be creative.

Mark Kaigwa: Correct. The last thing I'll say is that she's made some huge decisions very quickly. We've given her all the data and our point of view, and it's not like she always sides with us. It just happened to be that we were right about a number of these things, and she stress-tested it, too.

About a third of the way into the project, she delivered some news that we were experiencing resistance from this target audience. One insight is that hard labor affects pricing. We could go up the chain to sell to middle-class Kenyans, but our target was to try to change the behavior of people who would have to save a portion of a day's wage over some time to afford glasses.

I can't necessarily get into the details, per se, but some of the innovations there involved managers and stakeholders deciding the price. That, for me, was huge. Normally, you encounter challenges and flag them, but is that really the bigger picture?



Because we've been on the ground, we have been with the actual patients, and in some cases, they have asked if we could offer installment payments. That would've been highly tedious and had all sorts of loopholes, but that was someone telling us that the problem, presentation, and brand resonated with them; they just could not buy the product at that exact moment. It was huge that Wintana dropped the price of the products midway through the project. That's strategy, stakeholder management, and decisiveness. Something like that could have taken forever.

We are always brilliant about how many flyers and posters we're deploying at any time, but it allowed us to start to do different work. Not that there haven't been many challenges, but I can look back and say that the ability to get us to a decision and give it to us with some clarity has made a big difference for us coming into the new year.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: There's a lot of trust there with Maisha Meds, so that helps. What's next?

Mark Kaigwa: What's next for us is that we will end this to a close at the end of April 2024. By that point, we expect to have hit specific targets. The thing with these targets that emerge very quickly is it's not just about closing the sale, which sometimes can be because some brand ambassadors get paid on sales commission. It's almost like a rewiring, reprogramming, and retraining to focus on patient care and impacting lives. It's been a great opportunity that's put us in a position where we believe we've had a tremendous impact. The sales and sustainability part is where I see a great wide open door: if this project stops, which it inevitably will, who will take that on?

In the last couple of weeks, we've seen a direct copycat. They've taken our exact phrasing for Tazama Glasses and are using that... Some people are undercutting, and some are giving the glasses away for free. That tells me that we've touched a nerve with this project and that it's attracting attention and resources from others in the space who want to get into vision, too. They think they can build what we've built with Maisha Meds and Tazama Glasses with our breakthroughs over the last few months.

But that's out of our hands. We can't control it. It's been extremely gratifying and fulfilling for me to have Lavender serve on this and to have Nendo grow with this project.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When someone starts copying you, do you interpret it as you are doing the right things or getting worried? Because honestly, in creative and marketing campaigns, the minute people start copying you, that's the biggest compliment you can get. So I'm curious: With these imposters, do you see it as a success? Are you worried? Or a combination of both?



Lavender Sempele: I think for us, it's a considerable pat on the back in terms of what we've done for the project and how we've put the pieces of the puzzles in place, i.e. leveraging on the ground activities – below the line, above the line, USSD Codes, mass communication such as radio adverts and interviews with [Radio Kaya](#) in Mombasa City and [Radio Nam Lolwe](#) in Kisumu City, etc. Literally a medley of everything under the sun to get the Tazama Glasses brand to where it is today. It's gotten the attention of others such as [Good Vision Glasses](#), [MARWA](#) and [Sabatia Eye Clinic](#), all of whom have been observing our activities and the impact the Tazama Glasses campaign has had on the surrounding communities, so much so that they too, jumped on the bandwagon and carried out their very own campaigns as competitors. This was a great complement to us as it showed the impact and reach of our campaign. It means all of our hard work has not gone in vain.

Mark Kaigwa: Similar to what you said, Ambika, this is, in its way, a strange, backhanded compliment. They don't see it that way. I mean, in a more extreme way, I'm saying that if they want to copy us, start here, and they better not repeat all the mistakes because they don't see what we've learned to reverse engineer how to get to the point we are.

I have an abundance mentality. If we had a dozen brands competing to help people at and below the poverty line have better access to vision and care, maybe that's twelve brands too few. So, competition in service of a mission that is this big for me is something I welcome.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: This has been great. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

ICON LEGEND



Advocacy



Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating excellent content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an SJN initiative that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*