Turning to THE CROWD for solutions
Also called fansourcing, crowdcasting or mass collaboration, crowdsourcing draws on the collective intelligence of many people to come up with an idea or solution – often for free or at a fraction of the costs charged by service providers. Wikipedia and Idols are well-known examples of sourcing from crowds. But what can it do for your business? Heindrich Wyngaard takes a closer look.

Not many people paid much attention to the development of a new phenomenon until the phrase was coined, back in 2006, by Jeff Howe, a contributing editor to Wired magazine. He called it “crowdsourcing” and he defined it in two ways.

The first definition, his so-called white paper version, states: “Crowdsourcing is the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.”

His second definition was dubbed the sound bite version: “The application of Open Source principles to fields outside of software.”

This was the birth of “the age of the crowd”, as introduced by Howe in a Wired article, titled “The Rise of Crowdsourcing”, in which the phrase and its definitions were born. Outsourcing as we knew it before was redefined. It no longer simply meant sending jobs to countries where the cost of labour was low; it now also involved sourcing content and solutions from the most unimaginable corners of the world or someone’s home or by using the internet “to exploit the spare processing power of millions of human brains”.

Two other words should be added to one’s crowdsourcing vocabulary, namely “seekers”, referring to the companies looking for the bright sparks out there – and “solvers”, who are, naturally, the bright sparks, such as the patent lawyer who devised a novel way to mix large batches of chemical compounds …

On top of it, the content or solutions or innovations often come at a fraction of the cost to appoint a service provider in the traditional way.

Hence, the question is asked: “Why hire when you can crowd source?” Or, put differently, when can you “employ the crowd”?

**How a local ‘Great Brand’ did it**

This principle has been or is being applied by companies in need of anything from designs for T-shirts or shoes, video material for music videos or ideas for new Lego toys. Not quite a buzz word in South Africa yet, there are those companies – including Vodafone, FNB Premier Banking and Capitec Bank – that have joined the crowdsourcing movement locally through the social think tank Idea Bounty.

Of course, ideas can also be sourced through popular social networks like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

Known as a “non-traditional” bank, Capitec Bank decided in 2010 not to go the “traditional” advertising agency way for a marketing idea to communicate to the public that the bank had become the only South African company, one of only 27 globally, to be named a “Great Brand of Tomorrow” by Credit Suisse, the Swiss-based financial services group.

A brief was posted on Idea Bounty, informing “solvers” about some “insanely exciting news” of how the bank is looking for one print ad concept and one banner ad concept for which they were willing to pay $5 000 (around R50 000 today) to whoever came up with the best ideas.

The winners were freelance copywriter Amod Munga who involved art director Deon Hug to assist him in beating more than 600 others (who, like them, didn’t sweat about the tight deadline given). Still, when asked afterwards what he thinks it will take for the concept of mass idea generation to become standard thought for big brands, Munga was not too optimistic: “It will take a dramatic shift in the way we do business as creatives to make crowdsourcing the norm,” he said on the Bounty website. “I don’t know if the crowd will ever completely replace the professional creative but it’s already changing the way independent creatives operate.”

**The downfall**

Winning, however, didn’t come without a good measure of controversy when some were questioning Capitec Bank’s choice. Head of Communications, Marketing & Corporate Affairs Charl Nel had to try and douse the fires: “As we have mentioned before, the winner was picked after long deliberation and debate – all of the (top 30) ideas were of excellent quality and many of them could have been run as spectacular ads. It was just a case of one concept having slightly more pull with the Capitec Bank team at the time, which added in clinching the win.”

An example that Howe referred to in his article relates to a popular TV channel inviting viewers to create their own videos and send it to the channel. Out of nearly 12 000 videos received, almost all were described by the channel as “complete crap”; about 20 made the final cut.

In other words, crowdsourcing comes with its own problems, one of which is when other “solvers” are dissatisfied over the winning choice. Also, the “seeker” (company) can be flooded with ideas and face the time-consuming task of working through them.
Why crowdsourcing and not the conventional way of sourcing a service provider?
Crowdsourcing was a new method used to gather a number of insights in a short period of time from sources that are not from the traditional methods of idea gathering. Capitec Bank, as a non-traditional bank, embraces innovative ways to do things better and as such was open to explore off the beaten track and try this method to see what it delivers.

How much did you/the company know about crowdsourcing before you’ve decided to give it a try?
Crowdsourcing was in its infancy in South Africa at that stage so we trusted our instinct to explore new ways of getting answers. I think most marketing departments, however, do not really understand the value it can bring to the table.

How did it benefit you in achieving your goals?
It cut down the creative process of searching for a novel angle of communicating to our stakeholders and clients considerably. It also brought new ideas to the table from people unrelated to the advertising industry. Housewives in Slovenia were able to send their ideas along to top creatives at top advertising agencies in any part of the world.

What would you do differently next time?
The volume of the ideas that you need to sift through was overwhelming. In future, I would create a different way of assessing the ideas as they come in to make the decision making process easier. Still, crowdsourcing is an excellent tool if you have something unique to communicate. When putting a brief on the crowdsourcing platform, it must be done in such a manner so as not to “let the cat out of the bag” with regard to your strategic intent. The idea or message needs to be so unique that competitors cannot use the brief as a heads-up. Our inclusion as the only brand from Africa among the 27 Brands of Tomorrow was a unique opportunity as no competitor could trump the issue even if they had knowledge about the brief and the communication that would follow.