

De Beers initiative a safe bet

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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When it comes to marketing, few South African companies pay serious attention to employee marketing or internal communication.

They'll spend millions of rand making and fighting brand advertising, then neglect or ignore their workers.

Capitalist cynics will say: So what? Business is about money, not hearts and flowers. Yet, it is not good to keep your staff in the dark and fed on manure perpetually because, eventually, their ignorance and displeasure will end up costing you money.

In the heavy industries, for instance mining and manufacturing, communication to employees and "marketing" of issues such as safety consciousness is often given top priority, because accidents cause downtime and negatively affect the bottom line. Worse still, deaths in accidents can seriously damage the public image of a company.

But, "selling safety" is not at all sexy and the "same old, same old" approaches can make things more dangerous in the workplace.

Hence, I was intrigued to see the internal communications initiative produced by Ignite Joe Public for mining giant De Beers as it used classic marketing techniques to get across the message.

Safety is the number one concern for De Beers and they enlisted their employees to help draft the "Zero Harm" vision back in 2006.

Yet, it became apparent that the message needed repeating, and in a way which would make it resonate emotionally with miners and other workers. They tried out a "No Tolerance" positioning, but that didn't work in the way they wanted.

What Ignite Joe Public came up with was simple, but in classic advertising style pulled at the heartstrings.

Turning around the "hows" of safety, it focused on the "whys" – the most important of which was: Return home safe to my family. And nobody knows more than the local mining community that that desire is more than mere words.

De Beers workers at a number of mines were asked, via internal posters and e-mails: "Why will you stay safe today?"

More than 80 percent responded, sending in their personal reasons for staying safe, including pictures of their families.

The messages made their way on to posters and on to printed templates, which were sown on to the back of overalls and work clothes as a constant reminder of the real reason they go to work every day... their families.

It's simple, but stunningly effective.

Carrots work much better than sticks in most public service marketing and communication, which is what this is. But what makes this campaign stand out is the way it zeroes in on one of the strongest emotions in any person.

So Orchids to De Beers and to Ignite Joe Public. It's a classic case study in how to talk to employees.



Screengrabs from the ad.

The danger in using clichés or hip phrases in marketing campaigns is that you might use them out of context, or worse, could combine two words which don't relate to each other to make a unique piece of silliness.

Such is the achievement of AON, a company which is involved in insurance and employee benefits. Its radio ad, which has been running for a while, irritates the daylight out of me every time I hear it.

The company's proud slogan is: Empower Results. What? Not empowering people to achieve results, nor empowering companies to do better or provide better benefits for their employees, both of which would be correct. Empower results, however, makes no grammatical sense.

Firstly, the word empower applies to people and companies. Normally, when used in this context, it implies that the person, the company or organisation, has been given the power to do something.

Perhaps to improve their position in life or profitability. Hence black economic empowerment is giving black people the power to improve their economic situation.

A result, however, cannot, by definition, be changed. If it is, then it is a new result. Something which cannot be changed, therefore, cannot be empowered.

A result is also, effectively, an inanimate object, much like a chair. And how many furniture companies advertise that they "Empower Chairs"?

I can imagine the clevers at AON – I'm not sure whether a marketing agency was involved, because this silly slogan permeates the company's entire corporate identity – sitting down to thrash out a catchy company buzz phrase. What are the buttons to push which are hot at the moment?

Empower? Cool! Results? Cool! Let's put them together...

I hope you're not as quick to throw together disparate and unrelated ideas and terms in your business world, AON.

You get this week's Onion for further diluting the power of language. And that is one of the mottoes of this column: Onions: Empowering People to Improve Their Grammar.

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ABOUT BRENDAN SEERY

Brendan Seery has been in the news business for most of his life, covering coups, wars, famines - and some funny stories - across Africa. Brendan Seery's *Orchids and Onions* column ran each week in the *Saturday Star* in Johannesburg and the *Weekend Argus* in Cape Town.

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