

Marketing lessons from the Arab Spring

 By Eugene Yiga

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2011 was the year of the protester. But instead of discussing the bored trustafarians who 'occupied' the world lest they be denied something for the first time in their lives, I'd like to focus on the [Arab Spring](#). How did it happen? And what can we as marketers learn?

Here are three lessons:

1. **Just because something makes you happy, doesn't mean it always will**

It was easy for governments to hold on to power while citizens were happily enjoying the benefits of strong economies, some backed by foreign aid. Then things changed. GDP fell, youth unemployment rose, and people grew tired of seeing their corrupt leaders in charge. (South Africa, anyone?) They weren't so happy anymore.

This lesson applies to so many areas of our lives. New relationships, new jobs, new cars, new TV shows; everything starts out great and then the novelty fades. My example is with the gym. After upgrading from the one I used as a university student, I was absolutely blown away. With great facilities, great classes, and free internet, I was in heaven!

Until I wasn't. Slowly, the gym started getting on my nerves. Instructors didn't show up for classes, equipment was broken for weeks at a time, and the Wi-Fi was often down. I wanted out because I knew life would be more fun when I moved.

Ultimately, we need to keep coming up with new ways to impress, whether it's for our customers, our employees, or even our spouses. We can't rely on the fact that what we did in the past worked just fine. Nothing has the power to delight forever.

2. **Just because people look happy, doesn't mean they really are**

Many people can't figure out how the Arab Spring happened so quickly. I may be wrong, but I think it's safe to assume that people didn't just wake up one morning and decide that it was nice weather for a revolution; they'd been harbouring their feelings for a while. They may have looked happy on the surface but deep down they weren't.

Ghandi said that happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony. Unfortunately, the outer world of what we say and do doesn't always reflect the inner world of what we think and feel.

Again, this lesson applies to many areas in our lives, specifically all the times we smile and pretend to be happy even when we're not. Perhaps you hate your job but put up with it anyway because the economy sucks and you can't find work somewhere else. Perhaps you stay in a troubled marriage because you don't have the courage (or money) to make it on your own. Or perhaps you stick with a brand you don't like because you can't access or afford the one you really want.

Again, it applies to my gym. It happens to be the closest one to where I live (and, thanks to a generous loyalty program, the cheapest one too). So I stick it out. In other words, I'm 100% loyal because I go there every day but I'm 0% committed because I'd change in a heartbeat if I could.

This is a huge distinction that marketers often struggle to make. They assume that just because someone is using their brand, they're happy to be doing so. That might not be the case. Ultimately, loyalty is about what people do but commitment is about what they feel. Commitment matters more.

3. **Just because people don't have options today, doesn't mean they won't have options tomorrow**

Sometimes governments or brands or employers or spouses will realise that the other person isn't happy in the relationship. Perhaps they'll also realise that the other person is simply staying put because they have no choice. So why bother trying to make them happy? It's not like they can go anywhere else!

Actually, they can. It's just not now. The Arab Spring might not have been possible ten years ago, but the rise of social media made it easier for people to coordinate their efforts.

And just look at what happened with cell phone networks. We used to be trapped because nobody wanted to lose their number when they switched. But then mobile number portability came along and people switched like mad. (I've switched four times!) Cell providers now realise that they need to treat us a little better because we're the ones in control.

The lesson for marketers is to not get complacent. People might be forced to use your brand today but that won't be the case forever. Conversely, just because people can't use your brand today, doesn't mean they won't be able to use it tomorrow. In other words, you've got to treat them well even though you might not see the immediate benefits.

Banks are good at this. They're prepared to offer very attractive packages to students and graduates (even though they might lose money doing so) in the hopes of building long-term relationships that will eventually be profitable.

It's the same as a certain luxury car dealership I visited with my brother in Johannesburg a few years ago. I was quite amazed that all the cars were simply left on the showroom floor for anyone to sit in without asking first.

The salesmen understand that just because you're young and broke, doesn't mean you'll be that way forever. They want to treat you well so you can return the favour when you grow up and get rich (or go into politics). They know that times will change and that it's best to stay on good terms with the people who could end up on top. You never know who they might be!

The cycle of life

And so concludes our three marketing lessons from the Arab Spring. Apply them to your brand (or your life) and you might start a revolution too.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugenyiga.com, follow @eugenyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugenyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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