

Schweppes has been refreshingly honest

 By [Brendan Seery](#)

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Data that disappears or expires is not just rude, Vodacom, it is also theft. So you get an Onion. And, no, it does not expire.



There are few fields these days in which South Africans are world leaders. Whining is one of them. Making excuses is another... so much so, I sometimes wonder if we shouldn't have "It's not my fault" as our national motto, so good are we at passing the buck. It's my upbringing, it's my circumstances, it's the government, it's apartheid...

So, given that many South Africans are not honest enough with themselves to take responsibility, it should come as no surprise that businesses are some of the worst (or the best, if you look at it from their perspective) at ducking, diving and evading. That's particularly true when they have to pay you back for something they messed up.

“ However, in these days of social media, it is becoming increasingly difficult for the corporate avoiders to hide. The reality is that, in terms of actual numbers, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are still minority communication mediums in this country... but these are the places that the bosses, the marketers and ad agencies hang out. So complaints tend to get amplified. ”

Having said that, though, it is still very refreshing (nice allusion... see later) to see a major brand mess something up; admit it was wrong and then change what they did incorrectly.

In the process, drink-maker Schweppes – part of the global giant Coca-Cola Company – has not only managed to totally take the wind out of a social media storm, but has even turned it into a positive brand advantage.

And, a lot of that has to do with their ad agency, Ogilvy Cape Town, as well as their willingness to take their lumps in public.

Schweppes decided fairly recently to rebrand and redesign its tonic water and soda water bottles but in the process, took away the distinct look of each.

And soon there was a tsunami of complaints on Facebook and Twitter, not least from their loyal supporters, some of whom had to cough out their drinks when they realised it was gin and soda water, not gin and tonic they were sinking at sunset.

So, ad agency Ogilvy went to Schweppes with the evidence and then managed to get all those involved in the disastrous decisions to appear in a “Reality TV”-type video, collectively saying: “My bad!”

“ That took real guts: It’s one thing to say ‘sorry’ in private; it’s another altogether to say it in front of all of your customers and a country. I’m afraid to say to the people at Schweppes, though, that if you ever move out of a career in fast-moving consumer goods, don’t go into politics... you’re too honest. ”

What makes this especially powerful is that it confirmed for the agency and the brand that its consumers were loyal, fanatically so. And they decided to keep them loyal... in the best way possible.

So Orchids to Schweppes and to Ogilvy Cape Town. If I drank G & T (which I don’t, sadly), I would raise a toast to you.

At the polar opposite, in terms of treating customers with respect, is Vodacom, the subject of many of my peeves. Why have I never left them?

That’s a question I am often asked and I think – I supposed like a battered spouse – there were good times, too.

Those good times seem a long way off this week after “Voda-con” continued its nationwide dodgy practice of ripping off customers when it comes to data.





Ripping off? That's a bit strong, isn't it? Well, no. Consider that Vodacom (and the other cellular providers, it must be said) are challenging a ruling by the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (Icasa) that data is not allowed to "expire".

While their legal delaying actions (Jacob Zuma would be proud of you, people) are under way, the ruling is in abeyance.

My experience will probably elicit yowls of "yep, I've been there!" from plenty of Vodacom customers.

On my post-paid contract, I was notified that I had 80Mb of data left for the month. (I had been tethering my mobile phone to my laptop and doing low data-usage stuff, like emails). A whole 12 minutes later, I was warned I had just 5Mb left... and I hadn't been doing anything.



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Sitting as I was in a doctor's waiting room, I took the bait and opted for Vodacom's offer of 2Gb for R119 for seven days. Over the next six days, I only used the mobile data, whereas normally I use Wi-Fi at the office and at home. Up to the end of Thursday, I still had 1.4 Gb left.

Knowing the bundle would expire in seven days, I naively thought that would be at 3.30pm on Friday – seven days after I took it up. So, early yesterday morning, I planned to download pictures and video to blow through as much of the data I had already paid for as I could.

Just after 7.30am, Vodacom's balances showed me it was all gone.

This is not just rude, Vodacom, nor is it merely in violation of the spirit of the Icasa ruling, it is also theft – plain and simple. I could well have used a couple of hundred Mb before the actual seven-day cut-off time.

Vodacom – and many other South African companies – seem to be blithely unaware of one of the most basic rules in marketing: good customer service is the cheapest form of marketing.

That's because people come back.

But, when you rip them off and you steal goods they have paid for, they won't come back.

So you get an Onion, Vodacom. And, no, it does not expire.

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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