

# Fast food, democracy and the power of marketing

 By [Amanda Sevasti](#)

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There is a place in South Africa that is truly democratic. Young, old, black, white, rich, poor, rural and urban all congregate around it at least one Friday night a month. It is a choice they willingly and happily make, despite long queues.

It's not what the cultural elite would call refined. It can hardly be described as healthy. It horrifies vegans, vegetarians and those who can afford to eat organic or free-range. It is a pillar of industrial food production. Yet its golden arches, smiling grandfather face and whopping crown is a reassuring siren call to people everywhere. It is fast food. The queues for election voting, in the post office or at Home Affairs are perhaps the only other times you will see such a diverse mix of South Africans huddled together for the same reason.

## A variety of people

Visit the McDonald's in Braamfontein or the KFC in Rosebank on a Friday afternoon and standing in line will be a mid-level office worker, standing behind a yummy mummy with her son in St John's uniform, standing behind a City of Joburg cleaner, standing behind two Pick 'n Pay checkout staff on break.

The simple craving for a Big Mac or Zinger Wings is the great equaliser. Putting aside nanny state notions of controlling stuff that's bad for you (every French restaurant would be banned for its butter content alone), there is something deliciously ironic about a socialist ideal being reflected in the quintessential icon of global capitalism that is the fast-food chain.

Of course the food is terribly addictive. Our brains are hardwired for sugar, fat and salt, and most fast food delivers this trifecta. But then why do people queue for an hour at Burger King when they could get a burger down the road in five minutes?

## Carefully crafted advertising

Ardent fans will tell you it's The Whopper's unique flavour (even though our local version is missing bacon). Some will insist it's due to our idolatry of all things American. Others will say our low self-esteem as a nation results in a desperate need for vindication ("They chose to open here! We are special!") But those of us in the industry know it's because of brilliant marketing. Supported by carefully crafted advertising specifically aimed at them, every customer in that queue has their own justification for buying a happy meal.

The office worker has had a rough and monotonous week and needs a pick-me-up. The mom's son has done well at school this week and wants a treat. The cleaner promised his family that payday would hold a special surprise. The checkout staff are on duty until 7pm and feel they deserve a Friday indulgence. But these reasons are not different at all.

## Fast food marketing

What they all have in common is a powerful insight that is used as the basis for all fast food marketing - reward. Human beings, no matter how rich or poor, always need a reason to buy something. These reasons can vary greatly. Time, convenience, status, novelty, packaging... but they are all finite. The most constant and universal reason is reward. And marketers have tapped into this, tweaking and tailoring the message slightly for each consumer segment.

Love it or hate it, we have to give the industry credit and recognise the massive impact that exceptional marketing can have. It's a remarkable feat, finding our common ground and using it to bring us together - all in the name of selling fried chicken.

## ABOUT AMANDA SEVASTI

Amanda is Head of digital at Publicis Machine and a regular commentator on the digital landscape in South Africa. She was previously Head of Social Media at NATIVE VML and established the Social@Ogilvy practice within Ogilvy Johannesburg. Before moving into online content and communications, Amanda worked as a copywriter and creative head on TTL activations and campaigns. She dreams of a day when data is free. Follow @AmandaSevasti;

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