

# Race no longer has a place in marketing

 By [Chris Mberdyk](#)

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Far too many marketers and advertisers in South Africa today are still confusing culture and race. Culture is important in marketing today but race is completely irrelevant. You can't just group all whites and all blacks into a single target market. Marketing is about emotion and aspiration not pigmentation.

I find it immensely saddening that almost fifteen years after South Africa became a democracy in which all its citizens were deemed equal, so much emphasis is still placed on skin colour.

Let's face it, all one needs do is listen in to any talk radio programme and you'll hear race being used as the cause of everything from crime to bad performance on the sports fields, high cell phone prices, inflation, road rage, Eskom's woes, SAA's dismal service and financial performance and, in fact, any form of blunder, bribery and dodgy goings on you care to mention.

Race seems to have become an integral part of a new and popular finger-pointing national culture that, in my opinion, has more supporters than soccer, rugby and cricket combined.

But, I really wonder if this ugly form of intolerance is indeed part of the South African psyche or whether the man or woman in the street is somehow being encouraged to cling to the insane belief that skin colour does represent a massive human divide?

Frankly, I believe that among the major reasons why racism keeps rearing its ugly head in South Africa is because politicians keep using race to either score brownie points or make desperate excuses when there are actually no excuses. And the mass media needs to share responsibility for perpetuating racism by playing the race card in the interests of sensationalism and sales.

Even big business is certainly not guiltless in trying to convince us all that there are two entirely different markets for their products in South Africa - a "White" market and a "black" market.

In spite of the fact that as long ago as 1997 the South African Advertising Research Foundation (Saarf) decided to scrap race from its research data simply because it found that race was no longer relevant in terms of marketing and the media. The use of racial demographics was originally put in place during apartheid when blacks and whites were separated by law and when marketers needed to know what blacks living in black areas thought, bought and aspired to and what whites living in white areas thought, bought and aspired to.

When this data was scrapped the marketing fraternity blew a fuse and insisted that Saarf continue to produce research data showing blacks on one hand and whites, coloureds and Indians on the other.

After the parliamentary hearings into racism in advertising about ten years ago, SAARF once again decided to scrap the iniquitous WCI/Blacks element from its research. Once again there was whingeing from marketers who claimed they desperately needed this data.

But right now, there can be no possible good reason to keep perpetuating what is nothing more than blatant racial discrimination. There can be no reason marketers want to keep this other than as some sort of crutch.

If one looks at Saarf's own figures they showed that 30 years ago rich and middle class whites held all the wealth and blacks were mostly poor.

But these days, the middle class is almost completely black. And among the wealthy classes, blacks have reduced whites domination of this sector considerably.

Now, what happens in any middle or upper class is that the most powerful drivers of brand loyalty and the very basis of advertising, are emotion and aspiration. And there is no question that according to research there is no difference between what black upper and middle class consumers aspire to compared with whites, coloureds and Indians.

Then, look at research from 16-24 year old youths - black, white, male and female. 94 per cent believe all people are equal regardless of race, gender or religion

This is a quite remarkable statistics that adds up to the fact that young people today all aspire to the same things. And our youth makes up the vast majority of our population.

Certainly, in terms of the middle and upper classes one cannot possibly argue that white and black youth think so differently that it is necessary to create the need to produce separate market research data.

But, in spite of all this, until such time as politicians, business and to a certain extent the media, stop playing the race card for personal or corporate gain, South Africa will never ever be free of racism.

Unfortunately, I cannot see anything changing much in the foreseeable future, particularly with an election looming. An election that will undoubtedly see the race card being played quite unashamedly. So, all we can do is pray that ordinary South Africans will begin to see the futility of race-based blame. And that whites will stop talking about "them" and "us" and blacks will stop generalising about "whites" being responsible for absolutely everything that goes wrong.

## ABOUT CHRIS MOERDYK

Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on [moerdykc@gmail.com](mailto:moerdykc@gmail.com) and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).

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