

# If only Cell C had hired Alex Hunter...

 By [Herman Manson: @marklives](#)

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For online interaction with consumers to be successful, brands are required to undertake a transparent, truthful and open approach to communication. "You need to keep it real," says Alex Hunter, independent brand consultant and a speaker at the [Tech4Africa](#)\* conference being held in Johannesburg, 12-13 August 2010.



Independent brand consultant Alex Hunter, who will be speaking at Tech4Africa.

## Common sense

If this sounds like common sense, it's because it is. And if you are wondering why it needs repeating, look no further than the controversial marketing campaign from [Cell C](#), during which the company duped online users with a YouTube video of comedian Trevor Noah bashing mobile companies and Cell-C's subsequent 'response' in full page newspaper ads promising to address consumer issues.

It later turned out to have all been set up to announce the appointment of Noah as Cell-C's 'chief experience officer' (opening the way for quips on what a joke Cell-C's customer service actually is).

"This just validates my point," says Hunter, on hearing about the angry response from consumers on getting effectively getting punk'd by Cell C.

## Need to be upfront

Previously global head of online marketing for the Virgin Group, Hunter believes organisations need to be upfront about why they are choosing to communicate online. Are they there for honest conversation or because it's an ad-on to a marketing campaign, asks Hunter. By not being upfront, brands lose trust and all future campaigns might be suspect.

Manufacturing conversations is one of the biggest mistakes a brand can make says Hunter. Consumer trust is already hard enough to gain and is so easy to lose. Once lost, it becomes incredibly difficult to rebuild.

Before initiating online conversations or choosing the appropriate online platforms through which to engage, Hunter suggests organisations take a moment to listen. Listen to what is being said about the brand, listen to the tone of these conversations and find out where they are taking place. Is it on HelloPeter or on Twitter, Facebook or a forum like that managed by MyBroadband? Only when you can answer these questions are you close to a point of online engagement.

## Allocate appropriate resources

Brands need to ensure they allocate appropriate resources to these conversations so as to ensure they can continue over the longer term, warns Hunter. If they do not, brands trying to be everywhere at once risk being overwhelmed. You don't want consumers to think you are ignoring them when you simply don't have the capacity to respond to their queries or concerns, says Hunter.

Cell C has already been taken to task for not responding to complaints posted on Twitter regarding its campaign, when it had just positioned itself as social media friendly with its newspaper ads.

Hunter calls brand loyalty a misnomer - brands should focus on loyalty by putting customer interests before their own. Loyalty boils down to whether or not consumers would be prepared to engage in conversation with brands between purchasing decisions. As such, the focus on ROI in marketing spend online is a mistake - the Internet is a relationship

platform and should be measured as such, says Hunter.

## Consumer live-casting

Consumers are increasingly comfortable live-casting where they are and what they are doing onto social services via mobile devices. Location-based apps have been gimmicky and have offered brands little more than a virtual pissing contest, says Hunter.

Still, he believes these hold real value for marketers smart enough to use these apps to gather behavioural data that will help get consumers into stores. He lists organisations such as McDonalds and Starbucks as examples of brands offering consumer loyalty schemes to consumers checking in via mobile apps. Offering consumers tangible value like freebies and discounts creates a mutually beneficial and positive relationship.

Hunter agrees that words such as 'values' and 'sustainability' has been severely abused by brands. He argues that if you need to express your values externally, something is wrong in the way you have delivered your brand to consumers (yet another lesson for the folks at Cell C).

## "You are a jerk"

'Values' need to be taken as assumed and should be manifest in every aspect of your business. You should not have to put a plaque up saying you recycle paper products in this office. "If you don't, you are a jerk," says Hunter.

The same probably goes for taking out ads in the Sunday press announcing you are working at upgrading your customer care operations. (Hint: if you are a cellular company which hasn't been busy doing that already, you are a corporate jerk.)

Find Alex on the web at [www.haebc.com](http://www.haebc.com) and on Twitter at [@cubedweller](https://twitter.com/cubedweller).

\*Hunter, who also serves as a mentor at the annual SeedCamp venture capital and angel funding event, which this year comes to South Africa during the Tech4Africa conference, says he hopes SeedCamp will take innovative ideas from the white board to start-up as it mixes local passion and invention married to global perspective.



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