

The great brand race

 By [Shauneen Procter](#)

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The national zeitgeist continues to take shape around issues of politics and economics, and the impact of major shifts in these areas radiates across all parts of South African society. Within this context, winning brands (personal and organisational) are gaining traction thanks to their ability to maintain open and honest conversations with stakeholders. Similarly, the losers often stumble fatally in their attempt to navigate through a highly fragmented communication landscape. Pedalling inauthenticity will do that.

Brand winners

- Thuli Madonsela

In a year of high political manoeuvring, cynicism and so much corruption that we are scandal-fatigued, Thuli Madonsela has single-handedly redeemed faith in delivery, democracy and justice. She stands head and shoulders above most of our politicians. Aside from what she does as Public Protector and inspiring beacon, she must receive a round of applause for maintaining poise, calm and dignity in the midst of what is often an ugly political fray. Well done (and thank you) Thuli, for delivering faith too

Madonsela's achievements in 2012 show quite clearly (yet quietly and humbly) that public faith is secured on a foundation of transparency, honesty and consistency.

- Prof. Jonathan Jansen

Prof Jansen is an unwavering education star, a beacon of hope in a pervasively dismal public education landscape. An Honorary Professor of Education at the Universities of Witwatersrand, Cleveland & Edinburgh and a Fulbright Scholar at Stanford University, he sets the tone for what is possible and enthusiastically engages with the public directly on new media channels like Twitter.

Yes, we need more stars, but we also need stars who are willing and able to carry out a public debate beyond the tightly controlled borders of the press conference or political convention. Prof Jansen shows there is much to be gained through genuine, open public debate. He has also demonstrated that considered use of social media can be extremely powerful within this often chaotic environment.

- Nike

2012 was the year of the social athlete, thanks to Nike. The inaugural, Run Jozi saw 10,000 people participate in this marathon in down town Joburg. The success of the event sparked a second race only a few months later, where twice the number of social athletes took to the streets of Alexandra and Sandton. The local Nike campaign is a continuation of a concept that has worked globally for their brand. Following the lead set by Red Bull, the brand has positioned itself very successfully right in the middle of a community. People talking and running and using your product... it's brand gold.

Nike has worked carefully to ensure that it facilitates a lifestyle that matters to its consumers. Instead of targeting the people who buy its products, Nike has done some proper thinking about how they live, work and play, and then toggled up accordingly.

- Riaan Cruywagen

After more broadcasts than anyone can count, and displays at the end of his career of a sense of humour few would have expected, Riaan Cruywagen takes up his post-retirement place as a South African icon. Few South Africans have built such a blemish-free, trusted personal brand over such a long period of time. The cherry on the Cruywagen brand cake has been his willingness over recent years to poke fun at himself via spoof videos and ads. Great work!

The Cruywagen phenomenon shows that iconic brands can be built on modest and unlikely foundations. It also shows that the public responds to the real, rather than the carefully constructed. Nothing beats a genuine sense of humour, or authentic humility.

- Cell C

Under the fresh leadership of Alan Knott Craig, Cell C has created a stir in the Telecoms sector. The brand passed the 10 million account mark in October (outstripping MTN in the growth stakes for the first time) and has launched offerings which have forced rivals to relook some of their own basics. Most notable of these is reduced call rates to 227 countries, a deal announced on the back of a flagship 99c per minute call rate to 50 countries. Price does matter.

Talk of reducing cellular call rates has been on the public radar for ages, but Cell C actually made it happen. The brand's snappy bundling of products also sets the standard in the industry, and has shown consumers that innovation talk can actually result in tangible value. Cell C gets the voice to data shift and shows that if you put your money where your mouth is, the consumers will follow.

Brand losers

- Limpopo Province

As Greg Nicolson put it on the Daily Maverick, it has been 'the year of educating dangerously'. There have been many failures nationally, but the Province of Limpopo encapsulates them all with its textbook delivery train smash. Even worse, fiscal management of the province has been taken over by Government etc. etc. etc. Nothing anyone does or says within the governing structures of Limpopo helps. Ouch!

Limpopo's talk of a drive to empower learners in a previously neglected province turned out to be a farcical tragedy, proving that delivery should always come first, and verbiage second. Limpopo catastrophically disempowered its learners and let down a nation.

- Lonmin

Lonmin emerges from Marikana as a very shaky brand. From the handling of the strike through to the massacre itself and on to the aftermath, at no point has Lonmin looked like a company operating from a position of strength, trust or confidence.

Lonmin's failure illustrates that all corporations must be ready for a crisis. In general, Marikana offers a case study in how a crisis can turn into a national tragedy. To avoid the Lonmin trap, all companies should invest in crisis management skills; when the crisis comes, the nation needs more communication and more engagement, not distance.

- Woolworths

Woolworths has been fighting on the digital frontlines to restore its reputation after the Frankies saga outed its uncharacteristic retail bully underbelly. Frankies, a "micro" soft drink company, asked Woolworths to stock its brand of retro drinks, and then claimed the store nicked its idea when Woolworths - who refused the offer - produced its own line a year later. The Advertising Standards of Authority of SA (ASA) ruled in favour of Frankies when it came to Woolworths' slogan, which compounded the impact of the Facebook petitions, the 'Woolworse' website and a variety of other forms of digitally powered consumer backlash. It hasn't been an easy year for a brand not used to being the subject of attack. A complete failure to handle employment racism accusations, especially within the realm of social media, only made things worse.

Woolworths is a strong brand that speaks with confidence, self-assurance and credibility. But this strength evaporated when social media arrows were fired by consumers. The saga offers more evidence that social media can make a difference, or break a brand within a matter of hours.

- Groupon

The Groupon headaches keep coming. Just days after an accounting disaster forced the discount Website portal to reveal a greater-than-reported fourth quarter loss, Groupon had to face down a shareholder lawsuit accusing its executives of a fraudulent scheme that "deceived the investing public" about the company's prospects and business. And then there's the probe by the Securities and Exchange Commission and the slumping Groupon share price. How fast the mighty fall. Hot air and dishonesty will do that.

The way you do business really matters in the 21st century economy.

Conclusion

Honesty, transparency and innovation are the current definers of brand success, and failure. Not long ago all three could easily have been chucked in the verbiage box, but today's business world is so transparent that achievements (or lack thereof) are easily and publicly outed. 2013 looks likely to throw up a new range of political developments, technologies and tools, but the transparency challenge will, in all likelihood, continue to dominate strategic thinking.

ABOUT SHAUNEEN PROCTER

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